National identity and attachment among overseas Chinese children: Diaspora tourism experiences

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Abstract

Immigrants' national identities in relation to their homelands have received considerable academic attention. Although childhood plays a substantial part in national identity, studies on diaspora tourism and immigrants have often overlooked children's experiences. Ethnic and cultural symbols are embedded in place and contribute to one's emotional attachment to a territory for identity development. This study explores the nexus between diaspora tourism, national identity, and place attachment from children's perspectives. An integrative approach including a metaphor elicitation technique and participant observations was used to examine how overseas Chinese children make sense of their "homeland" national identity and place attachment in a diaspora tourism context. Findings address how overseas Chinese children's cultural pride, social connections, and self-representation intertwine with meaningful symbols tied to China and Chineseness. These symbols influence their national identities and attachment to the country. Theoretical and practical implications are presented in closing.

Key Words: National identity; Place attachment; Diaspora tourism; Overseas Chinese children

1 Introduction

Searching for a unique identity has become important in the face of globalization. Tourism has long been regarded as a useful way to establish a national identity: it represents the distinctiveness of a place and defines a nation (Shaffer, 2001). National identity is established through elements such as one's homeland or historical territory, shared myths and memories, a common culture, and legal rights and duties for all members, encompassing a community of mutual descent (Smith, 1991). For many, emotional attachment to an imagined or actual territory and community is integral to national identity construction (Anderson 2001). Although it might seem intuitive to develop a national identity associated with one's home, this process can become complicated for immigrants—a home and its embedded meanings may vary contextually. Nevertheless, an immigrant's homeland represents an essential aspect of their identity (Alexander et al., 2017). This study seeks to uncover how overseas Chinese children make sense of their "homeland" national identity and place attachment.

For immigrants, traveling back to the "homeland" is a main means of (re)connecting with home while (re)constructing a national identity. This type of tourism is known as diaspora tourism (Alexander et al., 2017; Sim & Leith, 2013; Sun et al., 2022). It is natural for immigrants to feel connected to their motherland, and diaspora tourism intensifies such transnational attachments (Huang et al., 2013). First-generation immigrants and subsequent generations encounter distinct experiences and emotions during these tours (Huang et al., 2016; Huang et al., 2018). Whereas first-generation immigrants travel to their homelands to socialize with family and friends, connect with the past, and explore tourism resources (Io, 2017), second-generation immigrants travel to their parents' homelands to better understand their ethnic origins (Ruting, 2012). Diaspora studies increasingly describe subsequent generations of immigrants. However, most research in this vein has centered on adults (Graf, 2017; Ruting, 2012).

Although childhood is considered a critical period for cultivating national identities (Scourfield et al., 2006), few studies have assessed the effects of diaspora tourism experiences on national identity in childhood (Frew & White, 2011). Meanwhile, scholars have determined that migrant–homeland bonds can be established through emotional attachment to a place (i.e., place attachment; Li & McKercher, 2016a). The notion of place attachment entails affective responses to one' s home, neighborhood, city, and country (Bernardo & Palma-Oliveira, 2013; Lewicka, 2008). However, even as one's homeland plays a symbolic role in national identification, it remains unclear how overseas children raised outside their "homeland" make sense of their national identities in relation to "home" in a diaspora tourism context.

This study concentrates on overseas Chinese children's national identity (re)construction. Symbols of China have assumed myriad forms over millennia. Considering China's growing influence in the global economy and culture, the continuity of Chinese identity symbols and the national identity of Chinese immigrants abroad have received substantial attention (Chan & Spoonley, 2017; Tie et al., 2015). Work on diaspora tourism indicates that overseas Chinese people's attachment to China is highly related to national identity. Put simply, individuals who self-identify as mainly Chinese tend to be especially attached to their homeland (Li & McKercher, 2016a). Ethnic and cultural symbols are embedded in place, and one's emotional attachment to an imagined or actual territory and community is vital to national identity (Anderson 2001). This study hence delineates national identities among overseas Chinese and their place attachment to China. The research context offers a vivid setting in which to investigate how overseas Chinese children make sense of their "homeland" national identity and place attachment. Findings were derived from a mixed qualitative method integrating a metaphor elicitation technique and participant observations.

2 Literature Review

2.1 National identity and children's identity construction

The concept of a nation is inherently complicated and features opposing definitions (Hutchinson & Smith, 1994). Nationalism studies typically feature two schools of thought: essentialists view a nation as primordial and given by kinship; constructivists acknowledge the continuity between premodern and modern forms of social cohesion (Hutchinson & Smith, 1994). Most descriptions of national identity adhere to the latter perspective, framing the concept as "a powerful means of defining and locating individual selves in the world, through the prism of the collective personality and its distinctive culture" (Smith, 1991, p. 17). Ethnic and cultural symbols developed through time permeate one's inner world and produce emotional attachments (Morris, 1995; Wan & Vanderwerf, 2009). Childhood is a key window for such development.

Children's national identity development is an important topic in the social sciences. Piaget and Weil (1951) studied such development based on cognitive development theory. An exploration of the national identities of children in Geneva, Switzerland, indicated that this development proceeds through four stages: the pre-stage (before 5 years old); Stage 1 (from 5 to 7–8 years old); Stage 2 (from 7–8 to 10–11 years old); and Stage 3 (above 10–11 years old) (Piaget & Weil, 1951). The authors pointed out that children began to judge their own nation and other nations around ages 10–11 (Piaget & Weil, 1951). Subsequent studies also documented distinct phases of children's national identity development (Barrett, 2005, 2007; Barrett & Oppenheimer, 2011; Brown, 1980; Carrington & Short, 1995; Hussak & Cimpian, 2019; Jahoda, 1963). Jahoda (1963) introduced social-class factors and found that middle-class children developed stronger national identities than working-class children of the same age. Later work verified this argument (Middleton et al., 1970). Barrett (2005, 2007) examined children's understanding of, and feelings about, countries and national groups. Children around 10 or 11 years old were able to justify and evaluate nations based on abstract dimensions (Barrett, 2005, 2007). According to Hussak and Cimpian (2019), older children are less likely to view national groups as biologically determined compared with younger children. Older children may instead see national identity as socially constructed.

As research on children's national identities has expanded, new perspectives have emerged such as childhood sociology (Dockett & Cusak, 2003) and children's geographies (Scourfield et al., 2006). Study objectives have also diversified to cover children in peaceful countries, in multiracial countries, and in war-torn areas (Habashi, 2008, 2019; Lau et al., 2012; Louie, 2000; Sasaki, 2004). Longitudinal examinations of the national identities of children in the West Bank of Palestine showed that children build national identities by distinguishing the "self" and "other" (Habashi, 2008, 2019). Political unrest in Palestine was found to influence children's national identities as well (Habashi, 2008, 2019).

Despite varied findings regarding children's national identity construction, many scholars have asserted that identities are malleable; that is, they can be nurtured and changed. School and education are believed to heavily influence national identity. Educational settings expose students to history, geography, language, and literature (Apple, 1993; Schleicher & Kozma, 1992). Intergenerational transmission and family education about traditional clothing, dance, and other cultural symbols further contribute to national identity development (Palmer, 1999; Somîtca & Stan, 2019). Apart from school and family, studies have addressed the impacts of more specific factors on children's national identities; examples include the Olympic Games (Lau et al., 2010, 2012) and children's fantasy literature (Cecire, 2009; Desai, 2006).

Immigrant children's national identities are particularly complicated. Sim and Leith (2013) discovered that diaspora tourism can strengthen relations between immigrants and their homelands and further enhance national identity with the motherland. Due to the effects of one's homeland and host country, immigrant children may form multiple national identities that gradually converge through joint conflict and compromise. Parents are similarly paramount in immigrant children's national identity development. Spiegler and colleagues (2019) observed that Turkish immigrant mothers' homesickness diminished their children's national identities regarding the host country in Western Europe. Likewise, Chan and Spoonley (2017) noted that Chinese New Zealanders have hybrid national identities, with parents normally preferring that their children combine Chinese and New Zealand identities.

As Smith (1991) claimed, national identity represents one's emotional attachment to their motherland. Attachment to and identification with places in that country are therefore mainstays of national identity. Children tend to be more cognizant of smaller boundaries (e.g., between Scotland and England) versus larger boundaries like Europe. Additionally, children's national identities are largely based on their perceptions of where they live (Scourfield et al., 2006). Children's place attachment is thus a tenet of national identity.

2.2 Place attachment and national identity

A close correlation exists between overseas Chinese people's attachment to China and their national identity (Li & McKercher, 2016a). Individuals who clearly define themselves as Chinese (or mainly Chinese) are naturally attached to China and often become increasingly attached to the country over time (Li & McKercher, 2016a). One's homeland is a pillar of national identity, reflecting "a sense of belonging, memory and attachment by the members of the community to an ancestral or historic territory regarded as uniquely 'theirs'" (Smith, 2009, p. 63). Place attachment may be a major embodiment of immigrants' national identity.

Place attachment originated in the environmental psychology field to describe the bond between people and places. It emerged from individuals' meaningful experiences in certain places (Manzo, 2005). The concept has since been described in various ways using terms such as "sense of place," "place identity," "place dependence," and "community attachment" (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). After reviewing many definitions of place attachment, Hidalgo and Hernandez (2001) offered a general description: place attachment is "a positive affective bond between an individual and a specific place, the main characteristic of which is the tendency of the individual to maintain closeness to such a place" (p. 274). While this definition emphasizes the actor as an "individual," Scannell and Gifford (2010) argued that place attachment occurs at individual and group levels.

Scannell and Gifford's (2010) three-dimensional model features the elements of *process* (affection, cognition, and behavior), *person* (individual and group), and *place* (social and physical). Regarding the *process* component, place-related affection involves positive emotions (e.g., happiness, pride, and love); cognition entails place-based knowledge, memories, and schemas; and behavior refers to one's tendency to maintain a sense of closeness with specific places (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001). The individual level of *person* normally involves personal relations with a place; it consists of personal memories and meaningful experiences (Manzo, 2005). The group level of place attachment includes a place's iconic meanings shared among group members (Low, 1992). For example, a culture that is created and practiced by a group in a certain place could connect those group members to that place (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Place attachment can also come from religious beliefs: some places are considered holy lands, with followers of a certain religion becoming attached to those places (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004). For instance, Mecca and Medina are sacred lands for Muslims; some Muslims have a place attachment to these areas despite never having visited.

As an affective bond, place attachment includes anchoring emotions related to the object of one's attachment. Place attachment can also involve a sense of belonging, a wish to remain close, and a desire to return when away (Lewicka, 2020). People usually become emotionally attached to a place thanks to perceived continuity in that area. Yet continuity with one's place of origin can be disrupted when the person moves away, potentially leading to estrangement and feelings of alienation (Lewicka, 2020). Immigrants are especially susceptible to this problem. Their national attachment can reflect their willingness to maintain a bond with the motherland. They therefore usually return to their homeland to maintain a sense of place-related continuity and national attachment.

However, immigrant descendants' place attachment to their homelands differs from that of first generations; descendants may rarely live in the motherland (Huang et al., 2016). Immigrant descendants can nonetheless develop a sense of continuity

between the past and the present if they hear stories of "what life was before their parents migrated" (Apfelbaum, 2000, p. 1011). Morgan (2010) constructed a developmental model of place attachment by exploring childhood place attachment and extracting five themes from childhood memories: love, grief, pleasure, security, and identity. Positive childhood place experiences are thought to bolster place attachment and to foster identification. By contrast, negative childhood place experiences produce weak place attachment and short-term anxiety, even leading to an attachment disorder if the situation continues. Place attachment thus typically involves affection towards a place. When immigrants become attached to their homelands, this emotional connection could facilitate their national identity construction. Whether children develop positive and long-lasting place attachment through temporary homeland visits has yet to be determined with respect to diaspora tourism.

China is a diverse country: it is home to 56 ethnic minorities, and its national identity is inherently linked with the territory's history. Multicultural ethnic symbols serve as resources for identity construction. Chinese national identity is also symbolic and closely associated with one's kinship, ancestors, and homeland (Shan, 2001). Rather than being exclusively related to political identity, this national identity commonly extends to all people of Chinese ethnicity. The nuances of Chinese identity are further intertwined with land-based ethnic symbols. Myriad factors hence contribute to the overall understanding of Chinese identity: physical and cultural places; and the varied affection, knowledge, and behavior associated with this country. In essence, place attachment at the national level and national identity are firmly interwoven.

2.3 Diaspora tourism in China

"Diaspora" was first used to describe Jewish people who were driven out of Israel (Safran, 1991) and was later expanded to include any immigrant with close relations to their homeland (Sheffer, 1986). Diasporas often travel home to visit families and relatives and to connect with their ancestors (Iorio & Corsale, 2013). As mentioned, studies on diaspora descendants have mainly involved adult participants (Graf, 2017; Ruting, 2012). Ruting (2012) found that descendants of Estonian migrants to Australia were driven to visit their homeland for numerous and complex reasons. Their motivations typically interwove ethnic identities, curiosity, kinship, and parents' stories (Ruting, 2012). Graf (2017) accompanied young diaspora-born Eritreans on a trip to Eritrea to observe how immigrants' children developed a sense of belonging by traveling to their parents' homeland. Descendants of immigrants often have weaker identities than their ancestors (Mavroudi, 2007). For instance, whereas first-generation Chinese immigrants have been shown to feel strongly nostalgic while visiting their homeland, their children perceive a diaspora tour as entering an "alternate universe" (Huang et al., 2016, p. 70).

Diaspora tourism can influence immigrants' national identities both positively and negatively. A study of Scottish diaspora tourists demonstrated that expatriates displayed stronger identities and connections with their homeland after visiting the country (Sim & Leith, 2013). However, concerning second-generation Asian Americans on diaspora tours, Garrod and Kilkenny (2007) discovered that some participants felt like "foreigners" because they could not speak the local language. These individuals were accordingly disappointed with the tour. A similar trend emerged for Malaysian Chinese diasporas: diaspora tourism brought a novel dimension to identity formation, with some participants sensing stronger connections with China while others stated that they were "not that Chinese" due to having different religions, education, and language (Tie et al., 2015).

Diaspora tourism encourages overseas immigrants to redefine and reconfirm their national identities (Tie et al., 2015). Many countries have started coordinating activities to attract diasporas to join homecoming tours and connect more robustly with their homelands (Sim & Leith, 2013). Although maintaining bonds with overseas Chinese represents a long-term policy for the Chinese government, the bonds between younger generations of immigrants and China are lessening (Qu, 2017). As such, to complement numerous activities aimed at uniting overseas Chinese, the national government is promoting an understanding of modern China among overseas teenagers (Louie, 2000).

The China Overseas Exchange Association and local governments at various levels have organized a series of summer camps and encouraged overseas Chinese youth to visit the country (China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese, 2019). To date, tens of thousands of overseas Chinese between ages 12 and 18 have been invited to learn about Chinese culture, namely at "root-seeking summer camps." These government-sponsored summer camps have significantly contributed to Chinese language learning (e.g., for Chinese Filipino children) and have induced a relatively positive national image among participants (Qu, 2017). Root-seeking summer camps are popular among overseas Chinese children. These programs enable children to visit destinations representative of Chinese history, culture, and modernization. The organizers choose sites before overseas participants arrive.

The globalization of capital and populations has led a growing number of Chinese to study abroad, work overseas, or even emigrate. Subsequent generations are raised and educated in the host country, causing then to become well acquainted with their country of residence but relatively unfamiliar with China. Subsequent generations of Chinese immigrants have been found to possess perceptions of China that vary from their parents' (Huang et al., 2016). Despite studies discussing immigrants' national identities, little research has investigated the impact of diaspora tourism on overseas children's national identities and place attachment. Addressing this line of inquiry based on root-seeking summer camps can provide rich insights into how overseas Chinese children's interactions promote identity (re)construction. This study was

specifically conducted to clarify how these children make sense of their "homeland" national identity and place attachment in the diaspora tourism context.

3 Methods

Data collection is notoriously difficult in studies involving children, as researchers may struggle to obtain effective information from young participants (Hay, 2018). The metaphor elicitation technique combines pictures with conversations and can help interviewers elicit participants' true thoughts and feelings (Jung, 2022; Zaltman, 1997). The Zaltman metaphor elicitation technique (ZMET) is frequently used in tourism to ascertain vacationers' underlying emotions and to explore travelers' embodied experiences (Chen, 2008; Ji & King, 2018). This approach is particularly valuable for uncovering implicit or unexpressed aspects of individuals' travel-related thoughts. It serves as a powerful tool for delving into tourists' "unspoken words" (Chen, 2008, p. 29). Batu and colleagues (2023) investigated Iranian migrants' perceptions of Turkish and Iranian culture using ZMET. Results showed that these migrants associated Iranian culture with diverse elements such as the Nowruz festival, family, Iranian dishes and desserts, historical symbols, and religious symbols. By contrast, when discussing Turkish culture, the migrants emphasized features such as Atatürk, the Turkish flag, family, the city, and social life (Batu et al., 2023). To capture ethnic symbols embedded in place (i.e., in China), this study relied on ZMET and participant observations to gain relevant information from children.

Two researchers participated in two root-seeking summer camps for overseas Chinese children in Xiamen, Fujian province, China, from July to August 2019. Both groups visited similar historical scenic spots such as Hakka Tulou and Gulang Island along with typical sites such as the memorial hall of Chen Jiageng, a famous overseas Chinese who contributed greatly to China in the 20th century. After meeting children attending camp and building rapport, the researchers invited them to take part in interviews. Thirteen children (8 Chinese Americans and 5 Chinese Europeans) volunteered to help. Of them, six boys and seven girls were between 12 and 17 years old. Three were born in China (1.5 generation); the remainder were born outside the country (second generation). Participants are profiled in Table 1. *Insert Table 1 here.*

At least one day before their interview, participants were asked to choose 5–10 images that they believed best represented China. Interviews were held in a combination of Chinese and English based on participants' preferences. Given that the study participants were children, the ZMET method was modified slightly to ensure data accuracy and research integrity. Seven simplified interview steps were followed:

Step 1: Storytelling about pictures. Interviews opened by asking participants why they had chosen their pictures. Participants explained the meaning and stories behind their pictures along with their feelings about the images.

Step 2: Missing pictures. Participants were asked if they wanted to share other ideas for which they had been unable to find relevant pictures. This question enhanced the completeness of data collection (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995).

Step 3: Triad task. The interviewer randomly chose three pictures and asked participants to explain the images' similarities and differences (Zaltman, 2003).

Step 4: Metaphor probe. Participants were asked to identify the most representative picture, after which the interviewer used laddering probes to solicit participants' detailed thoughts and experiences (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988).

Step 5: Sensory metaphors. To reveal participants' unconscious thoughts and emotions, the interviewer asked informants to describe other nonvisual sensory images such as taste, smell, touch, sound, color, and emotion (Coulter & Zaltman, 1994).

Step 6: Vignettes. As children may not be able to create a movie or a one-act play to express their ideas, the interviewer helped them each craft a short story involving a plot and characters. This process produced an overview of participants' thoughts and feelings (Zaltman, 2003).

Step 7: Summary image. Participants were asked to create a summary image using all their pictures. However, most children simply arranged the pictures in order (see Figure 1) without grouping or creative editing.

Insert Figure 1 here.

Some children may struggle to provide accurate or complete answers during interviews if some information is kept in their subconscious mind. Other children are simply unwilling to share. Interviewers in this study employed the laddering technique to overcome these obstacles. This method involves using probing questions to uncover relationships between concepts and elicit a deeper understanding of participants' attitudes (Chen, 2008; Jung, 2022; Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). "Why" questions are used to ascend the ladder, and "how" questions are used to descend it (Chen, 2008). Laddering ensures that researchers obtain a rich sense of participants' personal constructs and the connections between concepts (Chen, 2008; Christensen & Olson, 2002; Jung, 2022). For instance, one participant chose a picture of "shaking hands" (XY02) to symbolize the Chinese. Upon asking "why," the interviewer prompted the participant to explain her belief that Chinese people are friendly. The interviewer then followed up by asking why the participant felt this way, delving deeper into her reasoning. This conversation traced the participant's experiences with amiable people in China and her comparatively unpleasant experiences in Germany.

Children's place attachment and national identities in relation to China were initially captured through common constructs and then deconstructed through themed categories. This process generated six metaphors and three themes (Table 2).

Insert Table 2 here.

Participant observations were carried out through the lens of social constructivism. Overseas Chinese children appeared generally satisfied with their on-the-ground experiences at root-seeking summer camps. They preferred tourism experiences such as sightseeing and visiting local attractions. Combined with the ZMET interview results, observations and informal conversations with children and others suggested that these children held four types of national identity in relation to China: *Chinese or ethnically Chinese*, *hybrid*, *ambiguous*, and *non-Chinese* national identities featured corresponding place attachments (Table 3). Children who self-identified as Chinese (or at least ethnically Chinese) tended to display strong attachments to China as their homeland. Children with a hybrid national identity saw China as their second home. Children with an ambiguous national identity or who self-identified as non-Chinese viewed the country as a familiar overseas destination or a tourist destination.

Insert Table 3 here.

4 Findings

The cultural and ethnic symbols gained from ZMET interviews consistently explained overseas Chinese children's national identities and attachment to China. The identified deep metaphors reflected three themes: connotations of children's cultural pride, social connection, and self-representation in diaspora tourism. Discussions regarding modern and premodern identities, family reunion, and intergenerational negotiations, as well as children's affirmation with or alienation from China, were considered within these themes (Figure 2).

Insert Figure 2 here.

4.1 Cultural pride: Premodern history or modern affiliation?

Diaspora tours afford overseas Chinese children an opportunity to discover various aspects of China. Culture was mentioned most frequently during interviews because cultural elements were embedded in many aspects of children's trips. Six participants cited traditional Chinese architecture as representative of China, suggesting that it remains a national cultural symbol even among Chinese children overseas. Moon doors are often used in Chinese gardens to frame scenery. A girl who considered China her homeland provided a photo of a moon door (Figure 3) and said:

> "*I think it's very Chinese. A long time ago a lot of doors looked like this [in China]; I don't know why, but the circle pattern is common. I think it usually represents the family last name or something… This color also looks like a Chinese color to me*." (JE01, United States, female, age 12)

Insert Figure 3 here.

Besides architecture, historical achievements inspired children's pride in China—especially unique relics that were created decades ago, such as the Terracotta Warriors:

> "*Clay is difficult to shape, and clay soldiers [Terracotta Warriors] require skilled artisans. So I think we Chinese are very amazing [for being able] to make so many of them. And what we can see is not all of the warriors. There are many that have not been dug out.*" (RN11, United States, male, age 12)

This boy used "we Chinese" as a personal pronoun. The term is not solely associated with ethnicity; it also alludes to symbolic cultural elements within the Chinese land. By appreciating these aspects, children developed and nurtured an attachment to this place. Cultural belonging created a sense of pride among children who were firmly attached to China as their homeland. An American-born child provided pictures of temples to represent China and proudly explained:

> "*A lot of Chinese history happened in the temples... Temples are important… Japan has similar temples, and they are influenced by the Chinese temples.*" (WY13, United States, male, age 15)

Similarly, a 17-year-old girl shared a photo of herself wearing *hanfu*, her favorite traditional Chinese dress (Figure 4). China represented a second home for her. She noted that conventional Chinese clothing is diverse, but many Americans have little knowledge of it:

> "*You know, what I really hate is that many Americans think that China is represented by pigtails and the* cheongsam*. The most disgusting thing is they have westernized* cheongsam*, which becomes a tool to appear sexy. Although there are also some good-looking Chinese dresses in America, there are not many styles.*" (LC10, United States, female, age 17)

Insert Figure 4 here.

Participants also described pictures of unique foods featured at Chinese festivals, such as moon cakes. Immigrants' recognition of Chinese culture was often partially based on festival customs: the Spring Festival and Mid-autumn Festival are widely celebrated among overseas Chinese. Both focus on family reunions. One girl who viewed China as a second home emphasized the atmosphere of such festivals: "*I think the Chinese festivals are livelier ... And I like it*" (XY02, Germany, female, age 17). Participant observations revealed that children who were more attached to China were more often amenable to Chinese food (field notes, 30 July 2019). Children with a Chinese or hybrid national identity expressed positive feelings about Chinese food, including familiarity, recognition, and enjoyment. An American-born child remarked:

> "*I wouldn't say I'm bored with Chinese food. I'll never tire of Chinese food because there are so many choices.*" (LC10, United States, female, age 17)

The behavioral aspect of place attachment involves one's effort to maintain closeness to a place and to return there (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Certain activities help to rebuild diasporas' relationships and identities with their homelands (Sim & Leith, 2013). In one instance, the scenarios behind a picture of tea making (Figure 5) typified a girl's reconnection with China. The experience of making tea and engaging in countryside life could spark children's attachment to China and awaken their Chineseness:

> "*The picture shows where we make tea. They made us wear these hats, which made me feel Chinese. Then they showed us the basket and everything. I took some tools and felt like I was really a Chinese… People were picking fruits and vegetables in the countryside. I felt like I was one of them.*" (LL12, United States, female, age 14)

Insert Figure 5 here.

Although nearly all participants discussed the appeal of Chinese culture, their knowledge and interests were not necessarily sufficient to either establish attachment or develop a sense of Chineseness. Children with an ambiguous national identity or who self-identified as non-Chinese could exhibit unique sentiments and behavior. A boy from France shared a photo of soy sauce jars (Figure 6) he had taken and stated dispassionately: "*I think soy sauce was made in China*" (YC07, France, male, age 12).

Insert Figure 6 here.

China may merely be a familiar overseas destination for this boy. His cultural knowledge and experiences regarding a traditional Chinese condiment held little power to build place attachment. Relatedly, some participants possessed basic knowledge of traditional Chinese construction techniques; they knew that Chinese carpenters use a specific method (i.e., mortise and tenon joints) to build houses without nails or glue, although they could not name the strategy specifically. Yet the expressions of appreciation from children with an ambiguous national identity towards China seemed to convey limited attachment. The boy from France described his understanding of traditional Chinese construction thusly:

> "*I think it is a style that looks good, and it doesn't need nails, like they just put different parts together. The building looks good after being assembled.*" (YC07, France, male, age 12)

Simply being interested in traditional culture does not mean one wants to be a part of that culture. In this study, ancient cultural elements did not automatically evoke place attachment or inspire a sense of Chineseness among all overseas Chinese children, yet attachment to modernization was prevalent. Some participants showed a strong sense of identity when referencing China's modern buildings, metropolises, rapid internet speed, and convenient mobile payment as signs of the country's advancement. All participants were from developed countries. Even so, they were awestruck by the skyscrapers in Chinese cities. A 13-year-old boy who saw China as his homeland

shared a nighttime city photo he had taken (Figure 7) as a symbol of his national identity. He captured the shot while standing on a rooftop late at night and said excitedly:

> "*I've never seen a skyline view like this, never been to a rooftop. We climbed up to the roof and I saw the skyline and these cool buildings. I have never lived in a place with so many lights at night. I like it here!*" (WY13, United States, male, age 15)

Insert Figure 7 here.

Besides skyscrapers, other modern buildings in China also drew this boy's attention, such as the national stadium "Bird Nest" of the 2008 Olympic Games:

> "*I was amazed that anyone could design something so cool like that [Bird Nest]!*" (WY13, United States, male, age 15)

A girl also from the United States explained why she used Chengdu's nighttime skyline to exemplify China:

> "*I can't see these night scenes in the United States. I think architects are awesome because they build such tall buildings, and when I get closer, I realize these buildings are very tall!*" (SP08, United States, female, age 15)

Children's narratives about China's modernization were highly emotional, with pride readily apparent in their expressions (field notes, 16 July 2019). The girl from Germany had a hybrid national identity and treated China as a second home. She added "our" before "place" (XY02) when describing her hometown, indicating her attachment with a first-person pronoun. She also employed collective personal pronouns to discuss a modern Chinese image, reflecting her sense of identity in relation to China and the Chinese:

> "*You see, China is so big, with many big cities like Shanghai, Beijing, and Hong Kong. It means we have more and more people living in big, tall buildings. We can see the development of China...Our economy is growing fast.*" (XY02, Germany, female, age 17)

Children with an ambiguous national identity spoke of China's modernization as well. A 13-year-old German boy who provided two pictures depicting the internet and WeChat Pay was shocked by China's internet speed and mobile service: "*The internet speed here is extremely fast, and WeChat Pay and delivery orders are very convenient*" (CJ05, Germany, male, age 13). Another 13-year-old boy with a non-Chinese national identity provided four pictures he found online of the city skyline at night and noted a "beautiful China" (KN04) based on these images. He regarded China as a symbol of modernization rather than merely a tourism destination.

National identity is characterized by continuity between premodern and modern forms of social cohesion (Hutchinson & Smith, 1994). Ethnic and cultural symbols associated with premodern history were more likely to stimulate emotional

attachments among participants who were more Chinese, whereas modern affiliations could lead to broad attachments among overseas Chinese children.

4.2 Social connection: Family reunion and intergenerational negotiation

Social connection is a prime aspect of travel intention in diaspora tourism (Huang et al., 2018), as shown by participants' frequently mentioned experience of staying with their grandparents in China. Visiting friends and relatives constitutes a main reason why first-generation immigrants return to their ancestral countries (Huang et al., 2016). The 1.5- and second-generation immigrants in this study, who were still youth and had relatives in China, may also be influenced by their parents. These children's social relations with China were strong, particularly in terms of bonds with their grandparents. A girl who viewed China as her homeland stated excitedly:

> "*Oh, I think the first thing [I do when returning to China] is visit my relatives here. Yeah, I haven't seen my grandparents for a long time. I'm really happy to visit them!*" (LL12, United States, female, age 14)

Meaningful experiences promote place attachment (Manzo, 2005; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Diaspora tours are thought to contribute to meaning making in this way. Family reunions in China functioned as a crucial link for overseas Chinese children. Many participants shared favorable feelings about returning to China to stay with their families (i.e., across three generations). An American-born girl who had attended summer camp in China every year since she was 12 stated:

> "*I feel very happy stay with my family because Chinese culture seems to attach great importance to family; although people also have family reunions in the United States, they do not take it as seriously as the Chinese do…Even though we only come back for one month, we will try to get together with family [Figure 8]. I think that is very important.*" (LC10, United States, female, age 17)

Insert Figure 8 here.

Kinship ties often serve as another element of one's nation and national identity (Connor, 1994, 2004). Kinship and place, as Eriksen (2004) pointed out, are fundamental to a collective national identity. Family bonding in this study featured people's reconnections with the motherland. Multi-generational reunions even served as a reward and were vital for enhancing children's place attachment. A boy from America was extremely unwilling to come to China due to his previously disappointing experiences at a rural summer camp. He ultimately agreed to attend because he would be allowed to meet his grandmother by joining this camp. Interestingly, the child was initially poorly behaved at camp but later became responsible and looked after others on the day he was to meet his grandmother (field notes, 15 July 2019).

Place-based belonging can be fostered through connections with people, even if one has no particular sentiments towards the place itself. One girl emphasized, "*I would*

like to go back to Changle to visit my family, but I don't have much interest in this city" (XY02, Germany, female, age 17). This statement implies that subsequent-generation immigrants can become attached to an abstract China and are willing to maintain social ties rather than become attached to their original place (Huang et al., 2016, 2018). These social connections may prompt frequent return visits (Huang et al., 2016).

Children's identity formation is also entrenched in intergenerational negotiation among family members. Parents' descriptions of China influenced 1.5- and second-generation immigrants' place attachment. A boy who considered China his homeland heard positive evaluations of China from his parents:

> "*My parents explained to me a lot about the Chinese culture, and they're always bragging that Chinese history is way longer than any other country's history. They are always saying how good China is... And I'm pretty sure.*" (WY13, United States, male, age 15)

In addition to endorsements of Chinese culture, parents' enthusiasm for exploring the country could mold children's preferences, attachment, and identities. One girl who saw China as her homeland recalled stories from her mother:

> "*My mom likes to talk about Guangzhou. She also likes exploring other cities in China. She wants to see different cultures from different cities, and she thinks it's really diverse here in China. I also like the diversity, like different dialects.*" (LL12, United States, female, age 14)

Children's perceptions of visiting the motherland can also vary from their parents' (Huang et al., 2016). Immigrant family members' negotiation of national identity is associated with both cultural values and experiences. Children's diaspora tourism experiences can shape national identity formation more poignantly than information from their parents. For example, a girl who experienced China independently developed an entirely different opinion of the country versus her parents:

> "*I feel that my mom doesn't like China, and neither does my dad. They were relatively poor when they were children, and they say China was a mess then. I think it is also a bit of a mess sometimes now, but better than before, not as poor as my parents' time... I feel like China is still a great place.*" (JL09, United States, female, age 14)

Although she considered China to be a familiar overseas destination, her attachment to the country was different from that of her parents. The girl also shared her happiness about communicating with her mother and grandmother in China, explaining, "*My mother is too busy at home [in America] to chat. When we come to China, I can talk to my mother, my mother can talk to Grandma, I think it's quite happy. I can also meet my relatives, like my cousins, and get to know how they are doing*" (JL09, United States, female, age 14). In this case, returning to China offered

the child a genuine family atmosphere. Intergenerational negotiation inspired a growing attachment to China.

People of diverse national identities and attachments appear to have little disparity when it comes to social connections. In this study, intergenerational negotiation and the desire for family reunions led children to reconnect with China regardless of whether they were Chinese. China's non-Western model thus carries a powerful ethnic notion of nationhood as an ancestral culture in which family roots override geographical territory.

4.3 Self-representation in diaspora tourism: Affirmation or alienation?

Overseas Chinese children's self-representation in root-seeking summer camps was associated with personal identity affirmation, defensive reactions, identity-related issues, language issues, discontent, and alienation from China. When asked if he had a German name, a boy whose family visited China annually for summer holidays replied in fluent Chinese: "*I told my parents, as a Chinese, I do not need a German name*" (field notes, 29 July 2019). Children further confirmed their national identities by comparing their ancestral and host countries. A boy from France who was obviously proud of his Chinese identity stated, "*I think China is great... My mother has been in France for more than 20 years, and she is still not used to it...France cannot compare with China. One is in heaven and the other is on Earth...China is the one in heaven. China is really great*" (JY03, France, male, age 15).

In response to negative information that threatened his national identity, a participant who considered China his homeland became defensive when seeking to dispel stereotypes:

> "*I think American children have a very stereotypical view of China. They think everything is 'made in China' and everything is affected, ignoring the fact that a lot of products are not made in China.*" (WY13, United States, male, age 15)

Immigrants' defensive responses to national identity threats are typically associated with self-affirmation (Badea et al., 2020). The psychology of self-defense involves an intention to protect one's image of self-integrity (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Defensiveness also arose during group negotiation throughout diaspora tourism. When a boy described the Terracotta Warriors as "the soldiers who shoot people," another boy from the United States corrected his peer's description immediately, interjecting: "*No! The Terracotta Warriors? They don't shoot people!*" (field notes, 16 July 2019). His affirmation of national identity was evident.

Compared with the above cases, some participants who saw China as a second home were also willing to discuss their personal and national identities. A German girl described her national identity as follows:

> "*I won't say I am just Chinese because I am German at the same time. I think both China and Germany are my home: I have two homes. If China achieves*

> *something, I am happy; if Germany achieves something, I am happy too.*" (XY02, Germany, female, age 17)

Overseas Chinese children were surprisingly skilled in handling hybrid identities. Despite considering herself American, a girl from America conceded that part of her identity is Chinese and stated: "*What I don't understand is why I must be an American or a Chinese. For me, there is no such clean boundary*" (LC10, United States, female, age 17). However, diaspora children can encounter identity dilemmas in the host country and during diaspora tours in their ancestral regions. One girl said that people in the United States might not consider her a real American:

> "*If they hear that you are Asian...They just never treat you like an American...Family members will properly call me a foreigner in China, but when I come to the United States, they don't think Asians are real Americans. Even like me, who was born and raised in the United States, they do not think I am a real American.*" (LC10, United States, female, age 17)

Asians' outward appearance could easily trigger identity-related issues while encouraging overseas Chinese children to re-affirm their Chinese identities. Normally, overseas Chinese children strove to correct others who mistook them for Japanese or Korean. A girl from America shared her confusion: "*It's weird Americans think that I come from Japan. 'Are you Japanese?' No, I am Chinese*" (JE01, United States, female, age 12). A girl from France echoed this sentiment: "*Some people would ask if I am Japanese (I tell them that I am Chinese), because they can't figure out the difference between Japanese and Chinese. And they can't figure out the difference between Korean and Chinese*" (XR06, France, female, age 12). Children generally build a national identity by distinguishing the "self" and "other" (Habashi, 2008, 2019).

Language also matters in children's diaspora tourism and national identities (Garrod & Kilkenny, 2007; Tie et al., 2015). Children who were not proficient in Chinese or simply did not wish to speak it were less involved in the summer camps (field notes, 2 August 2019). By contrast, some children took language lessons before and during their trips to better reconnect with China. A boy who spoke half Chinese and half English during the interview said, "*Like one month before this trip. I would speak to others more in Chinese because I wanted to get ready*" (WY13, United States, male, age 15). A team leader from the group, who was also the mother of a summer camp attendee and taught Chinese in Germany, further stated, "*We should take our kids back to China at regular intervals and speak Chinese with them. Otherwise, even if I speak Chinese to him [in Germany], he replies in German*" (field notes, 29 July 2019). Thus, language plays an important role in self-representation, particularly when in one's homeland.

Most children affirmed their Chinese identities, although a few also displayed a sense of alienation from the country. This feeling seemed to emerge before rather

than during a trip (field notes, 5 August 2019). Children who felt alienated from China emphasized their place of birth (e.g., "*We were born in France*") or avoided discussing national identity altogether. Diaspora tourism offered overseas Chinese children an opportunity to reconnect with China. However, a poor destination image (e.g., crowded and dirty) and uncomfortable conditions (e.g., summer heat and swarms of mosquitoes) could lead to discontent. These disappointments inspired negative judgments of the country. Among them, mosquitoes were mentioned most frequently:

> "*The only thing I don't like about the summer camp is the mosquitoes, the mosquitoes here are horrible.*" (KN04, United States, male, age 13)
>
> "*The weather is too hot and there are too many mosquitoes.*" (YC07, France, male, age 12)
>
> "*The mosquitoes in China bit me very badly.*" (JL09, United States, female, age 14)

Even though discontent and perceived alienation were common among children who identified more as non-Chinese, those who were strongly attached to China displayed empathy. A girl whose first picture of China showed the crowded Great Wall (Figure 9) mentioned, "*It is impossible to enjoy the scenery [at the Great Wall], because all you see are people. But it is reasonable because there are so many people in China*" (LC10, United States, female, age 17).

Insert Figure 9 here.

Despite having similar experiences, children who self-identified as more Chinese were more likely to become attached to China and to display a sense of self-affirmation. Those who identified more as non-Chinese tended to alienate themselves from China more easily. This pattern suggests that other factors, such as school education in the host country, may contribute to children's propensity not to become attached to China.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

This study unveiled how overseas Chinese children make sense of their "homeland" national identity and place attachment. Results were obtained through an integrative qualitative approach, including a metaphor elicitation technique and participant observations. Diaspora tourism experiences appeared to cultivate meaningful memories for overseas Chinese children and evoke personal connections to China. Such outcomes mirror the *person*, *place*, and *process* dimensions of Scannell and Gifford's (2010) framework. This study examined ethnic and cultural symbols at the group level while investigating children's personal identities and attachment at the individual level. The "place" in the present study was not limited to a specific city but to China overall, conveying an abstract concept. Ethnic and cultural symbols embedded in place inspired children's attachment to China. Therefore, the meanings associated with a place's physical features may matter to people more than the

features themselves (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). The psychological process dimension of place attachment in this study contained cognitive, affective, and behavioral elements (i.e., as shown by overseas children's cultural pride, social connection, and self-representation).

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on national identity, place attachment, and diaspora tourism. Findings delineate how overseas Chinese children's diaspora tourism influences their place attachment and national identities as well as the corresponding relationship between place attachment and national identity. First, the study investigated children's place attachment from a multifaceted view. It surveyed place attachment at a national level; provided a detailed discussion of the person, place, and process dimensions of place attachment; and revealed diverse types of national attachment (i.e., *homeland*, *second home*, *familiar overseas destination*, *tourism destination*). Participants mentioned specific locations while expressing their general perceptions of the country. This broader view of the place dimension encompassed either the abstract country or a specific ancestral city. Scannell and Gifford's (2010) review introduced a three-dimensional framework of place attachment, which many scholars have dissected and validated. The current study reaffirms and expands the understanding of places' diversity and interconnectedness. In addition, this paper extends research on place attachment from a semiotic perspective by assessing the relationships between individuals' national identity, attachment, and cultural and ethnic symbols.

Second, the study described immigrant children's many national identities based on an ethno-symbolism point of view. Overseas Chinese children had different national identities (i.e., *Chinese or ethnically Chinese*, *hybrid*, *ambiguous*, *non-Chinese*). They perceived the country's historical and modern attractions as national symbols that informed their sense of cultural pride. Besides perceptions of nationalistic symbols, meaningful constructs and deep metaphors portrayed overseas Chinese children's social connections and self-representation. Cultural pride and self-representation differed among children with distinct national identities. Results painted an interactive picture of place attachment, national identity, and ethnic and cultural symbols: this research contextualized participants' cultural pride, social connections, and self-representation as well as how these aspects intertwined with meaningful symbols in relation to China and Chineseness.

Third, the study extends research on children's national identity. Previous research explored children's knowledge, feelings, and attitudes to their own and other countries (Barrett, 2005, 2007; Hussak & Cimpian, 2019). This study echoes Barrett's (2005, 2007) work about children's understanding of abstract dimensions of nations and expands it by putting it in a diaspora context. The findings of this study further discussed how children affirm their Chinese identity or display a sense of alienation from the country. While previous studies separated countries for children as their own countries and "other foreign countries" (Barrett, 2007; Hussak

& Cimpian, 2019), this study extends the understanding of diaspora children's view of the "homeland" and "foreign country".

Fourth, the present study clearly revealed the corresponding relationship between place attachment and national identity. Overseas Chinese children have four different types of national identities regarding China. Importantly, the four national identities were found to have four corresponding place attachments (i.e., *Chinese or ethnically Chinese [homeland]*, *hybrid [second home]*, *ambiguous [familiar overseas destination)*, *non-Chinese [tourism destination]*). While previous research either focuses on immigrants' national identity or place attachment (Li & McKercher, 2016a, 2016b; Zhang et al., 2019), this study expands the knowledge of diasporas' national identity and place attachment by highlighting their relationships.

Fifth, this work is one of few efforts to amplify children's voices regarding diaspora tourism. Scholars have suggested that second-generation migrants possess limited homeland attachment based on contact with multiple generations of adult diasporas (Huang et al., 2018). This study showed that some 1.5- and second-generation immigrant children displayed a relatively strong attachment to China, either as a homeland or a second home. As children-centered research, the findings also rectify insufficiencies in tourism studies of children (Liu et al., 2024).

This research setting and method included additional novelties. Instead of examining diasporas' homecoming events or individual tours, this study represents an early attempt to investigate children's summer camp experiences in China. Participant observations shed light on how overseas Chinese children encountered their homeland alongside same-aged children rather than parents. Findings can inform future work on children's diaspora tourism. Additionally, different from studies that mainly relied on traditional interviews to explore children's thoughts (Chan & Spoonley, 2017; Louie, 2000; Qu, 2017), metaphor elicitation interviews were combined with participant observations in this study. Summer camp attendees' in-depth perceptions, attitudes, and feelings contributed to a holistic understanding of national identity and place attachment.

The practical implications of this research hold value for the Chinese government and organizers of overseas Chinese youth camps. This study explored the potential benefits of diaspora tourism for establishing place attachment and nurturing national identities. Findings revealed that root-seeking summer camps afford children a chance to reconnect with China in earnest. Overseas Chinese children with ambiguous or even non-Chinese national identities readily acknowledged China's modernization. More content related to modern scientific and technological achievements should thus be added to the curricula of root-seeking summer camps instead of focusing solely on premodern history. Apart from visiting tourism sites, meaningful activities such as visiting grandparents encouraged overseas Chinese children to maintain social connections and place attachment. In practice, sub-group

sizes should be limited when visiting scenic spots or museums. Children will be able to more firmly grasp Chinese culture and develop a sense of Chineseness in an uncrowded and comfortable environment. Summer camp activities should ideally be segregated based on attendees' Chinese language proficiency. Arranging activities by children's language level can ensure that even attendees with limited Chinese language skills enjoy fruitful experiences.

Several limitations may temper this study's conclusions. First, the sample consisted of participants at root-seeking summer camps in China; all children had connections with the country and were exposed to positive national elements through messaging and the summer camp's structure. Even though the authors, who are Chinese, maintained a neutral stance, the results revealed predominantly favorable attitudes toward this nation. Second, researchers should account for additional impacts on immigrant children's "homeland" national identity and attachment, including aspects related to family, school, peers, and the media. Given regional diversity in children's host countries, subsequent studies should also include group comparisons based on different countries of residence. Third, because government-sponsored summer camps and family tours provide unique environments for immigrant children to encounter national symbols, comparing or combining these two models of children's diaspora tourism may provide a more thorough understanding of their experiences. It would be beneficial to evaluate children's national identity and place attachment before and after a visit as well. Finally, due to poor interview conditions and limited interview time, the ZMET method was not adhered to in full: participants did not successfully complete the process of creating a summary image. Further research can employ this approach in its entirety to explore children's national identities and related behavioral intentions.

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