



An Analysis of the Impact of Chinese Heritage Language on the Identity of the Chinese Community in the United States

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Abstract. With a large population in this group, Chinese diaspora in the United States is of great significance to investigate in terms of their identity and heritage language. As identity can be formed, transformed, and negotiated through language learning, this essay explores the impact of Chinese Heritage language on the identity of the Chinese community in the United States from three perspectives: CHL education, CHL proficiency, and CHL in the family. Findings from this research demonstrate that all of the three aspects exert an impact on their identity as Chinese.

Keywords: Chinese diaspora · Chinese Heritage Language · diasporic identity · the United States

1 Introduction

In this era of globalisation, overseas Chinese are dispersed throughout the world, dwelling in nearly every country, with the United States serving as one of the four largest host countries for Chinese immigration [18]. Diaspora, currently applied to refer to recognisable populations distributed around the globe [4], is thus of great value to be utilised to research the Chinese-Americans. In order to investigate the identity issue of this particular diasporic community, its heritage language (HL), namely Chinese, is worth consideration, as language is considered not only a source of identity interpretation but also a vehicle for identity negotiation [22]. In this essay, Chinese heritage language (CHL) will be discussed from three perspectives: HL education, HL proficiency, and HL in the family so that the impact of CHL on the identity of the Chinese diaspora in the US can be explored.

2 Overview of Chinese Diasporic Community, Heritage Language, and Identity

Originally, the term ‘diaspora’ exclusively indicates the historical exodus where Jews were forced to disperse from Judea and subsequently from Israel [19], whereas it is

currently changed from a derogatory notion limited to the Jewish people to describe all dispersed communities [18], and this is how the concept of Chinese diasporic community is generated. In the United States, Chinese immigration can be divided into two waves: the first wave was during the period between the 1850s and the 1880s, which was ceased by federal immigration laws; the second wave started from the late 1970s and continues until now, which follows the normalisation of Sino-American relations and the changes in migration policies (Hooper and Batalova 2015). Succeeding Mexicans and Indians, Chinese immigrants are currently the third-largest ethnic group in the US, with over 2 million people making up 5% of the total immigrant population in 2013 (Ibid.).

Compared with L1 and L2, the identity and linguistic demands of HL learners differ from those of L1 and L2 learners as the HL learners lack the language exposure and cultural edification outside the family [5]. With regard to the HL of the Chinese diaspora, Chinese is referred to as an umbrella term that encompasses a number of dialects, among which Mandarin, also known as Putonghua, is the standardised and principally taught kind in the Chinese language classes [9]. Under such circumstances, CHL in this paper is mainly concerned with Mandarin. To learn CHL entails not only inheriting the language itself and its transformation but also preserving the cultural identity and even re-create it (Ibid.). In the past, Chinese-American ethnic identity has generally been concentrated in Chinatown's relatively self-contained enclaves (Ibid.), while current Chinese-Americans do not occupy a distinct geographic space anymore, but they do identify themselves and are identified by others by their antecedent homelands to some degree (Chang 2003). In addition, to negotiate their identities, individuals with various past experiences and migration motives seek for congruity and association in the HL community (Sofos 1996 cited in Li and Zhu 2013), along with connecting themselves to the English-speaking society (Val and Vinogradova 2010).

3 The Impact of CHL Education

Language learning is considered a strongly useful part of identity study due to the fact that identity is embodied in discourse and that learning a new language enables one to take on new approaches to existing [12]. According to He [9], diasporic and cultural identities are indispensable parts of HL education. He [9] further indicates that HL learners tend to have manifold identities which are either similar to or different from the residents in the target community on account of being socio-historically tied to the target culture but empirically dislocated from it. Thus, the influence of CHL on the notion of identity in the Chinese community will also be examined from the perspective of HL education in this section.

Heritage language schools, commonly known as 'ethnic community mother tongue schools' [8] before the 1990s, are one of the educational institution types in which the native language of an ethnic group is preserved and fostered alongside the dominant language [2]. It is also considered a powerful force for diasporic communities to enhance HL proficiency and cultural understanding [9, 14]. The first Chinese Heritage Language school was established in 1886 in San Francisco, where teachers used the only official language of Cantonese to teach Chinese classical literature written in traditional Chinese

characters [13]. It is established either to improve the status of HL learners' multilingualism in mainstream public schools [7] or to provide opportunities for descendants to identify themselves on a cultural continuum with their parents [3].

In terms of Chinese Heritage Language schools, the first one was founded in San Francisco in 1886, with an intensively traditional curriculum and Cantonese as the only instruction dialect, teaching Chinese classical literature that is written in traditional Chinese characters (Liu 2010). These community schools are established mainly due to the shortage of support for HL learners' multilingualism in mainstream public schools, more or less with racist causes (Duff, Liu and Li 2017). However, it is highlighted by Bradunas (1988) that Chinese communities are attempting to keep open the opportunity for their descendants to identify themselves on a cultural continuum with their parents through these schools. No matter what purpose it is for, two national organisations were formed to support these HL schools: NCACLS (National Council of Associations of Chinese Language Schools) and CSAUS (Chinese School Association in the United States), contributing to a more organised and standardised HL education, which has even taken place of both K-12 and college to become the biggest supplier of Chinese-language training in the past few decades (McGinnis 2005). Concerning the curriculum, HL classes on weekends usually last for three hours, with the first two spent on language teaching and the third hour for cultural activities or field explorations; classes during after-school periods are arranged in public schools with one hour of language teaching and one hour of Chinese culture, which normally contains history, folk dance, martial arts, calligraphy, Chinese silk knots and so forth (Liu 2010).

As for the impact on Chinese communities' notion of identity, it is a multilayered process. Firstly, as a voluntarily attended program, attendants of these courses are supposed to have a certain degree of cultural awareness of their heritage culture, otherwise, they would not like to take part in it. Besides, as an HL education activity mainly for Chinese diaspora, the participants generally consist of Chinese-Americans, most of whom are with similar skin colour, migration experience and family background, making the congregation full of 'Chinese flavour' as well as giving rise to their Chinese identity. With the teaching contents centred on Chinese language and culture and Chinese as the instruction medium, there seems no difference between the HL lessons in the US and Chinese lectures in China, further consolidating the ethnic-cultural awareness for Chinese diaspora in the US. However, the distinct difficulty in learning Chinese especially in written forms and the force from parents to attend the classes may result in resistance against this language and culture and downplaying their ethnic identity outside the diasporic community.

The textbooks used in CHL classes also exert a profound influence on the identity of Chinese communities in the US, as it not only embodies the official knowledge [1] but also directly transmits how HL students should construct their identities [9]. In this situation, students are expected to become the iconic Chinese heroes portrayed in the textbooks who are patriotic, collectivistic, diligent, honest, modest, filial, and respectful [7]. However, the dynamics of identities are restricted, and children are only allowed to follow the cultural values and beliefs repeatedly presented in the textbook [20]. Mono-culturalism is another issue noticeable in the textbooks. To illustrate, although China is a heterogeneous country with 112 million ethnic minorities, the cultural contents

are mainly related to Han culture [21], which largely overlooks the minority groups in the textbooks, including the Tibetans, the Uyghur, the Qiang and so on. Under such circumstances, the CHL textbooks distort and oversimplify learners' diverse transnational experiences while explicitly or implicitly providing a little depiction of dynamics and multiculturalism. The monocultural attitudes unavoidably degrade their ethnic and diasporic identity, thereby marginalising CHL learners in both the home and the host countries.

4 The Impact of CHL Proficiency

In this study, heritage language proficiency refers to the capacity to comprehend, speak, read, and write in Chinese Mandarin. There are a number of variables to consider while assessing different levels of HL proficiency, including education, attitudes and beliefs, interpersonal contact, media, and literacy practice [10]. As for the relations between HL and ethnic identity, more specifically, CHL and identity of Chinese diaspora in the US, there are quantities of previous studies to draw upon. According to Joseph (2004), language is one of the most essential components in maintaining a solid ethnic identity for all diaspora. Likewise, Jia (2008) highlights that a stronger ethnic identity is connected to higher degrees of HL skills. In terms of language and ethnic groups, it is indicated by Giles and Noels (1998 cited in Chuang 2004) that language is used to categorise and unite people as members of a specific ethnic group (ingroup), as well as to keep outgroup members from engaging with ingroup members. Fong (2004) points out that people, both inside and outside the communities, of all ethnic backgrounds use their languages to communicate, leading language to be a distinctive element that demonstrates their ethnic identities. Concerning HL proficiency, Li [10] posits that proficiency is linked to a strong feeling of ethnic identity within one specific group, implying that people with the same ethnic backgrounds use their language to demonstrate their distinctive cultural values, etiquette, and ethics. Cho [6] claims that being more proficient in the HL strengthens one's ethnic identity and affiliation with the ethnic group. According to Oh and Fuligni [17], people with inadequate HL proficiency feel disconnected from their cultural communities, which can exert a significantly disadvantageous effect on ethnic identity development. Yu [23] emphasised the correlation between learners' CHL proficiency and their 'self-perceived identity of being Chinese at home and in Chinese classes'.

Hence, the proficiency is one of the decisive factors impacting the identity in a diasporic community. To be more specific, the Chinese identity of the CHL learners becomes more distinct as they improve their comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing in Chinese. This helps them to further integrate into the diasporic community and identify themselves as Chinese. In contrast, the phenomenon that the second-generation of immigrants are unwilling to speak HL is obvious (Zhang 2008 cited in Yu 2015) with the reasons as follows: 1) the implicit linguistic ideology of English hegemony over the home languages of children in immigrant households, which can be found in the mainstream society, might lead to a refusal to speak their HL; 2) after commanding English, these youngsters make it their first and preferred language, usually at the expense of their ancestral language loss. For them, their Chinese identity may be downplayed and even denied and they tend not to recognise bicultural or multicultural citizenship.

5 The Impact of CHL on Family

In recent years, an increasing number of language minority families and communities have experienced a complete language shift within two generations, with no bilingual generation in between. Because HL may serve as a medium of communication within the family, its loss can lead to a problem in communication between family members, affecting children's development and behaviour (Val and Vinogradova 2010). Besides, HL learners' family members play a significant role in (re)forming learners' ethnic identity (Yu 2014), which, combined with the above factors, entails an investigation into the impact of CHL in family on the notion of identity in Chinese communities in the US.

Within different families belonging to the same diasporic community, there is a variety of policies of CHL learning. Some parents require their children to have bilingual and bicultural competencies through strict curriculum and teaching strategies, such as applying the bilingual policy at home or transmitting CHL through intentional interactions and conversations; some merely expect their children to implicitly become bilingual; while yet others reject to make efforts in developing children's abilities to learn CHL [16]. Apparently, this demonstrates parents' different attitudes towards CHL. According to Zhang and Slaughter-Defoe [24], some parents view their native language as a valuable resource that their children can utilize to achieve academic success and pursue a promising career; some parents regard it as not only a vital part of their ethnic identity but also a legacy that binds second-generation children to their homeland and culture; others are conscious of its benefits in strengthening family ties and promoting family cohesion. Under such circumstances, they hold a positive and supportive attitude towards CHL learning, thereby contributing to creating and consolidating children's bicultural awareness and their ethnic identity as Chinese. For instance, many parents set Chinese as the sole home language to aid their children's CHL learning, despite the fact that everyone in the household speaks both Chinese and English because they reckon that speaking Chinese at home continuously is a productive method of instilling the HL (Ibid.). Furthermore, some of these parents, particularly the well-educated Mandarin parents, teach Chinese to their children in addition to transmitting CHL through intentional everyday interactions and conversations. With textbooks from libraries or the diasporic community or even bought from China, parents can give Chinese homework to the second-generations, some of whom have already established the habit to do Chinese homework in addition to schoolwork every day (Ibid.). Such policies and activities taken by parents indicate their stress on CHL and its culture, contributing to creating and consolidating children's bicultural awareness and their ethnic identity as Chinese.

In comparison, some young American-Chinese expressed dissatisfaction with their parents' indifferent or negative responses to their endeavours to speak CHL at home [16]. These discouraging behaviours include laughing at their mistakes, speaking to them in oversimplified Chinese, or enforcing an English-only language policy. Moreover, most second generations of American-Chinese, particularly older children, consider learning Chinese an unnecessary and unmeaningful duty imposed on them by their parents [24]. In this sense, this unsatisfying experience may lead children to be unwilling to recognise their belonging to the Chinese diasporic community and minimise their bicultural identity.

6 Conclusion

Based on the view that identity can be formed, transformed, and negotiated through language learning [15], this study investigates the impact of CHL on the identity of the Chinese community in the United States from three distinctive perspectives: CHL education, CHL proficiency, and CHL in the family. In the first dimension, the formal CHL class negatively and positively influences learners' ethnic identity, while the monoculturalism in textbooks impedes students' multicultural awareness. Also, the CHL proficiency is of vital significance in identity (re)formation; generally, the more proficient they are in Chinese, the more inclined they are to acknowledge their identity as Chinese. Moreover, parents' and students' attitudes towards Chinese and their actions taken for CHL familial education influence the identity as well. Accordingly, it can be applied that learners, parents, and educational institutions are supposed to make efforts for the development of diverse identities. Besides, the findings can probably be applicable to many Anglophone countries with a large number of Chinese immigrants.

Nevertheless, in the rapidly-changing world and the era of globalisation, the event, policy, and perception of migration are transient. Thus, some of the previous studies mentioned in this essay may not be applicable to the current situation, thereby necessitating an in-depth empirical investigation into the immigrant families and HL schools.

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