



The Shaping of Australian Identity: An Examination of Language Policy and Its Impact on Second-Generation Chinese-Australian Children

Jun Song*

School of Languages and Cultures, The University of Queensland, Australia

`jun.song1@uq.net.au*`

Abstract. This article critically examines the Australian Language Policy (ALP) and its impact on the national identity of second-generation Chinese immigrant children (CSIC) in Australia. Despite their Chinese heritage, these children often identify strongly as Australian due to the ALP's emphasis on English as the official language. The policy shapes their self-perception and societal integration, leading to a preference for English over Chinese in various aspects of life. The study explores how ALP in classrooms, its role in a diverse society, and language policies within Chinese-Australian families contribute to CSIC's inclination to embrace an Australian identity. The analysis reveals that while English proficiency is crucial for societal participation and success, it also creates a cultural gap between CSIC and their parents, who may hold onto their original cultural identity more firmly. The article concludes that the ALP plays a significant role in reinforcing CSIC's Australian identity, influenced by their educational experiences and societal interactions in English.

Keywords: ALP, CSIC, National identity, English proficiency, Multicultural education

1 Introduction

Australia's unique appeal has made it a popular destination for immigrants worldwide. However, second-generation CSIC often face challenges in defining their national identity. The languages people speak not only reflected but also shaped and continuously redefine their ethnocultural identity [1]. For instance, these children consider themselves Australian, as they were born and raised in Australia, speak English fluently, and have fully embraced Australian culture and ways of thinking. In contrast, their parents often perceive their children's national identities as being aligned with their original heritage language. CSIC are more deeply influenced by ALP compared to their parents, leading to contradictions in their sense of identity. Despite their appearance, which may differ from that of native Australian locals, including white and Indigenous populations, ALP profoundly shapes their identification as Australians.

The English-speaking environment in which CSIC are raised, coupled with their primary use of English, often leads them to overlook their Chinese heritage. For those born in Australia, pride in their Australian identity and a clear sense of belonging are prevalent, even as they navigate between languages within and outside their homes. This essay examines three key areas - ALP in Classrooms, ALP in Diverse Society, and Language Policy in Family - to explore the factors that contribute to CSIC's stronger inclination to identify as Australians.

2 ALP in History

Australia's appeal as a desirable destination has attracted immigrants from around the globe, yet second-generation CSIC often struggle with their national identity. While these children generally identify as Australian - having been born and raised in Australia, fluent in English, and acculturated to Australian norms and values - their parents often perceive their children's identities as tied to their original national heritage. CSIC are particularly influenced by ALP, which significantly shapes their sense of national identity and often creates a disconnect between their self-perception and their parents' expectations. Despite physical appearances that may differ from those of native Australians, including White and Indigenous communities, the ALP plays a pivotal role in framing CSIC as Australians.

Raised in predominantly English-speaking environments, CSIC frequently overlook their Chinese heritage, as English serves as their primary language. For those born in Australia, a strong sense of national pride and a clear identification as Australians prevail, even as they navigate bilingualism within familial settings. This essay critically examines three dimensions - ALP in Classrooms, ALP in Diverse Society, and Language Policy in Family - to explore why CSIC are increasingly inclined to embrace an Australian identity over their heritage identity.

3 ALP in Classrooms

In classrooms across Australia, ALP advocates for the confident use of Australian English, which has been instrumental in fostering a sense of national unity and facilitating cultural transmission [2]. The first language is pivotal in shaping an individual's national identity. In Australian schools, English is the sole medium of instruction, prompting the CSIC to internalize behaviors typical of Australians. They are expected to answer questions from teachers, engage in discussions with peers, and complete assignments across all subjects in English. This scenario mirrored the United States, where English was promoted as the lingua franca, and language education policies position Spanish-speaking Latinos as subordinate subjects [3]. The Australian approach to language education policy echoes the U.S.'s efforts to encourage immigrants to relinquish their original national identities. While this policy may not be as effective for the first generation of Chinese immigrants, it appears to have a more pronounced impact on CSIC. They are not merely passively integrated into Australian society; rather, they often fail to recognize that Chinese has become a secondary language for them.

For CSIC, China is perceived as a foreign entity, and Chinese is considered an optional second language to learn based on personal interest. Proficiency in English, not Chinese, is seen as the key determinant of academic success. Anderson highlighted the significance of national print languages in creating a sense of belonging to 'imagined communities,' [4] a concept that aligns with Spring's assertion that children can develop a positive identity that includes their home cultures and mother tongues if they are effectively educated using the resources they bring to school [5]. Schools can serve as communities where English is the sole language for social interaction, maintaining harmony and resolving issues within the community. The curriculum materials used by CSIC are predominantly in English, leading to increasing proficiency in both written and oral English. As they grow, they may never visit China, and their understanding of the world is mediated through the English language. This acculturation to English as the primary mode of thinking, studying, and communication reinforces their identity as Australians. While Chinese may be considered a second language for future learning, it is undeniable that English remains their first language, and they do not perceive themselves as anything other than Australian. In contrast, children in China engage with English primarily during English lessons, where it is not used as a medium of instruction. Teachers often use Chinese to explain English linguistic concepts, and students have limited opportunities to practice English outside the classroom due to the reluctance to communicate in a non-native language. This approach does not diminish the status of Chinese as the first language or the sense of Chinese identity among students.

4 ALP in Diverse Society

In a diverse society, the equitable treatment of every culture necessitates a clear language ideology to maintain the balance within a multicultural framework and to disseminate a shared understanding among all societal members. Designating English as the official language in Australia is considered an optimal solution to mitigate cultural conflicts, given its widespread use and its status as a global lingua franca. Language ideologies could indirectly influence humans' practices through legal and policy contexts, service models, and the language choices of the families people engage with [6]. For instance, social media vernacular consistently reinforces Australian values, resonating with CSIC and fostering a sense of shared cultural identity with other Australians.

Language played a foundational role in shaping cultural identity, as it preceded the learning of culture and the formation of identity in new social contexts [7]. ALP has established English as the official language while concurrently acknowledging the value of linguistic diversity. Despite Australia's multicultural ethos, Anglo-Australian culture remains the dominant cultural narrative. Seppala emphasized that language acquisition transcended grammar and vocabulary, encompassing an understanding of cultural context [8]. As members of Australian society, CSIC are likely to recognize the importance of learning English to grasp Australian culture, often leading to a diminished emphasis on learning Chinese compared to their parents.

Friction posited that some third-, fourth-, and fifth-generation British Asians might not require media content focused on Asian culture and heritage, as these were not central to their identity; instead, they might have a stronger affinity for British culture, including rap and Grime music [9]. The prevalence of English in Australian social media and official discourse across many aspects accentuates Australian values and often to the detriment of minority cultures. During ideological conflicts, such as those between China and the U.S., Australian media may align with Western values, reflecting a bias that supports the nation's political alliances.

Ali discussed the influence of Western media, noting how the United States' political attitudes, as disseminated through media, could sway public opinion regarding the perceived virtues and vices of nations [10]. The Australian government's need to maintain a cooperative relationship with the U.S. often results in media reports that are not neutral but rather inclined to uphold Western values. While first-generation Australian Chinese may not always agree with these portrayals, they contribute to the harmony of Australia's multicultural fabric. Furthermore, CSIC's proficiency in English, particularly in reading, enables them to better comprehend and align with the values presented in Australian media reports. This alignment fosters a sense of duty to support Australian values and culture, facilitating their integration into society. The ALP, through media discourse, serves as a tool that familiarizes CSIC with social changes on a global scale and positions Australian values as a representation of societal diversity. CSIC have become accustomed to perceiving and processing information through the lens of English and Australian values, which have become integral to their worldview.

5 Language Policy in Chinese-Australian Families

In the multicultural landscape of Australia, a plethora of languages coexists within family units. ALP acknowledges and respects the use of these diverse languages, thereby promoting the egalitarian status of each within society. Within Chinese-Australian families, language policies are often established by parents or elders to facilitate communication. Given their limited proficiency in English, these parents naturally desire their children to speak Chinese at home and strive to impart an understanding of Chinese culture through language instruction.

However, many parents also prioritize their children's academic success in an English-speaking environment. Chinese immigrant parents preferred to create social interaction opportunities, such as taking their children to community English corners, to enhance their literacy skills [11]. They must weigh the decision to reduce the use of Chinese at home to allow for greater English language exposure, which could lead to CSIC perceiving English as their primary language, akin to their Australian peers.

Li noted that some Chinese mothers view Chinese, English, Maori, or Cantonese as equally valuable and believe in the benefits of multilingualism for their children's integration into the host culture [12]. Yet, Hu et al. found that resources such as picture books, audio-visual materials, and online sites, which parents use to support their children's Chinese language development, are often rooted in English culture, leading to a

preference for English versions among children [13]. CSIC tend to have a deeper understanding of Western cultural values and attitudes through English, and the Chinese versions of these materials can pose additional reading challenges, prompting a preference for English materials.

Parents may not demand that CSIC master advanced Chinese literary skills; rather, they hope for fluency in spoken Chinese. The influence of neighborhood dynamics, where speakers of the same language variety often resided in proximity, is also a significant consideration for Chinese-Australian parents [14]. If CSIC do not speak English fluently, they may face social isolation and difficulty participating in community activities, which could negatively impact their mental health. With this in mind, parents may not treat English and Chinese instruction equally within the home.

The language policy in Chinese-Australian families can lead to a separation of language and culture, as parents may not emphasize the development of CSIC's Chinese literary skills. This can result in children remaining unfamiliar with Chinese culture through literature or reports, reinforcing their identity as Australians who share values and attitudes with their peers. Some Chinese-Australian parents may also prefer Australian culture, further influencing their children's identity perception. The participants' low achievement in the Chinese proficiency test and their inclination towards an Australian identity underscored the significant role that home language use plays in the development of children's heritage language [15].

If parents consistently advocate for Australian values, they are likely to communicate with their children primarily in English, which can hinder the deepening of Chinese cultural understanding. CSIC may not feel like outsiders in the classroom, as they share a common cultural framework with their Australian peers, leading to a sense of pride in their Australian identity.

While the language policy in Chinese-Australian families enhances CSIC's English proficiency and confirms their Australian identity, it can also create communication barriers within the family. Parents may struggle to understand their children's limited Chinese, and children may find it exhausting to translate between English and Chinese for family members who do not understand English. Despite these challenges, parents often prioritize their children's success in Australia, willing to make compromises to achieve this goal.

6 Conclusion

This article has conducted a critical analysis of ALP within educational settings, its role in a diverse society, and its implications for language policy within Chinese-Australian families. The discussion has centered on the factors that contribute to CSIC embracing their identity as Australians.

From an objective standpoint, the proficiency in English is a necessity for CSIC, as ALP has established English as the official language. This policy, while reinforcing the status of English, also serves to foster national unity and cohesion among the diverse populace of Australia. The influence of the Chinese language, as a minority language,

pales in comparison to the pervasive role of English, which is instrumental in integrating the nation and its citizens.

From a subjective perspective, Chinese-Australian parents are keenly aware of the potential social and professional challenges their children may face if they are perceived as lacking fluency in English. Proficiency in English is not only a gateway to academic success but also a critical factor in securing employment opportunities within Australia. Consequently, these parents often prioritize English language development, even at the expense of their children's Chinese language skills.

Despite the potential cultural gap that may arise between CSIC and their parents due to differing language proficiency, the learning of Chinese does not significantly impact their self-perception as Australians. This is largely because their educational experiences and societal interactions are predominantly in English, shaping their cultural identity.

Synthesizing these objective and subjective factors, it becomes evident that CSIC's acceptance of their Australian identity is a natural outcome of their linguistic and cultural upbringing. Having been educated in English from an early age, they have internalized Australian values and cultural norms, leading to a sense of pride in their ability to sustain and contribute to the Australian cultural tapestry throughout their lives. This embrace of their Australian identity is not only a reflection of their linguistic capabilities but also a testament to the broader societal and familial influences that have shaped their sense of self.

References

1. Tseng, A. (2020). Identity in home-language maintenance. In: Andrea C. S & Susana A. E (Eds.), *Handbook of home language maintenance and development: Social and affective factors*. De Gruyter Mouton, Berlin. pp.109-129. doi:10.1515/9781501510175
2. He, J., Liao, H. (2020). The Study of Language Policy in Education in the Context of Belt and Road - The Contrast on Language Education Policy between China and Australia. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 10, 1489-1493. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1011.22>
3. Wiley, T. G., Garcia, D. R., Danzig, A. B., & Stigler, M. L. (2014). Language Policy, Politics, and Diversity in Education. *Review of Research in Education*, 38, vii– xxiii. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X13512984>.
4. Anderson, B. R. (2006). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, London. https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/podzim2013/SOC571E/um/Anderson_B_-_Imagined_Communities.pdf.
5. Spring, J. (2000). *The universal right to education: Justification, definitions, and guidelines*. Routledge, New York. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410601889>.
6. Tönsing, K. M., & Soto, G. (2020). Multilingualism and augmentative and alternative communication: examining language ideology and resulting practices. *Augmentative and Alternative Communication*, 36, 190-201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07434618.2020.1811761>.
7. Parajuli, B. (2021). Role of Language in Shaping Cultural Identity. *Marsyangdi Journal*, 2, 112-118. <https://doi.org/10.3126/mj.v2i1.39970>.

8. Seppala, M. (2011). The effects of the English language on the cultural identity of Chinese university students. <https://jyx.jyu.fi/bitstream/handle/123456789/26616/1/URN%3ANBN%3Afi%3Aajyu-201103011836.pdf>.
9. Aujla-Sidhu, G. (2021). *The BBC Asian Network - The Cultural Production of Diversity*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-65764-2>.
10. Ali, S. H. (1989). Direct from America into our living-rooms. *Aliran Monthly*, 1989, 9, 20-1. <https://m.aliran.com/past-issues/1989Vol9No.9.pdf>.
11. Ding, Y. (2022). Investigate Chinese Immigrant Parent's Perceptions of Their Children's Literacy and Numeracy Acquisition and Development in Australia. *International Journal of Education and Humanities*, 5, 50-56. <https://doi.org/10.54097/ijeh.v5i1.1936>.
12. Li, S. (2020). "We only speak Chinese at home": A case study of an immigrant Chinese family's Family Language Policy in New Zealand. *He Kupu*, 6(3), 41-50. <https://www.hekupu.ac.nz/article/we-only-speak-chinese-home-case-study-immigrant-familys-family-language-policy-new-zealand>.
13. Hu, J., Torr, J., & Whiteman, P. (2014). Australian Chinese parents' language attitudes and practices relating to their children's bilingual development prior to school. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 12, 139-153. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X13515429>.
14. Miltory, L. (1980). *Languages and social networks*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
15. Shen, C. & Jiang, W. (2021). Heritage language maintenance and identity among the second-generation Chinese-Australian children. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 44, 6-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15235882.2021.1890650>.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

