



Cultural Identity Threat: The Role of Cultural Identifications in Moderating Closure Responses to Foreign Cultural Inflow

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Political theorists of globalization have argued that foreign inflows to a society can give rise to collective-identity closure—social movements aiming to narrow the in-group, and exclude minorities. In this research we investigate whether exposure to the mixing of a foreign culture with one’s heritage culture can evoke need for closure, a motive that engenders ethnocentric social judgments. On the basis of a proposed identity threat mechanism, we tested the hypothesis that exposure to situations mixing foreign and heritage cultures would evoke need for closure for individuals with low foreign identification but not those with high foreign identification. An experiment with Hong Kong Chinese students varied linguistic and visual cues of Western and Chinese culture and found, as predicted, that exposure to mixed Western/Chinese conditions elevated need for closure for those low in Western identification but not those high in Western identification.

Globalization refers to the recent expansion and acceleration of flows of people, organizations, capital, images, and ideas across different parts of the world (Appadurai, 1996). Although intergroup contact and exchange have occurred throughout human history, global flows across geographic, political, and

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cultural boundaries have increased in the past several decades owing to political and economic changes, as well as developments in transportation and information technologies (IT; Giddens, 1985). Whereas experiencing multiple cultures once required traveling abroad or to immigrant neighborhoods, nowadays it permeates everyday life (Arnett, 2002). Foreign and local cultural elements mix in classrooms, workplaces, restaurants, concert halls, and on television and the Internet (Appiah, 2006; Fu & Chiu, 2007; Lowman, 2009).

The consequences of globalization have been studied chiefly at the macro level of societal and economic trends. Journalists have called attention to heightened competition from opening of global markets and to convergence of lifestyles in many parts of the world—an Adidas-clad IT worker could stop at a strip mall for McDonalds and Starbucks on the way to the airport, whether in Los Angeles, Jeddah, or Marseilles (see Friedman, 2005). For some, these signs of communication, interaction, and convergence herald a global village (McLuhan & Powers, 1989). However, others note that globalism has been accompanied by renewed tribalism (Barber, 1996). In many societies, inflows of foreign culture have set off reactionary movements to reduce ethnic and religious diversity in the name of restoring traditional social forms (Appadurai, 1990). For example, as the 1970s oil boom infused Saudi Arabia with shopping malls and other icons of Western consumerism, Saudi clerics countered this Westernization through puritanical Wahhabism, supplanting more inclusive forms of Islam (Commins, 2006). Likewise, in 1980s France as Islamic people and practices became more visible features of everyday life, Le Pen gained surprising support in his political efforts to refashion the French national identity in racially and religiously restrictive terms (Bayart, 2005). Whether fundamentalist or fascist, these social movements are reactions to the blurring of boundaries and overlapping of categories that globalization brings; they seek to clarify the collective identity or purify the community by narrowing its boundaries, narrowing that is typically framed as restoring the rules of an earlier, simpler (and often more fictional than real) halcyon era (Paxton, 2004; Salzman, 2008). This narrowing denies the multiplicity of identity and leads inexorably to the exclusion of people and ideas that complicate the mainstream heritage identity category, such as religious and ethnic minorities (Sen, 2006). Although, scholars have described examples of this societal dialectic of global inflow and collective-identity closure (Bayart, 2005), little is known about the psychological motives that propel these social movements. Geschiere and Meyer (1998) note that “Global flows seem to trigger a search for fixed orientation points and action frames, as well as determined efforts to affirm old and construct new boundaries” (p. 602). Yet how does this reaction work psychologically and what types of people are most susceptible to it?

In this article, we investigate responses to global inflows on the psychological level, hoping to elucidate what types of people are more prone to defensive, closure-oriented responses. We build on the pioneering work of Chiu and

colleagues (Torelli, Chiu, Tam, Au, & Keh, 2011) on psychological responses to mixed-culture exposure. Their studies find that priming a mix of the heritage culture and a foreign culture evokes a cultural-difference mindset. On problem solving tasks this can result in complex, integrative creative thinking (Leung & Chiu, 2010). Yet in social judgments it can engender rigid and exclusionary judgments, such as stereotyping members of cultural groups and exaggerating the incompatibility of different traditions (Chiu, Mallorie, Keh, & Law, 2009). These judgments reflect an essentialistic mindset of construing one's cultural group as defined by sharp boundaries and distinctive consensual traits (Shore, 2002). Yet there remains much to learn about how dual cultural priming evokes this mindset and the conditions under which it occurs.

To fill this explanatory gap, we propose that the exclusionary response hinges on heightened need for closure. Need for cognitive closure is an epistemic motive for clear categories and firm decisions and rather than continuing uncertainty or ambiguity (Kruglanski, 1989). This motivational state is evoked by various kinds of threats (Orehek et al., 2010), particularly threats to the ideas central to the person's sense of meaning, such as identity categories (Proulx & Heine, 2010; Van Tongeren & Green, 2010). Exposure to mixes of an inflowing foreign culture with the heritage culture may threaten cultural identity and thereby trigger needs for epistemic certainty and security. It is also plausible on the basis of past research that need for closure underlies exclusionary social judgments. Cognitive closure gives rise to cultural self-stereotyping (Chiu et al., 2000; Fu et al., 2007) as well as prejudicial behaviors toward out-groups (Kruglanski & Freund, 1983). Hence, the essentialistic and exclusionary judgments that follow exposure to mixed heritage/foreign cultural priming could be explained in terms of threat to participants' heritage identity and their ensuing need for closure.

If threat to cultural identity is indeed the mechanism involved, then we can predict which kind of individuals are more and less likely to exhibit closure-oriented social judgments after heritage/foreign priming. This response would be less likely for individuals who identify with the inflowing foreign culture as well as their heritage culture, as such individuals should not feel identity threat from the juxtaposition of the heritage and foreign cultures. Individuals vary dramatically in the degree to which they identify with cultures other than their heritage culture. Acculturation studies have documented that some but not all immigrants identify dually with heritage and host cultures (Berry, 1990). Similarly studies of multicultural societies such as Hong Kong, a longtime Western colony and continuing nexus of Western business in East Asia, find that residents identify with both their local heritage (Chinese) and the inflowing global (Western) culture. Bicultural Hong Kong residents switch between Chinese and Western modes of judgment in response to situational cues, such as languages or visual symbols associated with either of the cultures (Briley, Morris, & Simonson, 2005; Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000). Even in societies without such an entrenched foreign

cultural presence, young people today increasingly identify both with their local heritage tradition and with inflowing global culture, typically represented by Western culture or that of a regionally hegemonic culture (Arnett, 2002; Hermans & Kempen, 1998). The degree to which individuals identify with a foreign tradition could moderate their feeling of threat when exposed to mixes of that culture with their heritage culture; high identifiers with the foreign tradition are less likely to construe the juxtaposition of foreign and local elements as a threatening invasion or contamination, and hence less likely to feel a compensatory need for closure. Consistent with this, past research has found that immigrants with dually strong heritage and host culture identifications are lower in their chronic level of need for structure (Tadmor, Tetlock, & Peng, 2009), which is a major component of need for closure (Kruglanski, 1989).

To test the idea that foreign identification moderates the effect of cultural-mix priming on need for closure, we conducted an experiment varying whether university students in Hong Kong were exposed to symbols of the heritage (East Asian) culture, a foreign (Western) culture, or a mix of the heritage and foreign cultures, adapting past methods of cultural priming in Hong Kong (e.g., Hong et al., 2000; Yang & Bond, 1980). Across participants, we independently varied the language of the experimental session and cultural content of a series of visual scenes, resulting in conditions where linguistic and visual cues aligned on one of the two cultural traditions (heritage or foreign) or mixed the two. We expected that the need for closure response would be triggered by exposure to the threatening mix of foreign and heritage symbols, not simply by exposure to foreign symbols. Moreover, this response would be attenuated for individuals who identify highly with the foreign culture.

Method

Participants

We recruited 111 undergraduate students (58 men; mean age = 19.85 years; $SD = 1.25$) from a university in Hong Kong. Self-reported proficiency in English and Chinese language was 4.68 ($SD = 1.11$) and 5.87 ($SD = 1.05$), respectively, rated on a scale of 1 (*very poor*) to 7 (*very fluent*). Level of identification with Western and East Asian culture was 4.31 ($SD = 1.26$) and 4.92 ($SD = 1.31$), respectively, rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*very weak*) to 7 (*very strong*). Participants were paid HK \$20 (roughly equivalent to US \$3).

Materials and Procedure

Participants were run in noninteracting groups of 5 to 15. They received a survey with a priming manipulation. We employed two types of cultural primes,

language and visual images. Specifically, participants were randomly assigned to complete a survey either in English ($n = 53$) or in Chinese ($n = 58$). The original survey (in English) was translated into Chinese by a bilingual research assistant and another research assistant translated it back into English to ensure equivalent meaning across the language versions (Brislin, 1986).

Within each language condition, individuals were randomly assigned to a visual image condition, either Western scenes ($n = 37$), Asian scenes ($n = 38$), or noncultural scenes ($n = 36$). Participants viewed four pictures of scenes (taken from Morris and Mok, 2011) and wrote down a few thoughts, feelings, or memories that each evoked. Afterwards, participants completed the need for cognitive closure scale (NFC; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994) on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*), followed by a demographic survey.

Analysis of Data

Participants in the culturally mixed conditions received a survey in English with Asian scenes, or in Chinese with Western scenes. Participants in the culturally aligned conditions received a survey in English with Western or noncultural scenes, or a survey in Chinese with Asian or noncultural scenes. We predicted that more need for closure would be evoked in the culturally mixed than aligned conditions for low identifiers with Western culture but not for high identifiers. In other words, Western identification should moderate the effects of the prime condition, which would be reflected in an interaction of language (English vs. Chinese), scene (Western vs. Asian vs. noncultural), and Western identification.

Results

We tested for the above interaction using a general linear model on the NFC score ($\alpha = 0.70$, $M = 3.90$, and $SD = 3.19$). Western identification was mean-centered. There was a main effect of language, $F(1, 99) = 5.02$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$, suggesting that Chinese language elicited higher need for closure than English. This effect was qualified by a significant three-way interaction of language, scene, and Western identification, $F(2, 99) = 5.30$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.10$. (Initial analysis showed that East Asian identification did not interact with any variables so it is not discussed further).

To explore the three-way interaction, we examined whether the language X scene interaction (which reflects the tendency for NFC to differ in culturally mixed vs. aligned conditions) was significant when Western identification was low (centered at 1 SD below the mean) and high (centered at 1 SD above the mean). In doing so, we first checked for differences between the two kinds of culturally aligned cells within each language condition (i.e., English language

Table 1. Need For Closure (NFC) as a Function of Type of Prime and Western Identification

Language	Prime	Low Western identification	High Western identification
	Scene		
English	Western ^a	3.69 (.13)	3.97 (.12)
	Asian ^b	3.99 (.10)	3.67 (.14)
	Noncultural ^c	3.78 (.11)	3.87 (.14)
Chinese	Western ^b	4.12 (.10)	3.92 (.09)
	Asian ^a	3.79 (.10)	4.00 (.09)
	Noncultural ^c	3.94 (.10)	4.01 (.09)

Note. Low and high Western identification is centered at one standard deviation below and above the mean. ^aCulture compatible prime conditions. ^bCulturally mixed prime conditions. ^cLanguage prime conditions (with noncultural scenes). Standard errors are given in parentheses.

with Western or noncultural scenes; Chinese language with Asian or noncultural scenes). Results showed that within each language condition, and regardless of levels of Western identification, NFC did not differ between these two conditions, all $p > .10$. Hence, we collapsed across the culturally compatible and noncultural scenes for a culturally aligned condition to contrast with the culturally mixed condition. Table 1 displays the means for each condition by levels of Western identification.

Specifically, we created contrasts that pitted NFC in the culturally mixed conditions (English language/Asian scenes, Chinese language/Western scenes) against the aligned conditions, for high and low Western identifiers separately. High Western identifiers did not differ in NFC across the mixed and aligned conditions, $F(1, 99) = 2.86, p = .09, \eta_p^2 = .03$. This result did not differ by the language condition, $F_{\text{English}}(1, 99) = 2.39, p = .13, \eta_p^2 = .02$, and $F_{\text{Chinese}}(1, 99) = 0.67, p = .41, \eta_p^2 = .01$. In contrast, low Western identifiers exhibited significantly higher NFC in the mixed than aligned conditions, $F(1, 99) = 9.98, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .09$. This pattern was robust across language conditions, $F_{\text{English}}(1, 99) = 3.97, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .04$, and $F_{\text{Chinese}}(1, 99) = 4.68, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .05$. Hence, our hypothesis is supported. Culturally mixed contexts evoked higher need for closure for low Western identifiers but not for high Western identifiers.

Further analysis revealed that low Western identifiers exhibited similar levels of NFC in a Western context compared to an Asian context; NFC was not significantly different in the English versus Chinese language condition (with noncultural scenes), $F(1, 99) = 0.91, p = .34, \eta_p^2 = .01$. These results imply that low identifiers are not threatened by a foreign culture per se; rather they are threatened by the *mix* of the foreign and heritage culture.

Discussion

The results of our experiment provide the first evidence linking exposure to mixes of heritage and foreign cultural symbols with elevated need for closure. Hong Kong participants felt increased need for closure after exposure to a mix of Chinese and Western symbols, implemented through language of instruction and visual images. Consistent with an identity threat account, high identifiers with Western culture did not exhibit this defensive response; only low identifiers, who would be threatened by Western influx into their Chinese heritage, exhibited heightened need for closure. To our knowledge, this is the first evidence that identification with a foreign culture moderates exclusionary responses to cultural mixes.

These findings contribute primarily to the literature on exclusionary reactions to cultural mixes. To review, Chiu et al. (Chiu et al., 2009) found that exposure to juxtapositions of foreign and heritage culture images induces in-group mixes stereotyping and exaggerated concerns about the incompatibility of the two cultures. Our study shows that defensive responses can be evoked by more subtle cultural mixes. With Chiu's paradigm of juxtaposing side-by-side visual images of iconic Western and Eastern symbols, a contrastive mindset is virtually implied by the stimuli. When participants respond with stereotypical, contrastive social judgments, they may be following perceived experimenter demand. In our paradigm of crossing linguistic and visual cues, it is not transparent to participants that two cultural traditions are being mixed. As either English or Chinese language is normal in the setting, participants were not aware that language was a cultural cue. Nevertheless, the mixed culture conditions were threatening to participants who were low in Western identification. Hence, our results suggest that exclusionary responses reflect an unconscious response to threat, not conscious acquiescence to perceived experimental demand.

The current findings also complement other contemporary findings in this research program. Torelli et al. (2011) exposed participants to hypothetical advertisements varying brands and product categories associated with foreign and heritage cultures. Cultural mix advertisements featured a foreign brand in an iconic product category of the heritage culture (i.e., exposing American participants to a Chinese brand of jeans) as opposed to other conditions without this foreign infiltration of iconic heritage-culture domains (e.g., an American brand of jeans or Chinese brand of ovens). As expected, cultural mix advertisements evoked stereotyping of the in-group and judgments that American and Chinese values are incompatible. Tong, Hui, Kwan, and Peng (2011) finds similar reactions to acquisitions of iconic local corporations by foreign firms, especially when a prior task activates a categorization mindset. Although these are clever and externally valid instances of cultural mixing, it is worth noting that the foreign inflow in these cases is more than symbolic. Foreign brands entering one's nation's traditional product categories and foreign firms acquiring local firms represent tangible threats to the

local economy. Negative exclusionary responses after exposure to such examples may reflect pushback that is driven by economic protectionist concerns rather than identity defense processes. Our findings support an identity protection account by showing that even subtle mixes of cultural symbols can trigger closure responses.

Our account, and this recent evidence, helps to clarify what about cultural mixes provokes exclusionary responses. Our premise is that cultural identities are threatened by the perception of foreign influx to one's heritage culture. On this account, the defensive exclusionary response should not be prompted by other kinds of cultural mixes, such as a mix of two foreign cultures. Nor would it come from priming the idea of heritage culture outflow into other cultures. That is, although Americans would have closure reactions to a Chinese brand of jeans imported to the United States, they would not to an American brand of rice cookers exported to China. Our account suggests closure responses arise when people feel a need to protect their cultural turf; it is not that cultural mixes are inherently overwhelming.

An alternative account would be that people are threatened by any cultural mix or blend that violates the order of their categories. In her classic book *Purity and Danger*, Douglas (1966) contends that people are averse to that which seems out of place or in between categories. As an example of this tendency to regard category exceptions as unclean, she cites kosher laws, which prohibit animals lacking cloven hooves (pigs) or fish without scales (lobster). For Douglas, mixes across categories inherently evoke an encoding as dirty and dangerous. So a person would have this reaction even to a mix of two foreign cultures. To our knowledge, past research on dual culture priming has always involved the heritage culture and an inflowing foreign culture. More research is needed to test whether closure responses to mixes reflect the motive of cultural turf protection or that of maintaining categories.

We find that high identifiers with a foreign culture are less affected by cultural mixes, presumably because their personal social identity is less dependent on the heritage collective identity. However, it is possible that there are alternative explanations for why high foreign identifiers do not show closure responses. Need for closure can be evoked by informational overload such as trying to solve puzzles in a noisy room (Kruglanski & Webster, 1991; Kruglanski, Webster, & Klem, 1993). It is possible that high identifiers are less overwhelmed by cultural mix situations because they are more accustomed to them. It seems likely that high foreign identifiers spend more time in culturally mixed settings than low identifiers. In future research it would be important to rule out this familiarity hypothesis. If the moderating effect on closure responses is seen with regard to inflow mixes and not outflow mixes, then this would suggest that it has to do with identity threats rather than cognitive overload.

Another contribution of the current research is bridging micro and macro level research on responses to globalization. The societal dialectic of foreign

inflow leading to collective-identity closure that we described in the introduction involves reactionary social movements centered on essentialized, narrowed in-group identities. The way individual reactions to a cultural mix can grow into social movements toward closure is illustrated by Chiu and Cheng's (2007) example of a Chinese journalists' response to the opening of a Starbucks Café within the Imperial Forbidden City, a screed of essentialistic arguments about Chinese and American cultures that soon attracted hundreds of thousands of readers and thousands of assenting comments. Social movements of this sort emerge when a leader's framing of social problem resonates with the intuitions of some followers (Gamson, 1995; Loseke, 1999). Need for closure responses create a mindset conducive to essentialized views of cultural groups. Hence, we would expect collective-identity closure movements to arise in sectors of a population with low foreign identification. In this way, our research provides a start to understanding when and where the macro level societal dynamic is most likely to play out.

The threat of cultural inflows is also an issue in international marketing. Foreignness is usually a liability for brands. When taking a brand overseas, firms often develop distinct brands in local languages for selling the same product. Likewise, in foreign acquisitions of iconic businesses the local brand names are retained, such as in Lenovo's acquisition of IBM's PC business. It would be interesting to investigate when the efficacy of such strategies by tracking commercial cultural inflows provoke closure movements, such as boycotts. At the same time, the brand context provides opportunities to consider when foreign cultural inflows are regarded positively. Marketers do not mask the foreign origins when they are importing French wine or Swiss chocolate. Sometime brands are even created intentionally to sound foreign (e.g., Haagen Dazs ice cream, made by Pillsbury, with headquarters in Minneapolis). Research suggests that foreign cultural stereotypes enter consumers' processing of their experiences. When brand names are given French pronunciations, for example, consumers perceive them as hedonically richer (Leclerc, Schmitt, & Dube, 1994). Measures of foreign- or global-culture identification may be useful in understanding which kinds of customers are attracted or repelled by foreign or faux-foreign brands.

Another applied domain is military strategy for foreign operations and counterinsurgency. Military strategists have long been aware that reactions to foreign occupation depend very much on iconic cultural symbols. For example, the Allies left the Japanese Emperor Hirohito in place after WWII as they thought it would enable the country to recover its sense of meaning. Foreign inflows often evoke feelings of invasion and contamination. In 1990, the United States set up bases in Saudi Arabia to protect the oil fields at Hama as it prepared to liberate Kuwait from Iraq. This move enraged many Muslims (including Osama Bin Laden, previously an ally of the United States) who saw it as a violation of the Islamic holy land (Commins, 2006). Strader (2006) proposes that in almost any community there are "cultural centers of gravity" that need to be respected to avoid causing

“a culturally sensitive situation to erupt.” He lists examples of sites such as Najaf’s Shiite cemetery, Mecca’s Holy Mosque, Madinah’s Prophet’s Mosque, the Hindu temples in Varansi, Rome’s Vatican, or the Buddhist holy sites at Lumbini, Kusinari, or Isipatana. In addition to geographic sites, some symbols are centers of gravity, for example, “desecration of the image of the Prophet Mohammad” (Strader, 2006, p. 58). Unfortunately military strategists have thought not only about avoiding cultural offense, but also about intentionally creating it. PsyOps units have tried to “weaponize” culture by threatening to violate cultural symbols as a means of breaking prisoners who are withholding information. When such tactics become public they deeply undermine trust. As in the findings of Torelli et al. (2011), foreign inflows become upsetting to the degree that they enter culturally iconic domains. A better understanding of which geographic and symbolic spaces are iconic, and which are not, would help in conducting peacekeeping and humanitarian missions without unintended side-effects of cultural offense.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our study suggests that some individuals in Hong Kong are highly identified with Western culture and, consequently, more accepting of the mixing of Western and East Asian culture. This suggests that they are active consumers of globalization and belies polemics that only wealthy Westerners are in a position to enjoy the foreign inflows that globalization brings (see Geschiere & Meyer, 1998). That said, it must be acknowledged that Hong Kong has long been a wealthy society (with a per capita GDP sometimes exceeding that of its colonizer, the United Kingdom). Also, Hong Kong is undoubtedly an economic beneficiary of global flows: it became wealthy as a broker between Western finance and Chinese manufacturing, it relies on guest workers for its nannies and nurses, and it attracts tourists for its cosmopolitan architecture, cuisine, and cinema. Hence, Hong Kong may be more like wealthy Western nations than most non-Western nations in its experience of globalization. It is important to explore a broader sample of countries in different regions that experience globalization differently to test whether foreign-culture identities are prevalent and whether they buffer individuals against defensive, exclusionary responses to cultural mixes. In addition, future research will do well by examining whether the present findings can be generalized urban student populations. For example, research by Chen and Chiu (2010) suggests that globalization experiences trigger differential responses among rural versus city inhabitants.

In this and other studies of reactions to cultural mixes, participants have been tested within the contexts of their own heritage cultures. In these settings, exposure to cultural mixes gives rise to some patterns of essentialistic social judgment, such as heightened tendencies to impute culturally typical traits to in-group members. Recent findings by Kopic et al. (2004) and Chao et al. (2010) illustrate that need

for closure pushes people to seek consensus with the salient in-group in the social environment, even if that is not the heritage-culture in-group. Hence, it would be interesting to examine expatriates' responses to cultural mixes. Would they show an inclination toward essentializing their heritage culture and excluding the host culture? Or would they essentialize the host culture and exclude the heritage culture?

Finally, future research should probe the similarities and differences between foreign-culture identification and other international identifications. Global citizen identifications predict individuals' effective functioning on multinational teams (Shokef & Erez, 2008). Integrated bicultural identifications enable frame switching in culturally laden contexts (Benet-Martinez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002; Fu et al., 2007; Mok & Morris, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Verkuyten & Pouliasi, 2002). Sussman (2000) proposed that intercultural identifications enable people to hold multiple cultural scripts and draw upon them as needed. Some evidence consistent with this notion of global identities as enabling flexible switching comes from a study of MBA students who have worked in several countries. Mor, Morris, Jagiello, Joh (2011) found that global identification predicts culturally integrated decision making, which involves seeking ideas from other cultures and incorporating these into one's solutions to a problem. Interestingly the link between global identification and this approach to solving problems is cultural perspective taking—imagining how the problem looks to an individual from another culture. In sum, emerging evidence suggests that culturally mixed settings can evoke creative, integrative solutions for individuals who chose to feel the other culture and to individual members of the culture.

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