

Ethnic Identification and Heritage Language Learning among Chinese American Teenagers

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Abstract

Based on a larger ethnographic study of second-generation Chinese American teenagers in Upstate New York, this paper explores the dynamics of heritage language (HL) learning and ethnic identification in various contexts. My findings suggest that both the primordial and circumstantial aspects of ethnicity are co-existing among these immigrant children. On the one hand, HL learning through the Individual Network of Linguistic Contacts (INLC) (educational support, interpersonal contacts, and media) plays a positive role in ethnic inculcation. On the other hand, learning and use of HL does not necessarily lead to homogeneous ethnic identity. By interacting within different INLCs, they display different relationships to their ethnic group and different degrees of ethnic belongingness. As such, ethnicity is not a fixed enduring category; rather, it is a continuum. Therefore, due to different life trajectories, these immigrant children can be located at various points on this continuum in terms of ethnic identification.

Key words: Identity; ethnicity; heritage language learning; Chinese Diaspora

1. Introduction

With the increasing flows of people, ideas, images, and technologies within and across national, ethnic, and linguistic boundaries, there has been a continuing debate on the concept of ethnicity, one of the most important aspects of identity. Since the 1960s, anthropologists and other social scientists have generally used the term ethnicity to refer to an individual's cultural heritage, which is separate from one's physical characteristics. In particular, there are both objective and subjective aspects of ethnicity. The objective aspect of ethnicity is the observable culture and shared symbols of a particular group. It may involve a specific language or religious tradition that is maintained by the group, or it may be particular clothing, hairstyles, preferences in food, or other conspicuous characteristics. The subjective aspect of ethnicity involves the internal beliefs of the people regarding their shared ancestry. It entails a "we-feeling", and a sense of community or oneness, or a distinction between one's own "in-group" versus "out-group". This subjective identification of individuals with an ideology of a shared history, unique past, and symbolic attachment with a homeland is often the most important expression of ethnicity (Smith, 1986). Anthropologists have employed a number of different theoretical strategies to study ethnic groups and processes of ethnic identification.

Based on a larger ethnographic study of second-generation Chinese heritage learners (HL) in Upstate New York, this paper explores the dynamics of HL learning and ethnic identification. It strives to address critical conceptual and empirical questions, including: 1) how do migrants, non-migrants, and Diasporic populations draw on linguistic resources to maintain ethnic ties across time and space? 2) To what extent and how does HL facilitate positive ethnic identification? 3) And how do we analyze ethnicity and identity in a globalized world of multilingual contact?

2. Theoretical Frameworks

2.1 A practice account of ethnicity/identity

One early model of ethnicity developed in the early 1960s is known as the *primordialist* model associated with anthropologists Clifford Geertz and Joshua Fishman. Geertz (1963c) suggested that ethnic attachments based on assumed kinship and other social ties and religious traditions are deeply rooted within the individual through the socialization process. He maintained that ethnic affiliation persists because it is fundamental to a person's identity.

Although this deep emotional attachment is sometimes evident through ethnic boundary markers, such as religion, dress, language, or dialect, Geertz tended to focus on the intense internal aspects of ethnicity, and deep subjective “feeling of belonging” to a particular ethnic group. In other words, he emphasized the meaning and significance that people invest in their ethnic attachments.

Fishman, in an essay titled “Social theory and ethnography”, also stressed the persistence of ethnicity as an integral part of one’s identity as follows:

“Ethnicity has always been experienced as a kinship phenomenon, continuity within the self and within those who share an intergenerational link to common ancestors. Ethnicity is partly experienced as being ‘bone of their bone, flesh of their flesh, and blood of their blood’. The human body itself is viewed as an expression of ethnicity, and ethnicity is commonly felt to be in the blood, bones, and flesh. It is crucial that we recognize ethnicity as a tangible, living reality that makes every human a link in an eternal bond from generation to generation—from past ancestors to those in the future. Ethnicity is experienced as a guarantor of eternity.” (Fishman, 1980:90)

However, one major objection is that “the primordial approach infuses a romantic dimension of the study of ethnicity” (Stack, 1986: 2). In other words, it highlights ethnicity as an expression of a basic group identity without considering individual differences.

In contrast with the *primordialist* model, another anthropologist, Frederick Barth (1969), proposes a new approach to ethnicity, called the *circumstantialist* model, based on research on multiethnic societies. Barth emphasizes how ethnic boundary markers such as language, clothing, or other cultural traits are not based on deeply rooted, enduring aspects of ethnicity. Ethnic boundaries are continually being revised, negotiated, and redefined according to the practical interests of actors. He argues that the interaction between ethnic groups influences how people identify with different elements of their own ethnicity, and they might express or repress these elements and characteristics in different circumstances for economic, political, or other practical purposes. Therefore, in Barth’s view, ethnicity is not fixed and unchanging, but is instead fluid and contingent, as people strategically use, define, and redefine their ethnicity to respond to their immediate basic needs.

Both models have clarified the aspects of ethnic identity, although they have some basic differences. The *primordialist* model has been extremely useful in substantiating the persistence of ethnicity, as a basic group/collective identity, through socialization; the *circumstantialist* model has helped demonstrate how ethnic identity can be altered and constructed in various economic and political conditions. I occupy a middle ground between these positions. In other words, these two approaches are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are complementary to account for different aspects of ethnicity.

Accordingly, I adopt a practice theory of identity/ethnicity. This position recognizes the dialectic relationship between structured/ascribed vs. constructed/achieved aspects of identity. Pierce has the best summary of the characteristics of social identity as “multiple, a site of struggle, and subject to change” over time (1995: 9). Following this practice orientation, both primordial and circumstantial aspects of one’s ethnic identity are addressed. On the one hand, one’s ethnic self, as a collective identity, emerges through interaction and socialization with a larger collectivity based on shared religion, language, and other social practices that differentiate members of the group from non-members; on the other hand, in a multicultural/multiethnic society, individuals might express or suppress certain aspects of their ethnicity depending on a specific context for practical needs.

2.2 Individual Network of Linguistic Contacts (INLC)

When studying these Chinese American adolescents’ HL learning processes, I utilize Landry and Allard’s (1992) concept of “individual network of linguistic contact (INLC)” from the model of additive and subtractive bilingual development. This model comprises three levels of analysis: sociological, socio-psychological, and psychological. Ethnolinguistic vitality (EV) constitutes the sociological level of analysis. It refers to the objective EV including demographic, political, economic capital, and cultural capitals an ethnolinguistic group acquires. It is this EV that influences the structure and composition of individual networks of linguistic contacts (INLC) which is at the socio-psychological level of analysis. The INLC is established through interpersonal contacts, media-based contacts and educational support.

These networks determine the quantity and quality of a person's ethnolinguistic experiences. At the psychological level, it is the INLC that determines both the linguistic competences and the cognitive-affective dispositions toward the ethnolinguistic groups with which one is in contact.

In other words, the individual's experiences in the INLC lead to the development of various vitality beliefs. A sense of ethnic belongingness can also be formed as a result of the individual's experiences in the INLC. Therefore, the INLC functions as a bridge between the sociological and psychological level of analysis. More precisely, it forges connections between objective EV and subjective EV. Then, as a result of the individual's phenomenological experience of the INLC, the linguistic aptitude/competence along with vitality beliefs and ethnic identification becomes the basis for the individual's language behavior, which in turn influences the quality and quantity of the ethnolinguistic experiences in the INLC. Finally, different language behaviors give rise to different routes of bilingual development: additive, balanced, or subtractive bilingualism.

The INLC is different from the notion of *social network*, the pattern of informal relationships people are involved in on a regular basis. First, the INLC includes both formal and informal relationships. Second, the INLC covers both regular and irregular interactions, the latter of which may be the best examples of the emergent nature of ethnicity/identity. Third, the INLC highlights the role of language in mediating social interactions. Finally, the INLC emphasizes the import of media in HL learning. Therefore, the notion of INLC provides some keen insights into the study of the dynamic interactions between language, identity, and social environment. It functions as a bridge to connect the larger social environment and the individual's psychological factors. The linguistic experiences within the INLC determine one's beliefs and identities, which in turn influences one's language behavior. In regard to my project, my focus is on the transition from weak to strong ethnic identification. Since the larger social environment is basically the same for every Chinese American, the INLC becomes crucial to account for different results of language development and identity construction. Therefore, special attention is paid to how different INLCs contribute to individuals' identity formation that in turn gives rise to different routes of language use and development. In what follows, I will unfold the inquiry by laying out the research context, the methodologies, and the background information of the focal informants.

3. Methodologies and Procedures

3.1 Research contexts

Data presented in this paper were based on an 11 month ethnographic study of second-generation Chinese American adolescents' heritage language learning and language use along with identity formation processes in Upstate New York. These children were either born in the U.S. or came to the U.S. with their parents at a very young age. Like many other immigrant groups, most of these youngsters are already English-dominant though some of them are bilingual in Chinese and English in the oral form. In order to maintain Chinese language skills as well as to retain cultural heritage, they are sent by their parents to attend the local Chinese heritage language school during the weekends. Both Chinese language classes and Chinese culture classes are offered there. In addition, some parents teach Chinese language and culture at home, such as reading Chinese stories, watching Chinese movies/TV programs, and practicing traditional Chinese calligraphy. Some children are also encouraged to participate in activities organized by the Chinese heritage language school and the local Chinese Community Center (CCC)¹, such as the annual Chinese New Year Celebration, the Story-telling Contest, and the International Festival. Overall, it is to improve their Chinese language proficiency and maintain their Chinese cultural identity that these youngsters are engaged in various events/activities across different settings.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

I selected six focal informants (please see Table 1 as a brief summary of their background) and conducted in-depth case studies to explore their HL learning and ethnic identification processes through the INLC.

¹ Different from traditional Chinese immigrant institutions/organizations founded in urban Chinatowns, the vast majority of its members are from middle-class families. This is because the New York State government, the two major universities (State University of New York at Albany and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute), some big companies (General Electronic and Albany Molecular), and various small businesses have attracted many Chinese professionals to work and live in the Capital Region.

Since there are three kinds of contacts within the INLC: educational support, interpersonal contacts, and contacts through media, I paid special attention to various contexts in which the INLC is established. I went to the local Chinese heritage language school every Sunday to observe and audio-tape classroom interactions. I also went to their homes to observe and audio-tape their interactions with family members and friends as well as with the media (e.g. music, films, TV shows, the Internet). In addition, I participated in different kinds of ethnic activities (e.g. Chinese New Year Party), which offered opportunities to observe their behaviors in various settings. Furthermore, I conducted semi-structured interviews with these informants, their families, Chinese teachers, and friends, which aimed to get additional information of their life stories from different perspectives. I also had interviews with their teachers at regular English schools to compare their behaviors across different settings. Generally speaking, participant observations aim to get first-hand data on how these Chinese American children are socialized through the INLC and what identity dynamics are embodied in moment-to-moment interactions to accrue spatial data, while interviews have been used to solicit background information of a temporal nature to supplement observations.

3.3 Background profiles of focal informants

Judy, 11 years old, was born in a small town in Upstate New York and moved to the Capital District five years ago. Both her parents are originally from Shanghai. Her father got his PhD in Chemistry from an American university and works for a local pharmaceutical company. Her mother stays at home, but is actively involved in various Chinese ethnic activities (she is the Chinese school teacher of Judy and Chief Editor of the CCC Newsletter). Her father speaks Shanghai dialect to her, while her mother speaks Mandarin to her. In doing so, she will not forget her identity of being Shanghaiese in particular and being Chinese in general. However, she is only capable of speaking fluent Mandarin, not Shanghai dialect. This is probably because she has more contact with her mother and she learns to speak Mandarin at the Chinese school. As a 7th grader, Judy has been in this Chinese school for five years. Before moving to the Capital District, she had also taken Chinese classes for one year. Judy is a 6th grader in her English school. In regard to language use, Judy speaks Mandarin Chinese most of time (70%-80%) at home and also to her parents' friends. When I interviewed her several times, she also chose to speak Chinese to me.

Alex, 13 years old, was born in California and sent to Beijing to stay with his grandparents when he was eight months old. He came back to visit his parents a couple times. Before finally returning to the U.S., Alex had gone through the entire pre-kindergarten program and studied in a primary school in Beijing for three years. Alex's mother divorced his father five years ago, and Alex has lived with his mother since then. His grandparents came to the U.S. to take care of him, because Alex's mother is usually on a business trip as a civil engineer working for the state government. Alex did not attend Chinese school immediately after coming back to the U.S. at the age of eight. After catching up with his English for a couple of years, Alex began to take Chinese classes in this Chinese school three years ago. Alex is now an 8th grader at the regular school. Although having being in the U.S. for only five years, Alex speaks native English and ranks in the top 10% in his class (a total of 22 students).

14 years old, Megan was born in Chicago and sent to Shanghai when she was ten months. After staying with her grandparents for eight months, Megan returned to the U.S. She was sent to grandparents again at the age of five, and stayed in a kindergarten in Shanghai for one semester where she learned *pinyin* (Chinese phonetic system). The family moved to the Capital District in 1999. Megan's father is a manager in a pharmaceutical company, and her mother works as an office worker for a nurses' association. Megan has a 10-year-old younger brother who also goes to the Chinese School. As a 9th grader, Megan has been in the Chinese School for six years. As in the Chinese School, Megan (9th grade) is a top student at her regular school. In regard to language use, Megan speaks half Mandarin and half English to her parents. The interactions between her and her brother, however, are 100% English.

Yichen, a 16-year old, is the only focal informant who was not born in the United States. He came to the U.S. at the age of five when his parents came to attend graduate schools. The family moved to the Capital District five years ago when the father began to work as a chemist in a pharmaceutical company and the mother found a position of microbiologist in a private hospital. Yichen has been in the Chinese School for three years. He is in the 10th grade, which is the most advanced language class in the school. Also a 10th grader at his regular school, Yichen ranks in the top 5% in his class (totaling 24 students). Yichen's parents insist on speaking Mandarin Chinese to him at home, and Yichen responds with 20% Chinese and 80% English.

It is interesting that he used mostly Chinese (90%) during my interviews at the Chinese School, whereas he spoke no Chinese at all when I met his parents at home.

Linda, 17 years old, was born in Albany, NY and sent to Beijing to stay with her grandparents at the age of two. She attended a kindergarten there for three years and learned about 100 Chinese characters. When she was five years old, Linda returned to the U.S. with her grandparents who stayed another three years to take care of her. Linda's father maintains the database for a company, and her mother is a nurse at a local hospital. Linda graduated from the Chinese School in 2005, but she chose to stay there as a volunteer to co-instruct an elementary dance class with another girl. Linda also graduated from her regular high school and entered University of Rochester in Fall 2006. I interviewed her previous chemistry teacher and got to know that she ranked middle in the chemistry class (26 students).

Joy, 17 years old, was born in Albany, NY. Compared to the other five families, Joy has a large family which is made up of five members: she, her father, her mother, her younger sister, and her grandmother. Both of her parents are chemists, but with different employers: her dad works for Albany Molecular Center, and her mum for the New York State Health Department. Her sister, Julie, is 15 years old, and goes to the same high school. Joy's grandma has been in the U.S. to take care of the whole family since Joy was born 17 years ago. Joy and Linda went to the same Chinese class. Like Linda, Joy graduated from the Chinese School in 2005, but stayed there to teach the Taekwondo class. Joy also went to the same high school as Linda's before she was admitted to International Studies at George Washington University in Fall 2006. While Joy and Linda went to the same Chinese class and the same high school, both their Chinese and English teachers pointed out the differences between the two girls: Linda was quiet and dependable, while Joy was bossy and assertive. The situation of language use in Joy's family is very complicated. Her parents speak Mandarin to each other but mostly English to the sisters. Joy's grandma speaks a Northern Chinese dialect to everyone in the family. The sisters speak Mandarin to the grandma, but English to their parents and to each other.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 HL learning and ethnic identification through the INLC

Although my six informants illuminate different life trajectories of Chinese American teenagers, they share some common and recurrent implications for HL education within the INLC. Generally speaking, the youngsters' persistent learning and use of Chinese that enable them to be socialized through various contexts, which help to establish various identities including ethnic belongingness; on the other hand, their strong ethnic identifications incline them to certain phenomenological experience, which in turn facilitates their learning and use of Chinese. Therefore, socialization through the INLC plays a crucial role in this dynamic process of forming primordial aspects of ethnicity.

All the informants agree that attending Chinese school is the most important means to improve their Chinese language proficiency as well as learning Chinese traditional values and beliefs. All the parents have a strong motivation to make their kids maintain the heritage language and culture. Sending them to the Chinese School and keeping them at the school for a relatively long period of time (the shortest is three years for Alex; the longest is 10 years for Linda) at least proves this. In addition, all of these informants, along with their parents and Chinese teachers, consider Chinese language education as an ideological investment (Lei, 2011; Lei, 2012a; Lei, 2012b). This means that they have the expectation that learning Chinese language enhances one's ethnic identity, because language is a symbolic capital, one of the most important components of one's identity. The following remarks from Linda illustrate this point.

“Learning a language is not simply about learning to speak, write, and read fluently or even passively. Languages are embodiments of the culture, traditions, of people to whom it belongs; they aid in defining people.” (*The CCC Newsletter*, 2003, p. 16)

Peer interactions also play a positive role in HL learning and ethnic formation. Five out of six informants (except Yichen) keep close contacts with friends and relatives in China or the United States to maintain their Chinese language proficiency and socio-cultural knowledge. All of them are inclined to make Asian friends who share similar cultural backgrounds. All of them mention that they have made good friends at the Chinese school, because they feel that it is easier for them to make friends with those who share similar cultural backgrounds.

In addition, except for Judy, all the others participate in multicultural/international clubs, which demonstrates their ethnic/racial awareness. On other occasions where these Chinese American teenagers interact with individuals of different ethnic groups, their awareness of ethnic belongingness could also be intensified.

The following remarks, from Joy's writing about her experience of representing the CCC as Miss China in the Albany Festivals of Nations, reflect this dynamic process:

“The Albany Festival of Nations was something that I would've almost never dreamed myself to participate in, and even less to represent my country as Miss China. I can think of not one better experience than this one that provoked my desire to learn more and to research about my native country. I've developed, in a short amount of time so many friendships with the rest of the girls participated and represented different countries. Knowing that we live in such a heterogeneous area had opened my eyes to a whole new world in front of me. Many of the girls that I've talked to have the same or very similar morals and values as I do, all drilled in by their parents who most of them were immigrants themselves to America. The festival of nations is an amazing place that unites over 30 different countries in one place. I realized that we really are the land of plenty, and even now, America welcomes new immigrants every day.” (*The CCC Newsletter*, 2004, p. 22)

Regarding media-based contacts, my observations, interviews with students, parents, and teachers all suggest that watching Chinese TV/videos, exploring the Internet, and listening to Chinese pop music are important factors in socializing these teenagers into alternative ways of knowing. Five out of six focal informants (except for Yichen) enjoy exploring the Internet and watching Chinese films/videos, which indirectly facilitates their learning Chinese language and culture. First, watching Chinese movies or TV series provides an important means of learning Chinese language and culture. This is because the vivid images of movies/TV programs may spark their curiosity about Chinese culture. It could also be an efficient means of enlarging Chinese vocabulary, especially idiomatic expressions across various contexts. Reading subtitles helps them to recognize Chinese characters. Furthermore, watching historical TV/movies enhances students' ethnic pride. Second, the Internet provides these teenagers with a fast and convenient way to acquire needed information on Chinese language and culture. While Judy and Alex explore the Internet to search materials for their Chinese assignments, Megan, Linda, and Joy use Chinese websites to look for Chinese music. Finally, listening to Chinese music might indirectly facilitate learning the Chinese language and culture. For example, the process of searching lyrics through Chinese websites helps Joy recognize more Chinese characters. In addition, in order to understand the lyrics, Joy asks her parents and her Chinese teacher about some background information, which in turn broadens her socio-cultural knowledge.

4.2 The role of language in ethnic identification

As many scholars have argued, language is not indispensable but very important and useful for ethnic identification (Heller, 1994; Smolicz, 1992). The central question is to what extent and how HL facilitates positive ethnic identification. Based on the six case studies, I interpret the role of heritage language in ethnic identification in three ways. Firstly, language per se is a part of culture. By studying the words and linguistic structures of a language, learners also acquire the socio-cultural information underlying the language system, which in turn, helps them to develop a deep emotional attachment to the shared heritage. For example, my case study suggests that learning and use of Chinese idiomatic expressions functions as an important means to facilitate these adolescents' language proficiency and cultural competence. (Lei, 2012a). My observations of the focal informants in and out of the classroom as well as interviews with them and their parents and teachers suggest that idiomatic expressions provide an interesting lens to examine language both as a target of socialization and as a tool for socialization (He, 2000; He, 2003; He, 2004). Chinese idiomatic expressions contain a lot of culture-specific meanings and are windows to look into the Chinese past, which enhance ethnic pride. They also best demonstrate the indexical relationship between linguistic forms and socio-cultural contexts (Ochs, 1990).

Secondly, heritage language provides important access to participation in ethnic activities and formation of group boundaries (Heller, 1994). It is through participating in and being exposed to various ethnic activities that children develop a strong sense of being a community, and the shared experience entails a “we-feeling”. According to interviews with informants, their parents, and Chinese teachers, five out of six informants (except Yichen) keep close contacts with friends and relatives in China or the United States to maintain their Chinese language proficiency and socio-cultural knowledge. For instance, Megan has a close relationship with her cousin who is only four months older than she is.

She has kept up-to-date with everything in China by calling her cousin a couple of times every month. Because of their similar age, they talk about everything over the phone including Chinese pop music, fashion, videos, and movie stars. Linda's close contacts with her cousins in Beijing help her develop a deep attachment to Chinese popular culture (Chinese TVs, films, and music), in which Chinese language is a central means of making sense out of that shared experience. Judy also mentions that her Chinese language proficiency has been greatly improved by talking to her cousin in Shanghai. Joy is also influenced by her good friend in the United States to listen to Chinese pop music. In all these cases, the peer group functions as a linguistic and cultural broker that brings authentic Chinese practices to these informants.

Finally, heritage language is an important ethnic boundary marker. Thus, learning and use of heritage language entails a distinction between one's own "in-group" group and another "out-group". All of them mention that they have made good friends at the Chinese school, because they feel that it is easier for them to make friends with those who share similar cultural backgrounds. The friendship also extends to other contexts. In particular, Linda and Joy were brought up together with a few other Chinese American kids and have maintained an "Asian gathering" at their high school, which indicates a strong sensibility about their ethnic identity. On the other hand, both Joy's and Linda's teachers from their high school reported that the two girls occasionally spoke Chinese to each other and with their Chinese American friends at their high school to exclude "the others," which in turn demonstrates their sensibility of manipulating their linguistic repertoires to display their unique ethnic identities. In this sense, Chinese language functions as a group boundary marker between "in-group" and "out-group."

4.3 Ethnicity as a heterogeneous identification process

In spite of commonalities, these six case studies display different life trajectories, which lead to various patterns of linguistic and cultural development. First, in regard to family relations, while Judy and Yichen have some tensions with their parents, the other four feel a part of a cohesive, unified family system, which increases their possibility to internalize the values and behaviors of that system. Secondly, in terms of peer interactions, Joy networks with her Chinese American friends, whereas Linda, Megan, and Alex keep close contacts with their cousins in China by visiting or calling, both of which help them to develop a strong sense of ethnic belongingness. For Yichen and Judy, there seem to be very few peer interactions like that. Finally, while Yichen's experience of visiting China was not positive, for Megan, Linda, Alex, and Judy, frequently traveling back to China provides crucial means of being exposed to the authentic Chinese language and culture, which indirectly facilitates their ethnic identification. By contrast, Joy's Chinese language proficiency and ethnic belongingness is mainly achieved through active participation in various ethnic activities in the United States.

My intensive case studies of the six teenagers also suggest that there is a possibility of ethnic revitalization. Since they are at different ages within the adolescent range, it is to my advantage to examine if there is any ethnic rebirth for them, and to what extent. By doing participant observations of their social interactions across different settings as well as developing life histories, I am able to have a general idea about their linguistic and cultural development. It indicates that at least three of them (Megan, Linda, and Joy) are undergoing an active ethnic revitalization, Yichen's ethnic identification is intermittent, Judy is still in the stage of passive ethnic identification, and ethnic rebirth does not apply to Alex.

As mentioned before, I adopt a practice account of ethnicity/identity. This means ethnicity is not a fixed enduring category; rather, it is more a matter of strong or weak, focused or diffuse, persistent or intermittent (Silverstein, 2003). In addition, this is not a dichotomy; rather, it is a continuum. Therefore, due to different life trajectories, my six focal informants can be located at various points on this continuum in terms of ethnic identification.

Alex's ethnic identification seems to be most persistent among all six teenagers. His Chinese language proficiency is native-like, he knows a lot about Chinese history and culture, and he keeps many Chinese traditions and lifestyles. Since he has never shown any negative attitude towards his Chinese background, ethnic revitalization does not apply to him. This is probably because Alex was sent to Beijing to stay with his grandparents from eight months old to nine years old. Before coming back to be reunited with his mum, Alex had gone through the entire pre-kindergarten program and studied in a primary school in Beijing for three years, all of which provided him with a solid base of Chinese language and culture. In addition, he still keeps close contacts with his previous classmates and teachers, and also traveled to China a couple of times, all of which keeps him updated about what is happening in China. Going to Chinese school helps Alex to keep his Chinese reading and writing skills, and watching Chinese historical TV series also helps him learn more about Chinese history and culture.

Even his Social Studies teacher at the regular high school mentioned to me that Alex has maintained many Chinese traits, such as showing respect to teachers and being patient with his classmates. However, this does not mean that Alex is isolated from his English world. Instead, Alex speaks native-like English, reads a lot in English, and works hard in his regular school as well. Therefore, Alex seems to be proud of his bilingual and bicultural background, but his unique life trajectories make him develop a deeper emotional attachment to Chinese heritage.

Next to Alex, along this continuum, are three girls: Megan, Linda, and Joy. Their life histories are similar in that they used to “hate”, or at least get frustrated with their Chinese heritage at the earlier stage of their school years, but all of them end up stepping out of that frustration and acquiring a positive understanding of their self-identity. All of them agree that going to Chinese language school plays a crucial role in this ethnic revitalization. As Linda says, “We go to Chinese school every Sunday and get our heads filled with ‘Chinese’. In learning the language, we are learning what it means to be Chinese”. Megan also mentions to me that, “At the school, I routinely see Chinese Americans, and especially Chinese-American women in positions of respect and authority. These are important role models. Through dance classes, I also experience the grace and strength of Chinese-American women.” In addition, their networking with friends in China or in the U.S. also enables them to be emotionally attached to Chinese heritage. Take Megan and Linda for example. It is their close contacts with cousins in China that give them access to updated information on Chinese movies, music, and fashions, which in turn increases their exposure to Chinese culture. Joy is also influenced by her good friend in the U.S. to listen to Chinese pop music.

All of them are also inclined to make Asian friends who share similar cultural backgrounds. In particular, Linda and Joy were brought up together with a few Chinese American kids and have maintained an “Asian gathering” at their high school, which indicates a strong sensibility of their ethnic identity. Furthermore, these girls’ parents’ strong desire to socialize them in the Chinese environment also accounts for ethnic revitalization. For instance, as a leader of the Chinese Community Center, Joy’s father encourages Joy and her younger sister to participate in various ethnic activities. It is through service and volunteer work for the Chinese community that Joy feels self-actualized. By contrast, Megan’s and Linda’s parents send their children back to China every summer, which helps them learn and practice Chinese in a natural setting. It also gives them opportunities to see China’s changes in their own ways, which help them to develop a positive attitude towards China and Chinese culture. Finally, all these three girls realize that, from a utilitarian point of view, it is advantageous to be bilingual and bicultural. Linda wanted to be an interpreter for the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. Megan’s dream job is to work in China as an English teacher. Joy’s plan is to be the U.S. Ambassador to China. In other words, they are not only being proud of their bicultural background, but also consider learning Chinese language and culture as an instrumental investment in their career opportunities (Lei, 2011; Lei, 2012a; Lei, 2012b).

Yichen’s ethnic identification is more complex, and his identity transformation is not as clear as those of the three girls. His parents told me that he was originally forced to learn Chinese, and this situation was slightly changed two years ago. He is right now considering going to Chinese School as a routine, although he is not necessarily enthusiastic in learning Chinese language and culture. Yichen is the only one, among the six cases, who was born in China and still keeps a Chinese passport. It is mainly because of this reason that he identifies himself as “Chinese”. He is also the only one, among the six kids, who does not watch Chinese movies and explore Chinese or bilingual websites. Due to his isolation from his parents within the past few years, Yichen talks less and less with his parents. His experience with Chinese language and culture is only confined to the Chinese school and the two or three hours of doing Chinese homework and previewing Chinese texts right before going to the Chinese school.

Yichen visited his hometown in Northwestern China for just one week, so he has a vague impression of China. However, Yichen seems to be enthusiastic in displaying his ethnic identity in his regular high school. For example, he participated in the International Club where he organized a Chinese Information Booth to display crafts and calligraphy at the 2006 Cultural Fair. Yichen’s case is a little bit complicated in that, on the one hand, his continuing study of Chinese language and culture and his active participation in multicultural events at his regular school move him toward a positive ethnic identification; on the other hand, Yichen’s isolation from his parents and decreasing time spent in heritage education might make this initial ethnic rebirth pause or go the opposite way. As a matter of fact, as bilingual and bicultural development is a dynamic process (Kecskes, 2002; Lei, 2003), the final result for Yichen in the future will eventually depend on various factors.

Located closest to the other end of this ethnic continuum is Judy, an 11-year-old girl. Based on my findings, Judy has not yet undergone any ethnic revitalization. Almost everything she has done in learning Chinese language and culture is forced by her mum, not completed at her own will. As a housewife and the Chinese school teacher of Judy, Judy's mum is very enthusiastic, inculcating in her daughter Chinese ways of speaking, writing, thinking, and acting. She has also set up very high expectations for Judy. However, Judy does not appreciate her mum's efforts, and she is the only one, among the six kids, who does not realize the importance of learning Chinese language and culture. As she tells me, "I am in the top 2% in my Chinese class. But this does not mean that I like it. It is just to please my mum. That's the whole story." There are obviously some tensions between Judy and her mum. The more Judy's mum pushes her, the more negative feelings Judy develops towards her heritage education. Judy's frustration with her mum was even reported to her teacher at the regular school. As the only Asian American student in her class (24 students) at the regular school, Judy seems to have no big difference from other kids, and she does not want to be identified as different. In short, Judy seems not yet to have developed a strong ethnic self. This might be because she is too young to make sense of who she is. Judy's tension with her mum definitely exacerbates this situation. This does not mean that there is no chance for Judy to go through positive ethnic identification. The scenario might be that Judy is able to figure out why her mum invests so much in learning Chinese language and culture as time goes on, or her mum modifies her ways of educating Judy. Otherwise, it might be very hard for Judy to step out of this passive process of ethnic identification.

5. Conclusion

This paper has explored the symbiosis of HL learning and ethnic identification among six Chinese American adolescents. My findings suggest that both the primordial and circumstantial aspects of ethnicity are co-existing among these immigrant children. All of them consider HL education as an ideological investment, i.e. HL learning could facilitate positive ethnic identification. This is mainly achieved through the INLC which serves as a bridge between psychological and sociological factors. In other words, various aspirations, attitudes, feelings, and ideas toward heritage language and culture within ideological investment influence these immigrant children's learning and use of Chinese in various contexts (educational support, interpersonal contact, and media-based), which helps to establish ethnic belongingness; on the other hand, their strong ethnic identifications incline them to make instrumental investment in certain phenomenological experience within the INLC, which in turn facilitates their learning and use of Chinese.

However, learning and use of heritage language does not necessarily lead to homogeneous ethnic identity. By interacting within different INLCs through time and across space, immigrant children may display different relationships to their ethnic group and different senses of being a minority (Jo, 2002). This is especially true for Chinese American youngsters who are exposed to multilingual and multicultural environments. Their diverse experiences help them develop overlapping or even conflicting identities. And they often fight very hard to step out of that identity dilemma. Furthermore, they are not simply the combination of being Chinese and American, but rather the sum of their personal experiences. Accordingly, their language choices and group affiliation are not fixed and unchanging, but fluid and contingent, as they adapt to specific types of social, economic, and political circumstances in a multilingual and multiethnic society (He, 2006; He, 2010).

In conclusion, this paper is of significant interest to researchers who are interested in sociolinguistics, ethnic studies, and second language acquisition research, because it addresses the multiple, fluid, and dynamic nature of ethnicity along with heritage language learning. The study also emphasizes theoretical and methodological efforts to understand ethnicity/identity as a practice in a multilingual and transnational context. However, there are still some important questions that need to be further addressed in future studies. How do other aspects of identity emerge with ethnic self along spatial and temporal dimensions of HL education? What other social factors (such as social class and gender) may affect HL learning and ethnic identification? To what extent does the Chinese Diaspora differ from other ethnic groups in terms of their attitudes towards heritage language and culture? In answering these questions, heritage language education, which differs significantly from first language (L1) acquisition and second language (L2) acquisition (Comanaru & Noels, 2009; Li & Duff, 2008; Wen, 2011), opens up possibilities for us to re-examine the interrelationship between language, ethnicity, identity, and power within the era of globalization.

Table 1 Background Information of Six Focal Informants

Name ²	Age	Gender	Years in the U.S.	Grade level in the Chinese School	Years in the Chinese School
Judy	11	Girl	Born in the U.S.	7 th grade	4
Alex	13	Boy	Born in the U.S.	7 th grade	3
Megan	14	Girl	Born in the U.S.	9 th grade	6
Yichen	16	Boy	11	10 th grade	5
Joy	17	Girl	Born in the U.S.	Graduated	9
Linda	17	Girl	Born in the U.S.	Graduated	10

² To keep the confidentiality of the informants, all names are pseudonyms.

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