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Thai-American Identity: Second-Generation, 1.5-Generation, and Parachute Children in the U.S.*

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้เป็นการศึกษาเชิงพรรณนาเกี่ยวกับอัตลักษณ์ทางชาติพันธุ์ของลูกหลานคนไทยในประเทศสหรัฐอเมริกา ได้แก่ กลุ่มคนไทยรุ่นที่สอง (second-generation) รุ่นที่หนึ่งจุดห้า (1.5-generation) และเด็กโดดร่ม (parachute children) มีวัตถุประสงค์ประการที่หนึ่ง เพื่อศึกษาว่ากลุ่มคนเหล่านี้นิยามอัตลักษณ์ทางชาติพันธุ์ของตนเองอย่างไร การศึกษาพบว่ากลุ่มตัวอย่างที่เป็นลูกหลานคนไทยรุ่นที่หนึ่งจุดห้าและเด็กโดดร่มส่วนใหญ่นิยามว่าตนเองมีอัตลักษณ์แบบไทย และรู้สึกว่าตนเอง “เป็นคนไทยในต่างแดน” มากกว่าเป็นคนอเมริกัน ในขณะที่กลุ่มคนไทยรุ่นที่สองส่วนใหญ่นิยามอัตลักษณ์ตนเองทั้งสองแบบ คืออัตลักษณ์แบบชนชั้นกลางอเมริกันผิวขาวและอัตลักษณ์ไทย บางรายสามารถสลับอัตลักษณ์ของตนเองไปมาระหว่างไทยและอเมริกันได้ค่อนข้างราบรื่นตามบริบทของกลุ่มทางสังคมที่ตนมีปฏิสัมพันธ์ด้วย วัตถุประสงค์ประการที่สอง เพื่อศึกษาว่ากลุ่มตัวอย่างมองคนไทยในสหรัฐอเมริกาคนอื่นๆ อย่างไร ซึ่งพบว่าเมื่อมีปฏิสัมพันธ์กับคนไทยอื่นๆ กลุ่มตัวอย่างได้มีการสร้างอัตลักษณ์ย่อย (sub-ethnic identity) ในหมู่คนไทยในสหรัฐอเมริกา เช่น “FOB” (“Fresh Off the Boat”) ซึ่งเป็นอัตลักษณ์ย่อยเชิงลบที่แสดงถึงความ “ไม่กลมกลืน” กับสังคมอเมริกัน และ “whitewashed” ซึ่งเป็นอัตลักษณ์ที่แสดงถึงการ “ละทิ้งความเป็นรากเหง้า” ของตนเอง

abstract

This article is a descriptive study seeking to provide more understanding about the children of Thai immigrants in the United States. First, this study examines how a convenient sample of eleven second-generation, 1.5-generation Thai-Americans, and parachute children define their ethnic identity, focusing on the extent to which they assume an assimilated identity as an American, identify with their parents' original homeland, or identify with both cultures and assume a bicultural identity. It is found that a group of Thai grown children in this study identify themselves in terms of ethnic identity differently. 1.5-generation and parachute children identify more with homeland identity and view themselves as "foreigners in America". On the other hand, second-generation mostly assume a bicultural identity and some are able to shift between Thai and American identity depending on the social situations they are interacting. Secondly, the study examines the sub-ethnic identities that are collectively constructed in the ethnic sub-culture of second- and 1.5-generation Thai-Americans to see how they view their ethnic-peers. The term "FOB" ("Fresh Off the Boat") is used to label on coethnics who carry the images that imply the failure to acculturate to mainstream white-American culture. Also, the term "whitewashed" is viewed as carrying negative meaning as the term used to label those who are "too Americanized" and "have forgotten their roots". However, the use of the term "whitewashed" is more varied than the term "FOB".

Why Study Children of Immigrants?

When first-generation Thai immigrants leave their homeland to live in an unfamiliar culture in the U.S., they might feel alienated or lost in the new culture. To counter their alienation, immigrants seek cohesion with people of the same ethnic identity and use their own traditional culture to improve the situation (Jongkind 1986, 37). However, for their children, the situation might be different. While the immigrant parents may try to maintain aspects of the home culture, the younger generation has to live within two or more different cultures. They have to fill the gap between the traditions and beliefs of their families and the different ways of thinking and behaving that they experience in the country they live in. This cultural gap is wide because Asian culture and American culture differ greatly in their world view: Asians are environment-centered, collective, high-commitment to traditions, and hierarchical while Americans are individual-centered and egalitarian-structured (Chung 1992, 29). As a result they can go through a difficult identity search (Hartman 2009, 36).

Existing studies have suggested that growing up in bicultural environments shape how second-generation Americans view the world and themselves. Rumbaut (1994) finds that those who were born in the United States and are fluent in English greatly identify with assimilative identity, while those who have experienced being discriminated against are less likely to identify as American. There are also situational identities where they identify with Americans when they are with people outside their ethnicity and identify with national-origin identities when they are with people in the same ethnicity (Waters 1994). Many works correspondingly state that ethnic identity is situational and changeable, which mean that this group of second-generation Americans can identify their belongings to different categories at different places and times (Espiritu 1992; Nagel 1994).

However, existing literature found that second-generation Asian Americans sometimes look down on their coethnics who carry negative images that undermine their Americanized identities; for example, those who cannot speak English or dress in styles unusual to mainstream American culture (Kibria 2002, 89). Pyke and Dang

(2003) found that most of the 1.5- and second-generation Korean and Vietnamese Americans consider those who can balance the bicultural identities as being "normal", while those who are too ethnic are denigrated as "FOB" ("Fresh off the Boat") and those who are seen as too American and having "lost their roots" are denigrated as "whitewashed".

This study seeks to provide better understanding about the children of Thai immigrants in the U.S. First, this study examines how a convenient sample of eleven second-generation, 1.5-generation Thai-Americans, and parachute children define their ethnic identity, focusing on the extent to which they assume an assimilated identity as an American, identify with their parents' original homeland, or identify with both cultures and assume a bicultural identity. And secondly, the study examines the sub-ethnic identities that are collectively constructed in the ethnic sub-culture of second- and 1.5-generation Thai-Americans to see how they view their ethnic-peers.

To clarify, in some studies, people are considered to be "second-generation" if they are children of the first-generation immigrants and born in the U.S (Ramakrishnan 2004, 382). However, in this study, some respondents who were born in the U.S. were raised by grandparents or relatives in Thailand for some years before returning to the U.S. The reasons for that were because many Thai parents in America were too busy working long hours and they wanted their children to learn Thai language. Therefore, the "second-generation" in this study refers to those who were raised in the U.S since early childhood (4 years old and younger) because of the similarity of their linguistic, cultural and developmental experiences to those of their peers born and raised in the U.S. (Kim 1999, 29). And the designation of the term "1.5-generation" would be applied to respondents who are either U.S.-born but lived in Thailand for part of childhood or foreign-born and arrived to the U.S. with their parents in their preteen or teenage years (5 years old and older; Kim 1999, 28). Another group of respondents is called "parachute children" which refers to those who come as minor-aged children in pursuit of educational opportunities not available in their country while their parents still work and reside in the homeland (Pyke 2004, 256). This study includes only respondents who immigrated prior to

the age of 15 so they experienced American culture prior to and during high school years — a time when ethnic and acculturative boundaries became a more salient social practice (Pyke and Dang 2003, 155). In this study, four respondents were identified as second-generation, four as 1.5-generation, and three as parachute children.

Theoretical Frameworks

Ethnic Identities as Ethnic Boundaries

According to Barth, ethnicity is not only forged by a shared historical and cultural ascription but is also a product of social process (Barth 1998 [1969], cited in Wimmer 2008, 971). Ethnic identity is constructed and defined as 'boundaries' – patterns of social interaction that are subjectively formed to determine who is and who is not a member of ethnic groups (Sanders 2002, 327). These boundaries entail a complex organization of behavior and social relations. It is constructed by discourses about criteria for determining membership and ways of signaling membership and exclusion (Barth 1998 [1969], 15). However, as ethnic boundaries are constantly fluctuating, ethnic group members always negotiate a limited set of cultural markers to define their own ethnic authenticity. Moreover, ethnic identities are also formed within the ethnic group's internal boundaries. Pyke and Dang (2003) investigate the sub-ethnic identities that second-generation Korean and Vietnamese Americans collectively create and share within their ethnic boundaries. They examine the negative identity terms "FOB" and "whitewashed" that the young adults of 1.5- and second-generation use to describe coethnic peers at different acculturative levels. Therefore, what it means to be Thai from the perspective of the second-generation and 1.5-generation can be different from the perspectives of their parents and people who live in Thailand. This study examines how second-generation and 1.5-generation Thai-Americans define, construct, and negotiate discourses about ethnic norms as boundaries of ethnic membership.

Situational Ethnicity

Another concept that can supplement the concept of ethnic boundaries is "situational ethnicity". This concept views ethnic identity as determined by a social situation (Paden 1970, 244). Ethnic identity is not just a label or an ascribed trait but it is a subjective perception in "culture contact" – the level of "felt ethnicity" is situation specific (Okamura 1981, 454). Paden (1970) notes that "particular contexts may determine which of a person's communal identities or loyalties are appropriate at a point in time" and that "the variability in the affirmation of ethnic identity may depend on the immediate social situation and the actor's perception of that situation". An individual first identifies which ethnic group(s) that s/he belongs to (which is called "self-designated ethnicity") and then indicates how strongly s/he identifies with that group "(which is called "felt ethnicity")" (Stayman and Deshpande 1989, 362).

Ethnic identity is situational and mutable which means that people's conception of their ethnic identity can change at different places and times (Espiritu 1992; Nagel 1994). For example, Korean Americans often employ an "American" identity when they are outside of the U.S. – or when members of the foreign land impose such an identity onto them. When interacting in the white-dominated American mainstream, they are more likely to self-identify as "Asian American" and when among Asian Americans, as "Korean" or "Korean American" (Pyke and Dang 2003, 148). The idea of ethnic identity as situational can be employed in this study to see how the Thai-Americans feel and negotiate their identity in different places and times.

However, although second-generation Asian Americans grow up in the American culture, they have less freedom to identify, and be identified as, truly American because social categories of race or national origin override the choice of ethnicity (Waters 1996, 449). Asian Americans are seen as less American than other Americans. Although they may feel, think, and act American, they are routinely treated as though they are foreigners and do not belong in America to the same degree as white Americans. In this study I examine the narratives of Thai-Americans

regarding how they feel when interacting in the white-dominated American mainstream.

Assimilation and Acculturation

Assimilation is a concept aimed to describe the immigrants and their children's incorporation into the host society (Chantanee 2011, 115). Alba and Nee (2003) define assimilation as "the decline of an ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences" (Alba and Nee 2003, 10). Early models of assimilation were applied to Europeans leading to expectations of straight-line assimilation. This model has become largely obsolete in the study of today's non-white immigrant groups because this uni-directional model assumed the full assimilation of immigrant groups with the eventual disappearance of the ethnic groups into a single host society – an Americanized white-dominant culture (Gordon 1964; Gans 1979; Pyke and Dang 2003). Criticized for its ethnocentrism and failure to explain today's non-white immigrants, this model has led to new multidimensional models of assimilation theory (Gans 1992, 1997; Portes and Zhou 1993; Rumbaut 1994, 1997; Zhou 1997).

Gans (1992) proposes a "bumpy-line theory of ethnicity" which views ethnic identity as adapted and recreated in response to the circumstances in the host society. The bump represents various kinds of adaptations to changing circumstances with the line having no predictable end. This bumpy line theory's idea "is related to the optional transnational practices among second or later generations who deliberately adopt their ethnic identity as a result of some exclusion encountered in the host society" (Chantanee 2011, 121). At the same time, they are free to look for ways of expressing that identity which suit them best, thus opening up the possibility of voluntary, diverse or individualistic ethnicity (Gans 1979, 9). For the third and later generations, ethnicity is often symbolic; they can maintain their ethnic identities without necessarily participating in ethnic communities or organizations but instead through the consumption of symbols, for example eating at ethnic restaurants, celebrating festivals, and taking vacation trips to their home country. Symbolic ethnicity can become a permanent source of ethnic identity, an occasion of

nostalgia, a pleasant leisure time activity and even an opportunity for exotic consumption (Gans 1992, 44-45).

Portes and Zhou (1993) propose a model of "segmented assimilation." They argue that the children of immigrants will be assimilated in several ways – as opposed to the straight-line theory. The processes of assimilation and economic outcomes of immigrant groups are diverse as they are affected by a number of factors including their place of settlement, regional resources, and the human and social capital that they bring with them from their countries of origin (Pyke 2004, 258). In this model, assimilation into mainstream American society is only one possible outcome for some immigrants and their children.

Rumbaut (1994), another segmented assimilation theorist, argues that there are multiple paths to assimilation that construct different types of ethnic identities. The outcomes of the assimilation process can be one of three possibilities; *the first path* is assimilating into the mainstream white culture; *the second path* is assimilating into the racial minority groups where they remain disadvantaged; and *the third path* is accommodating social and economic resources from the mainstream society while maintaining their ethnic cultural values, which is called "selective acculturation" (Golash-Boza 2006, 30). The idea that the children of immigrants choose to adopt and adapt some culture and values of the mainstream and maintain some aspects of their ethnic cultural patterns is similar to Gibson's idea of "accommodation without assimilation" (Gibson 1988) in which the immigrants and their children change their behavior to conform to mainstream expectation but not adopt all the values. They still hold on to their ethnic cultural practices and ethnic community that contribute to their success in the host society (Pyke 2004, 259).

We know very little about Thai second-generation assimilation and acculturation into American mainstream culture therefore, in this study I will use the existing studies about other Asian American ethnicity as a conceptual framework to examine to what extent second- and 1.5-generation Thai-Americans and parachute children accommodate themselves in two or more different cultures.

In the study of Korean Americans, Kim (1999) categorizes the cultural orientation of Korean/Asian individuals into four quadrants: *1) assimilationist* (assimilating into the white American mainstream), *2) traditionalist* (retaining or asserting the traditional Asian values), *3) bicultural integrationist* (being bilingual and bicultural and feeling comfortable and competent in both cultures) and *4) isolationist* (not feeling a sense of belonging or acceptance in either culture).

In this study, I will use these typologies as a broad framework to see the extent to which the Thai-Americans assimilate or acculturate to American culture. However, I acknowledge that the ethnic boundaries are situational and fluctuate depending on different settings and audiences. Kim (1999) admits that, in reality, a person's cultural orientation may be "overlapping, fluid, shifting, depending on the specifics of a situation and developmental age factors" and an individual could have multiple identities. The Thai cases might also differ from what existing literature has found.

Method

This descriptive study employs semi-structured in-depth interviews regarding respondents' family background, cultural values, and ethnic identities. I located the respondents through the Thai Student Union (TSU or "Thai Club") at the University of California, Riverside and gathered a convenient sampling of eleven respondents., who participated in the interviews during the summer of 2012. All pseudonyms given to respondents in the study have been chosen by the respondents themselves. I conducted the interviews in both English and Thai. Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to an hour and a half, averaging about one hour. All respondents recruited in this study are Thai-Americans who have lived in the U.S. for more than ten years and are living in the U.S. at the time of interview. All respondents have been purposely selected to be female in order to focus on only one gender. From the literature, Asian daughters are more likely than Asian sons to have conflicts with their parents, as they are often pressured to conform to Asian traditional gender

values at home yet are also pushed to succeed in education as required by modern Western values (Gibson 1995; Pyke 2004). Respondents range in age from 19 to 30, averaging 23 years old. The study excludes anyone over 30 year of age because the researcher cannot ascertain whether their identities have been constructed in later stages of adulthood (Pyke and Dang 2003, 155). The background of the respondents are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 *characteristics of respondent*

name	age	category	age of immi-gration	years in the U.S.	family	self-identification
Joanne	22	second-generation	-	22	Thai parents	Thai-American
Sophia	21	second-generation	-	21	Thai parents	Thai
Pichy	20	second-generation	2	18	Thai parents	Thai-American
Nicole	19	second-generation	-	19	Thai mom and Burmese dad	Asian-American
Nicha	26	1.5-generation	14	12	Thai parents	Thai
Olivia	28	1.5-generation	10	18	Thai parents	Thai
Jen	24	1.5-generation	11	13	Thai mom and white stepdad	Thai
Polly	24	1.5-generation	14	10	Thai mom and white stepdad (deceased)	American
Jay	30	parachute	13	17	Thai brother (16 years senior) and white sister-in-law	none
Sarah	22	parachute	11	11	Thai aunts	Thai
Emmy	20	parachute	9	11	Thai aunts	Thai

The study employs a three-page interview guide with open-ended questions and follow-up probes about the respondents' self-identities and life. To begin, I asked respondents to describe their family background in terms of their relationship with family members, values, and traditions. Then, I posed questions regarding their relationship with people in their childhood and preteen life. The variation of interview questions depends on whether the respondents were raised in the U.S. since early childhood, or immigrated to America in their teenage years.

Regarding their life experiences during school-age years, I asked if they felt and acted differently when they were at school compared to when they were at home, and how people they encountered reacted and seemed to view them. I asked respondents to describe their ethnic identification, whether they felt more Thai, Americanized, both, or something other, and their reasons for their self-identification. I also asked respondents to describe what characteristics Thai people had and if they saw differences among Thai people. To those respondents who noticed differences, I asked them to describe those differences. Additionally, I asked if they had ever heard the terms "FOB" and "whitewashed" used by others (Pyke and Dang 2003), to whom the terms were applied, what the terms meant to them, and whether they used these terms themselves. Then, I prompted respondents to discuss Thai identity, values and culture, and what they believed to be similar or different from American culture. Finally, I asked respondents to describe their lifestyle and how it was influenced by Thai culture and to what extent they had a sense of belonging to the Thai culture. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

I use the Coding Analysis Toolkit (CAT), a qualitative data analysis program to organize and code interview transcriptions. As the research seeks to understand how second-generation and 1.5 generation Thai-Americans identify themselves and how they view other coethnic people, the data has been coded into two themes. *The first theme* concerns the meaning of identity, how respondents identify themselves and see others. I use the data to describe the ways that respondents think about their ethnic identity. *The second theme* is the analysis of the sub-ethnic

that emerge when they describe coethnics. I also analyze how the respondents accommodate themselves to both cultures. I select quotations from respondents that are relevant to the themes and these are presented as examples of representative patterns in the data. Although a convenient sample of eleven respondents is a very small group, the purpose of this study is not to generalize from the experiences of the respondents, but to understand each case in its complexity and processes of identity construction.

Findings

Self-identification: the Difference between Thai and Thai-American

When asked how they self-identify, the responses from second-generation and 1.5-generation are diverse. I do not find major difference in self-identification between 1.5-generation and parachute children, as most respondents from both groups report that they identify as Thai. Most of them give similar reasons: their parents are Thai; they were raised in a Thai family; they grew up with the Thai culture and values for the most of their lives; and the first language they spoke is Thai. They can blend in with their American peers but are more comfortable with Thai. On the other hand, the second-generation can communicate in Thai with their parents, but they feel more comfortable with English, despite being bilingual. According to Olivia (28, 1.5-generation) who was born in the U.S. but had lived with her aunt in Thailand until she was 10 years old: "I don't view myself a real American. I still think I'm Thai. Because when I first came here, the first language I spoke was Thai so I identify myself Thai, even though I live here longer than I lived in Thailand."

Olivia's view is similar to Jen (24, 1.5-generation), who immigrated at the age of 11 when her mom married a white American man: "Obviously, I'm Thai. It was everything that makes me who I am today. It was like the first half of my life I grew up there. It was the first thing that I knew – the first thing I learned about. Most Thai people who were born here can't even speak Thai. They tend to forget

that they are Thai. They say they are Thai but not thinking about themselves as Thai."

Sarah (22, parachute child), who immigrated to study in America and has lived with her aunts in the U.S since the age of 11, uses the notion of "a foreigner" to present herself. She reports "I feel like a Thai who lives in America" Although she has been living here for ten years, she comments that she still does not speak English well: "I feel more comfortable speaking Thai and more connected with Thai people. I feel a little bit like a foreigner in America."

However, not all respondents who grew up in Thailand identify with Thai identity, Polly (24, 1.5-generation), who moved to the U.S. with her mom at the age of 14, identifies with American: "I'm totally American because sometimes I really get annoyed with Thai people. I feel like I live here for too long and I'm used to American ways of living and thinking. Something I do here…sometimes it is against Thai culture and it bugs Thai people and I get annoyed. I just can't be them."

For second-generation respondents, two of the four identify as "Thai-American", one identifies as "Asian American", while the other identifies as Thai. What they have in common is that they grew up in America for the most of their childhood. They report knowing more about American than Thai values and customs. The American-hyphenation means they lean more toward their American identity but still identify with their parents' country of origin.

Pichy (20, second-generation), who immigrated with her parents when she was 2, identifies with Thai-American and says she was "raised in America for the majority of my life". She feels that even though she is Thai, she "knows more of American culture than Thai culture".

Nicole (19, second-generation), who was born in the U.S. to a Thai mother and a Burmese father, identifies as a so-called 'pan-ethnic Asian identity'. She prefers identifying with her mom to her dad because she had spent her early

childhood with her maternal grandmother in Thailand, and because "not so many people know about Burmese".

> But if you ask me, I would say I am Asian American because I am mixed of Thai, Chinese, and Burmese. I was raised in American ways and I don't speak Thai. I know only a little bit of culture and customs. I don't know everything about it. I'll say I'm Asian American because I'm not completely Thai and I'm not completely American.

Joanne (22, second-generation) also identifies as Thai-American. She describes the phases in her self-identification from early childhood to college, and discusses situational identities that come into play in a particular setting,

> It's half-half between American and Thai. I did grow up in an American community since I was little but at the same time culturally I grew up in a Thai family. From pre-school to high school, I lived in a Thai household for my whole life. But when I go to college and get out of the house, it's more Americanized because I live with American-born people. We speak English only. Living there [at home], there's something you can't do because there are Thai people but living here I act American.

While other people are quite certain about their identity positions, there is one respondent that feels ambivalent about her identity. Jay (30, a parachute child), who immigrated to live with her elder brother when she was 13, explains that, because she has lived in the middle of two cultural worlds, she feels that she does not fit in either one completely. Jay's brother (16 years her senior) came to America around the 1970s, married a white woman and had three sons. Jay left Thailand to live with her brother for a better education and also to help babysit his sons. In her case, Jay feels that she initially identified as Thai, but after more than ten years of socialization in American settings, she has become more Americanized.

> It's difficult to feel at ease in either one culture. When I am with American friends, I feel more Thai but when I am with Thais, I feel

> more American. I was raised as Thai for 13 years but once I got here, I didn't know anything else but this [American] culture. I did not have much contact with other Thai people except my family until six years ago. Even if I tried not to be affected by American culture, it was not possible. Hanging out with both groups, there is always a part of me that feel like a person who has the look from the outside.

Jay's case is relevant to Kim's typology of cultural orientation as the *isolationist* (Kim 1991) in the way that she can have more than one ethnic identity depending on the contexts but she does not feel she belongs to any group completely. Her position about ethnicity is 'situational' and the level of felt ethnicity is context specific (Okamura 1981). She identifies with both Thai and American, but is reluctant to self-identify strongly with either one.

With an exception of Jay's case, the main difference between 1.5-generation and second-generation is that the former group has spent more time during their childhood in Thai settings. Childhood experiences prove critical for Thai-Americans in their identification, with a tendency to orient toward the culture they grow up in, for the most part. Their self-identifications vary considerably with their backgrounds and individual experiences. Some 1.5-generation respondents report the same descriptions found in existing literature, that they "feel more like foreigners, more marginalized, feeling they're in the middle of two cultural worlds they do not quite belong to" (Kim 1999; Park 1999) but some are able to blend in with both cultures if they speak better English and have experienced a high degree of socialization in American environment since they have migrated. Second-generation individuals do not have difficulty with English. They feel more comfortable with American culture, but the degree to which they feel comfortable with Thai culture depends largely on their socialization during childhood and their family encouragement.

Cultural Images: Who is Thai and Who is not quite Thai?

When asked to describe Thai people, most respondents report their encounters with first-generation immigrants who are friends or acquaintances of their parents rather than their peers, indicating they do not know many Thai people in their ages. Only two 1.5-generation and two parachute children report hanging out regularly with Thai peers. They report that Thai people in general tend to value deference, politeness, manners and courtesy. Social interactions within Thai context are very hierarchical. They do what their parents tell them to do. Younger persons are expected to show respect to older persons when they are introduced to them or on their first meeting of the day after they have known each other. All respondents describe how they are taught to behave in Thai social contexts, especially to make sure to *wai*[1] older persons when they meet.

> Politeness is the big one. My parents always teach me to be respectful. In Thai culture, we do *wai* and we say *"ka"*[2]. I guess Thai culture values politeness more. You have to be more respectful when you talk to someone who is *phee*[3]. In American contexts, if someone is older than me only two or three years, I treat him just like a friend but in Thai culture it is different.. (Pichy, 20, second-generation)

> [Mom] would specifically tell me every time when I am about to meet someone who is Thai, she would tell me "Don't forget you're Thai"; "You have to *wai* every time you see an adult. (Jen, 24, 1.5-generation)

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[1] ไหว้ - a Thai greeting in a form of a slight bow with the palms pressed together in a prayer-like fashion.

[2] ค่ะ – the more polite way to end sentences in Thai language.

[3] พี่ - an elder sibling or an acquaintance who is few years older.

Even Polly (24, 1.5-generation) who identifies more with an American identity still performs the formal greeting in Thai context as she feels that it is a code of conduct for a Thai.

> I do the *wai* to show respect. I do it to people that I respect. I would *wai* only to the people that I know and respect. It's our culture. I don't want to say "Hey! What's up?" and hug Thai people. That's crazy, you know.

Respondents report that *wai* is a way to identify with Thais and self-identify as Thai. Normally, when Thai-Americans meet Thai people, younger persons would know what to do to elder persons. According to Barth's concept of ethnic boundaries (Barth 1998 [1969]), there are some sets of standards in social interaction that determine whether one is a member of an ethnic group. In the Thai case, these boundaries are exercised when they comply with the practice of deference and respect of the elders. Second-generation, 1.5-generation, and parachute Thai-Americans in this study acknowledge the obligation of these standards and conform to them in order to assert that they are one of the members of the group. However, this practice is acted out only to the first-generation. No one reports doing *wai* within the second-generation peers although the other persons are older. Here I see *wai* as one of the cultural practices that reveal authoritative and hierarchical structure of Thai culture. Because the culture prescribes the younger to show respect to the elder first, the elder never does *wai* first. When the second-generation are among their peers in the same generation, they do not feel obliged to do it as American culture is more egalitarian-structured, especially if the age gap is not too big.

What are more American Persons like?

When asked to describe Thai people who are more Americanized or act like an American, respondents used adjectives such as independent, easy-going, more disobedient and liberal to describe people they know. They use the term "liberal" to

refer to people who do not adopt traditional, orthodox, or authoritarian Thai views or practices. Olivia (28, 1.5-generation) talks about her younger brother, who is more Americanized:

> He didn't obey parents as I did. [...] He's more self-centered, self-directed, comparing to me and my (elder) sister. (Probe: What do you mean by "self-directed"?) Like when he didn't want to do homework or didn't want to practice piano, he just didn't do it and mom had to stay with him closely to make sure that he did it.

Sophia (21, second-generation) describes her peers who are more American as "more laid back" and "carefree": "They wear what they like. They do whatever they want. We don't care much about how other people will think how we dress."

Joanne (22, second-generation) contrasts Americanized persons with traditional Thai persons in the ways that they make choices in their own lives. She says that Americanized persons are more determined to choose their own life paths:

> They [Americanized persons] are liberal. Thai people are more conservative. (Probe: What's conservative?) Like you have to be back home by seven; you have to dress certain ways. You have to stick to your parents and you just can't swing it. You have to do this-this-this, in order to reach this. (Probe: What do you mean by "liberal"?) Liberal is like "oh it's okay" I can go this way but I will reach to the goal anyway. It's not a one, direct route that you have to start from this point only and you have to go step-by-step like from a prep school here and get internship here and study this and you have to go to that college and blah-blah-blah. You do what you enjoy and you will eventually get there. You are bumping around but you'll gain more experience on the way. They will know what they like or don't like. They don't have to be told what to do by their parents.

Moreover, respondents report that Americanized persons are more open and sincere in expression, and that sometimes might be considered disrespectful in Thai

context. Some respondents report that Thai people are taught that when it comes to an argument with older persons, most Thai people would keep it inside or find the way to express their opinions indirectly. For Americans, they would just speak out:

> Most people who are more Americanized don't take care of their parents or sometimes are not even close to their parents like Thai people do. My (American-Thai) nephews don't respect teachers or bosses not like the ways I was brought up in Thailand. It is not that they are disrespectful but they speak up without regard to what people think of them sometimes. (Jay, 30, parachute child)

> Thai people are more considerate. Americanized people don't care much about seniority. It's like everyone is equal and they treat you like friends, not like older persons. For example, my cousins, they don't really respect their parents. They would say something which should not be said to older persons although she was just joking. The words like "Oh, mom, shut up!" You know that was very harsh. You don't say that to your mom. Thai people are more respectful. (Sarah, 22, parachute child)

It appears that respondents tend to blame bad behaviors on being influenced by American culture, although some behaviors are considered improper in American culture as well. They conclude that most "bad" behaviors in general such as being disrespectful, showing explicit sexual intimacy in public (e.g. kissing), and sleeping over at a friend of the opposite sex's place, are resulted from being too Americanized. This is because the respondents view Thai (or Asian) values as highly disciplined and authoritative which are opposed to Western ones. A behavior that does not correspond with family expectations will be interpreted as American or Western ones.

Sub-identities: "FOB" and "whitewashed"

FOB: They fail to acculturate into American

I examine the identities "FOB" and "whitewashed" as sub-ethnic identities given and used by people in the same ethnicity to "create meaning, mark and maintain internal social boundaries, and control social behavior among coethnic peers" (Pyke and Dang 2003, 155). "FOB" is applied to those who display any of several ethnic identifiers such as speaking strong accented English, speaking Thai with peers, dressing in styles associated with the homeland or ethnic enclaves, or socializing with recently immigrated coethnics.

When I asked respondents if they saw any differences among Thai people in America, most of them reported the differences in the degree of maintaining Thai and acculturating American identities. However, only two of them mentioned the word "FOB" deliberately. Sophia (21, second-generation) is one of the respondents who used the word in the interview when she described a group of 1.5-generation Thai girls who attended the same high school.

> [Newly immigrated Thai girls] hung out with each other in high school and they spoke to each other in Thai. But if they looked at me, they wouldn't think I was Thai but I knew what they were saying because I understand Thai. Mostly, I knew that they were people from Thailand from the way they acted and dressed and they formed their own little group. (Probe: Did you associate with them?) No. (Probe: Why?) *Because they are too FOB."* (laugh; emphasis added)

Polly (24, 1.5-generation) is another person who mentioned the word FOB when I asked her about how long it had taken her to become acculturated comfortably with American culture and identified more with American identity.

> It took like three years…yeah and I had a boyfriend – a white American. *That made me cannot do FOB things.* I didn't hang out with Thai people. *No more FOBBY.* So most of the times I speak

> English, and I can't hang out with Thai people anymore because I'm too Americanized. (emphasis added)

As the term FOB is associated with negative stereotypes of immigrants who cannot accommodate to American culture, Sophia and Polly use the term to distance and disidentify themselves from such images. This is consistent with previous studies that find some second-generation or 1.5-generation trying not to engage or participate in social activities with newly immigrated coethnics, fearing that such association could undermine their Americanized identities (Kibria 2002, 88). Four respondents report avoiding using the term 'FOB' because they feel that it is a mean way of saying. This is consistent with the existing literature as the term could be regarded as racist and it incorporates negative racial images and anti-immigrant attitudes from the mainstream (Pyke and Dang 2003, 159). The category 'FOB' is a broad construction of all negative notions of Asian Americans. A FOB can be found in different social classes. They can be either a rich, well-educated person or a poor illegal immigrant who overstayed their visas and works in a low-skilled labor job. What they have in common is that they fail to accommodate to American lifestyle as define by the persons who label them a FOB.

When talking about FOB, most people exclude themselves from the stigmatized label and refer to "someone else". However, two respondents use the term as a self-identification label as they acknowledge their own inclinations toward "Thainess". Although they have been living on American soil for many years, they prefer to engage in Thai/Asian lifestyles and social relations rather than American ones. They know that the term has derogatory meaning but they do accept the fact that their characteristics and lifestyles fit more with the descriptions of the term and they do not want to change.

> I call myself a FOB because I know the way I act is like FOB. [...] That's what my friends called me. (Probe: "How did you feel when your friend called you a FOB?") I didn't feel anything. I knew she didn't mean it in a bad way. She is my best friend. I knew she was just joking and I don't care. If doing what I like will relate to a FOB,

> I can be a FOB. I know that using an umbrella on a sunny day is kind of FOB and I always make fun of myself among Thai friends about that, but I would use it anyway because it is very hot during summer. (Nicha, 26, 1.5-generation)

Sarah (22, parachute child) also considers herself a FOB because she is "shy and more comfortable to speak Thai to Thai people I hang out with." Also, she mentions that Americanized-Thais "speak English only", and therefore she feels more comfortable to be with the Thai people.

The sub-identity 'FOB' is viewed as negative by Thai-Americans as it is associated with the inability to acculturate to American culture. However, not all respondents see it as a negative term when applied to themselves and it does not prevent them from living their lives in the ways that they are familiar. This might be because both persons who self-identify as FOB came to the U.S. when they were already in their teens (14 for Nicha and 11 for Sarah). There is something associated with FOB characteristics that they cannot wash away (e.g. accent). Therefore, they are less confident to be American. When the term FOB is labeled on them, they appropriate the derogatory label in a way that it is merely a joking term.

Whitewashed: They don't speak Thai

Most respondents describe 'whitewashed' as those who cannot or refuse to speak Thai with peers or parents and have more American friends. Six of eleven respondents report that they have heard the term 'whitewashed' used by other people, or have used the term themselves. From the interviews, only one respondent (Polly, 24, 1.5-generation) self-identifies as 'whitewashed': "I consider myself a whitewashed too. [Because] since I started working part-time, I was surrounded by white friends and they brainwashed me." The term refers to people who have little understanding about their culture. They do not share or talk about ethnic activities with other people, not even people from their own ethnicity. Nicole (19, second-generation) explains what whitewashed is and tries to distance herself from the term:

> I think *it means you don't know anything about Asian culture* and your root. It's like not knowing any of the traditions, customs, and holidays. My mom always told me about Thai stuff ever since I was a kid. I know Thai phrases and I can understand. *I know about holidays and stuffs.* I think whitewashed is not knowing about anything. *So, I'm not a whitewashed.* (emphasis added)

While most respondents describe 'whitewashed' as "being nurtured as an American", another meaning of the term is described by some respondents. The term may also refer to "wannabe people" – those who imitate the behavior and customs of white Americans because they admire American culture more than their own ethnic culture.

Sarah (22, parachute child) describes her view on a 'whitewashed' person that 'whitewashed' is like people who try to be white when they are not white. She talks about her cousin:

> She only likes a white guy. She only has white friends. She doesn't hang out with Asian friends. The way she talks is like white and she doesn't speak Thai now. She is like "oh, I don't understand Thai." Even though she was born in Thailand and she came here when she was in middle school but my aunt said that since she came here, she always speaks English. She likes to make fun of people who just came to America, like their accents.

Unlike the term 'FOB' that is undisputedly considered negative, the use of the term 'whitewashed' is more varied. It can be regarded as positive status that indicates their success at being seen as "American". Pichy (20, second-generation) comments that 'whitewashed' people often identify themselves a "whitewashed" as they think that white middle-class culture suits them better than their ethnic culture. The person who self-identifies or is identified as 'whitewashed' tends to be proud of such identity. She views that people who engage in ethnic practices are excluded from being labeled 'whitewashed'.

> Normally, people who are whitewashed, identify themselves whitewashed. Like my housemate, she is Asian but she has white boyfriend [...] and she says "yeah I'm kind of whitewashed." She is proud for trying to be white, you know. I don't really meet Thai people who are whitewashed because most of the people I know they go to *Wat Thai* (Thai temple) and if you go to *Wat Thai*, you are not whitewashed.

Olivia (28, 1.5-generation) believes that one chooses to be whitewashed by not speaking Thai, even if he/she can. She thinks that it is quite unusual for a person who has Thai parents and grew up in a Thai family to not understand Thai. So, she says it is a matter of choice that person chooses to be Americans by not associating with Thai cultural markers and the most significant marker is the language:

> I think they can be Thai if they want to be [...]. If they are not interested to learn to speak Thai from their parents, that means they don't want to use the language; they don't want to associate with Thai people; and they don't identify themselves as Thai. My sister once talked about one Thai girl. She told me that she's Thai but she doesn't understand Thai at all. This girl was around my age when she came to America but she didn't speak fluent Thai which surprised me because if you came here at the age of 10 or above, you must have had education in Thailand before. You must be taught to read or write Thai in school. I didn't understand why she couldn't do that (speak Thai). I think that was because she didn't wanted to be Thai but she wanted to be American. So, she chose to speak English.

According to Olivia, she feels that whitewashed people refuse speaking Thai even when they can because they feel that it will undermine their American identity. The identity 'whitewashed' is not only used as a way to assimilate with white culture, but is also used to place a person identified as whitewashed higher than other

Thai people. They want to assimilate into American mainstream culture completely by discarding all Asian characteristics.

However, for these groups of young Thai-Americans, almost everyone wants to be categorized in the middle of the scale as balancing American identity with an ethnic identity. Because both sub-ethnic identities have some negative images, they make the bicultural middle as a safe, non-stigmatized zone that is considered as "normal". For the second-generation group, they feel that American culture is more dominant in their lives, despite being bilingual and bicultural.

Conclusion

This study examines how second- and 1.5-generation Thai-American women define their ethnic identity, focusing on the extent to which they assume an assimilated American identity, Thai identity, or assume a bicultural identity. I have found that all of the respondents have some ties with Thai identity, although some identify more strongly with assimilated American identity.

The ways these groups of second- and 1.5-generation and parachute children think and act are situated in different contexts. In their everyday life, they blend in with American culture; they speak English more often, and have friends from diverse ethnicities. But when they are with their parents or when they encounter the coethnics, they acknowledge the cultural differences. When I asked a question about their self-identification, most of them said they had never really thought about the question of ethnic identity but they reported having some connections with Thai culture.

In terms of ethnic boundaries (Barth 1998 [1969]), they know what criteria are required in an interaction within ethnic group. They think and act according to Thai values and cultural norms that they have learned from their experiences when interacting in Thai contexts. There is also a notion of situational ethnicity (Paden 1970; Okamura 1981): how they identify themselves and act depends upon context.

They choose to act as a Thai to a person who is very Thai and act as an American with other people. They do not want to polarize and identify with either one of the culture completely. If they are too ethnically-involved, they could be labeled as FOB which is a derogatory term. If they do not want to be a part of their ethnic group, they might act 'whitewashed.' Therefore, most people want to be normal and can get along with both cultures. There are still some variations on the self-identification depending on the years of immigration, family relations, personal experiences, and other factors that I have not examined in this study.

The limitation of this study is the very small sample size and the samples are very varied. When I started the interviews, I expected to examine only second- and 1.5-generation and did not anticipate the presence of parachute children in the sample. Moreover, all respondents in this study have ties with Thai culture to some degree and have not assimilated into American culture completely. I could not locate any respondents who identify with American identity alone in this study which might be assumed that they do not want to associate with an ethnic enclave. For this reason, the findings based on this study alone cannot be generalized to the broader community.

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