

# Is the Family a Driving Force in the Preservation of Heritage Languages among Chinese Immigrant Communities in the USA?

Ge Ao\*

School of Arts, Languages and Cultures, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

\*18292228886@163.com

## Abstract

Heritage languages are normally considered indigenous language for the distinction with different ethnic groups, speakers usually maintain this language for connection of original culture and identity. Researches on heritage language actually is the interactional consequence of both the global development and population migration. In this article, I will focus on Chinese immigrant communities in the USA, critically analyze how parents think about heritage language, whether these attitudes as well as behaviors affect the cognition and learning of heritage languages by their next generation, and then point out the pivotal role of family factors in carrying out bilingual education in the Chinese American community, along with its current dilemmas and solutions.

## Keywords

Heritage Language; Bilingual; Family; Immigrant; Chinese; USA.

## 1. Introduction

The term "Heritage Language" originated from the 1977 Inheritance Language Project, funded by the Ontario government, Canada, which refers to the ancestral languages of immigrants from all over the world in addition to the two mainstream languages of English and French, and was established to affirm the positive significance of this language to Canadian society and individual citizens[1]. Scholars also have different opinions about how to define heritage language. In the United States, heritage languages are often considered immigrant or indigenous languages, and speakers retain the language for personal connection to the original culture[2]. In addition, Trifonas & Aravossitas noted that unofficial regional minority languages spoken by people who have lived in an area for generations, such as Basque spoken by the Basques in Spain, are also considered heritage languages in Europe[3]. However, according to Valdés[4], a person who speaks a heritage language, is someone who grew up in a non-English-speaking family and can communicate with others in that language. In this article, I prefer to use heritage language to represent the immigrant parents' native language, which is Chinese.

The Chinese population in the United States is rapidly growing, with an estimated 5.1 million (excluding Taiwan) by 2020, making it the largest Asian group in the country[5]. As a result, whether as a heritage language, a community language, or a foreign language, Chinese language learning has gradually become a topic of interest for researchers and language educators[6]. However, the implementation of some relevant policies in the United States demonstrates hostility toward immigrant languages and a desire for immigrant children to learn English forcibly, which poses challenges to the inheritance and maintenance of the heritage language[7]. The first scholar to study language maintenance and language shift as a field was Fishman[8], and subsequent sociolinguists have written about a variety of factors that promote this progress, such as culture, politics, society, population, and language itself[8]. In Fishman's research, he pioneered the emphasis on the family as a key factor influencing whether a language would be shifted or maintained. More research on language practice further

demonstrates that the family language environment is extremely crucial for heritage language preservation[8]. Therefore, this paper will investigate whether parents' attitudes and behaviours toward heritage language affect the next generation's learning of the language, and whether the family can serve as a positive factor in promoting the spread and maintenance of Chinese in the Chinese American community.

## 2. Parents' Attitudes and Behaviours Toward Heritage Language

### 2.1. Attitudes

When it comes to heritage language, a parent's attitude toward the language can influence whether and how it is used[9]. This is exemplified, for instance, by Burton, who describes a bilingual mother intentionally not allow her child to speak one of their languages because she does not want the child to have any cultural or emotional ties to the original language[10]. Similarly, Mertz showed that Bilingual parents in Cape Breton purposefully avoid speaking Gaelic in front of their children, believing that doing so will impede their children's learning of English, which is more important in their children's future development[11]. Other studies, in contrast, report the parents' positive attitudes towards different languages can affect children's language choices and learning interests[12]. In this study, there were 11 French/English bilingual mothers living in Canada who had a very positive attitude towards French and claimed to speak French regularly to their children, while another group of 7 French/English bilingual mothers were more inclined to speak English and therefore their children spoke English more fluently than French[12]. Research studies on parents attitude towards language provides further evidence that the distinction in attitude can even affect parents' expectations for their children's language mastery[13]. Christy conducted a survey at a Chinese-English bilingual school in San Francisco found that parents had significantly different expectations of their children's Chinese levels of Chinese in predominantly and English-speaking households. Most predominantly Chinese parents expect their children to be fluent in Chinese conversations and reach high school literacy levels. However, English-speaking parents simply want their children to learn to converse in Chinese, or even to reach primary school level in Chinese[13].

### 2.2. Behavioral Intervention

As previously stated, parents consciously choose a specific language to communicate with their children in order to accomplish a certain educational goal, believing that they can intervene and control their children's language choices in advance, a behavioural pattern that De Houwer refers to as "impact belief"[14]. This belief can be strong because it believes that parents have an important role to demonstrate, that parents' own language use will directly affect what children will say, and that parents' language use favouritism can even influence children's language use bias by praising or punishing children for using specific language forms[14]. However, this belief can also be loose and weak because it believes that children will naturally learn language from their social environment [14]. Several examples of this can be found in a report by Donghui Zhang & Diana T[7], they describe how Chinese parents in the United States intervene in their children's language behaviour and guide them to learn and retain heritage language. One interviewee, Lulu, stated that her father would explicitly request that she communicate with her parents in Chinese at home, and that once she wrote a note to her father in English reminding him to remember to screw on the lid after squeezing the toothpaste, and then his father wrote back to Lulu in Chinese that if she wrote a note in Chinese to remind him, he would gladly follow his daughter's advice, but if she wrote in English, he would not accept it[7]. In addition, some parents, particularly well-educated Mandarin-speaking parents, will teach their children Chinese at home and even become full-time Chinese teachers, this is because learning a language generally requires constant contact between learners and speakers of the target language [15]. Downer, another interviewee in the above study,

mentioned that her mother would direct her to read Chinese classics, Tang poetry, and Song poetry at scheduled times each day, and would bring mathematics textbooks from China to study with her. If she can't understand what is said in the book, her mother will be very patient to explain it[7]. From this point of view, as for the majority of Chinese parents, they still have a strong sense of belonging and reliance on China, and positive attitude of most overseas Chinese toward their mother tongue also stimulates their enthusiasm and interest in learning Chinese[7].

### **3. Reasons for Learning Heritage Language for Parents**

#### **3.1. Inter-generational Connection**

In general, Chinese parents in the Chinese American community place a high value on their children learning and cultivating their heritage language[7]. Grandparents are a very important consideration for families who largely retain the language of heritage as an inter-generational and kinship link[16], in other words, the presence of non-English-speaking grandparents in the family must be actively included in interactions among family members. Living with their grandparents, according to some Chinese parents, is beneficial to their children's Chinese proficiency, particularly their speaking skills[17], this is because the children have to use Chinese communicating with grandparents all the time. Of course, as for a small number of Chinese, it will not be said that Chinese has involved psychological factors, especially when relatives mock them in front of them for not understanding Chinese, making them feel extremely embarrassed[16]. Therefore, learning Chinese can enhance inter - generational emotional ties and in-depth exchanges within the family, as well as promote family cohesion[7].

#### **3.2. Children's Personal Development**

Some parents see heritage language preservation as a way to promote the development of children's education. They believe that with the current trend of globalization and the continuous improvement of China's comprehensive national strength, encouraging and nurturing children's bilingual development is an invisible gift to their children that will benefit their future career development[18], Christy do furnish evidence in his research showing that 71.2% of Chinese parents believe that a high level of Chinese-English bilingual education can provide better career opportunities for their children, and this reason is far more important than other reasons, such as cultivating children's positive self-image (55.8%) and promoting communication with the Chinese-speaking community (57.7%)[13]. Consequently, the idea of heritage language preservation as a way to advance their children's education and future career development was unthinkable for English-speaking American parents[7], but for Chinese parents, beliefs and attitudes toward children's language development are part of a more general belief and value system for parents' holistic development[9], and the parents' thinking and imagination of global relationships ultimately influences their children's language choice[16].

#### **3.3. Establish National Identity**

Most Chinese in the United States who care deeply about their origins from China and the Chinese identity, they prefer to choose the label "American Chinese" to define and refer to the Chinese community, rather than the U.S. government's definition of their nationality - "Chinese Americans", they believe that learning Chinese can help them develop their identity, strengthen their connection to China's long history, culture, and national spirit[7]. Interestingly, they even regard Chinese as an important symbol for distinguishing people within ethnic groups, if a person does not speak Chinese, then he is not a Chinese[7].

## 4. The Dilemma of Bilingual Education at Home

### 4.1. The Complexity of the Language Environment in Reality

Some studies, however, have discovered that children are unlikely to master a heritage language simply rely on their parents teaching it at home or creating an environment of language exchange[13][19]. This is demonstrated first by the fact that Chinese parents are less informed about the difficulties and challenges they face during the bilingual education process[20]. Wei Li & Hua Zhu, for instance, showed a strong relation between external environment and children's language learning[16]. They interviewed families who had changed their dominant language from Chinese to English, and one woman thought that although they had been encouraging their children to speak Chinese at home, his friends and teachers were American, and they only spoke English instead of Chinese together, and slowly the parents accepted this fact and stopped urging children to learn Chinese[16]. In another research conducted by Donghui Zhang & Diana T, they found that the younger children, the more interested they showed in learning Chinese because the way they were exposed to learning Chinese at their age was very fun and practical, mostly play-based, and they were not under their own academic pressure[7]. Children in Year 3 and above, on the other hand, lose interest in learning Chinese significantly[7]. They consider Chinese learning to be a very complicated and boring task because they have to complete their school teachers' class assignments every day, as well as the Chinese homework set by their parents when they return home, and they essentially do not speak Chinese with their classmates at school, so they believe that learning Chinese is simply completing the instructions conveyed by their parents[7]. As a result, language conversion is frequently easier and more common among children of immigrants than language maintenance[8].

### 4.2. The Limitations of Family Education

In addition, another dilemma is manifested that there was a disconnect between the attitudes and behaviours of many of the study's interviewees and what they actually did[21]. As Goodz stated in a report that, while it is best to adhere to the principle of one person, one language in bilingual families, the fact that parents frequently address their children in more than one language at home[22]. This suggests the complexity of bilingual education in real life. In addition, for some parents, who always hold pessimistic views about influencing beliefs, they do not believe that parents' language choices and language styles have a direct impact on their children's language learning. As Mills already noted that not every young person in society will take themselves as an excellent example to regulate children's words and actions, instead, the society often teaches them more knowledge[23]. Therefore, as for the majority of parents, achieving the vision and goal of "full bilingual fluency" seems unattainable and unrealistic, and indeed only a minority of parents acknowledge that bilingual education is a continuous effort by the family, the community and the school[18].

## 5. The Significance of Language Communities for Preservation Heritage Languages

In a predominantly English-speaking American society, can Chinese parents are capable of helping their children create an appropriate environment for learning Chinese? Spolsky explained language learners can develop their learning in two environments: the natural or informal environment, which is dominated by the language community, the second is a formal environment based on classrooms[24]. In the informal setting of the heritage language community, children can learn the language by interacting with family members, friends, neighbours and other people around them[24]. Milroy refers to such relationships that individuals make through informal means as social networks, and in multilingual environments,

social networks have become an important way for minority individuals to maintain their first language[25]. This is exemplified, for instance, by Donghui Zhang, who points out that Mandarin-speaking children are often compared to their American peers and face extreme peer pressure to assimilate English; as a result, most children refuse to learn Chinese and seldom use it in their academic life to alleviate peer pressure[17]. However, because of the existence of immigrant communities among their peers, namely social networks, these Chinese-speaking children can be accepted and accommodated, even if they are not recognized by mainstream peers[17]. Therefore, social networks strengthen ethnic minority individual people's capabilities to deal with the anxiety of living in a multilingual society, and their widespread application has a significant impact on whether ethnic minority groups maintain and transform their heritability[25].

Furthermore, the power of local public interest organizations and the Chinese government in the United States to learn and disperse Chinese should not be underestimated. There are associations in the United States dedicated to serving Chinese schools and the Chinese community, as well as spreading Chinese culture, such as the "Chinese School Association in the United States", which provides Chinese Simplified teaching, and the "National Council of Associations of Chinese Language Schools", which provides Chinese Traditional programs. The former of which has more than 400 member education in the United States, and the latter of which has 82 member schools in almost all large and medium-sized cities[16]. In addition, the Confucius Institute, as it is known, has made great efforts to spread the Chinese language. According to data released on the official website of the Confucius Institute Headquarters, more than 1,500 Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms have been established in 159 countries through Sino-foreign cooperation as of October 2021, with the United States having 103 Confucius Institutes. The importance of Confucius Institutes in spreading Chinese culture cannot be overstated[26].

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the primary goal of this paper, is to investigate the role of family factors in the preservation of heritage languages. As Fishman already argued, although individual families and immigrant communities have limitations that are insufficient to counteract the forces of English assimilation in American society, there is no denying that family and community culture play an important role in maintaining heritage languages. Immigrant language is a complex social issue that is not only the resource for immigrant families, but also a public asset for the entire community. Consequently, it is only through the collaborative efforts of parents, teachers, and society as a whole that second generation children can be motivated to learn, recognize, and preserve their heritage languages, which is also important for the global preservation of linguistic and cultural diversity.

## References

- [1] Cummins, Jim. "Heritage language teaching in Canadian schools." *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 24, no. 3 (May 1, 1992): 281–86.
- [2] Shams, Manfusa. "Developmental issues in indigenous psychologies: Sustainability and local knowledge." *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 8, no. 1 (March 7, 2005): 39–50.
- [3] Trifonas, Peter Pericles, and Themistoklis Aravossitas. *Handbook of Research and Practice in Heritage Language Education*. Springer International Handbooks of Education, 2016.
- [4] Valdés, Guadalupe. "Bilingualism, Heritage Language Learners, and SLA Research: Opportunities Lost or Seized?" *the Modern Language Journal/ the Modern Language Journal* 89, no. 3 (August 22, 2005): 410–26.

- [5] "U.S. Census data | USAGov," n.d. <https://www.usa.gov/census-data>.
- [6] McGinnis, S. "More than a silver bullet: The role of Chinese as a heritage language in the United States." ResearchGate, December 1, 2005.
- [7] Zhang, Donghui, and Diana T. Slaughter-Defoe. 2009. "Language Attitudes and Heritage Language Maintenance among Chinese Immigrant Families in the USA." *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 22 (2): 77–93.
- [8] Joshua A. Fishman, "Language Maintenance, Language Shift, and Reversing Language Shift," October 3, 2012, 466–94.
- [9] Annick, Houwer. 1999. "Environmental Factors in Early Bilingual Development: The Role of Parental Beliefs and Attitudes." De Gruyter Mouton. *Studies on Language Acquisition [SOLA]*. 1999.
- [10] Peirce, Bonny Norton. "BILINGUAL WOMEN: ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO SECOND LANGUAGE USE. Pauline Burton, Ketaki Kushari Dyson, and Shirley Ardener (Eds.). Oxford: Berg, 1994.
- [11] Mertz, Elizabeth. "Sociolinguistic creativity: Cape Breton Gaelic's linguistic 'tip.'" In Cambridge University Press eBooks, 103–16, 1989.
- [12] Rodrigo-Tamarit, Maria, and Verónica Loureiro-Rodríguez. "Exploring attitudes towards French, English, and code-switching in Manitoba (Canada)." *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, August 18, 2023, 1–16.
- [13] Lao, Christy. "Parents' Attitudes Toward Chinese–English Bilingual Education and Chinese–Language Use." *Bilingual Research Journal* 28, no. 1 (April 1, 2004): 99–121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15235882.2004.10162614>.
- [14] De Houwer, Annick. "Environmental factors in early bilingual development: the role of parental beliefs and attitudes." In De Gruyter eBooks, 75–96, 1999.
- [15] Fillmore, Lily Wong. "When learning a second language means losing the first." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (September 1, 1991): 323–46.
- [16] Li, Wei, and Zhu Hua. 2019. "Imagination as a Key Factor in LMLS in Transnational Families." De Gruyter Mouton. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*. January 17, 2019.
- [17] Zhang, Donghui. 2012. "Co-Ethnic Network, Social Class, and Heritage Language Maintenance among Chinese Immigrant Families." *Journal of Language, Identity & Education* 11 (3): 200–223.
- [18] Piller, Ingrid. "Identity constructions in multilingual advertising." *Language in Society* 30, no. 2 (April 1, 2001): 153–86.
- [19] Lee, Jin Sook, and Eva Oxelson. "'It's Not My Job': K–12 Teacher Attitudes Toward Students' Heritage Language Maintenance." *Bilingual Research Journal* 30, no. 2 (July 1, 2006): 453–77.
- [20] King, Kendall, and Lyn Fogle. "Bilingual Parenting as Good Parenting: Parents' Perspectives on Family Language Policy for Additive Bilingualism." *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 9, no. 6 (November 15, 2006): 695–712.
- [21] McGuire, William J. "The Current Status of Cognitive Consistency Theories." In Elsevier eBooks, 1–46, 1966.
- [22] Goodz, Naomi Singerman. "Parental language mixing in bilingual families." *Infant Mental Health Journal* 10, no. 1 (January 1, 1989): 25–44.
- [23] Mills, Jean. 2001. "Being Bilingual: Perspectives of Third Generation Asian Children on Language, Culture and Identity." *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 4 (6): 383–402.
- [24] Spolsky, Bernard. *Conditions for Second Language Learning*, 1989.

- [25] Milroy, Lesley, and James Milroy. "Social network and social class: Toward an integrated sociolinguistic model." *Language in Society* 21, no. 1 (March 1, 1992): 1-26.
- [26] Ren, Zhe. 2012. "The Confucius Institutes and China's Soft Power." Institute of Developing Economies, Japan External Trade Organization (IDE-JETRO) [Http://Www.ide.go.jp](http://www.ide.go.jp). IDE Discussion Paper. March 2012.