

The voices of thirteen Chinese and Taiwanese parents sharing views about their children attending Chinese heritage schools

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Abstract: Many Chinese and Taiwanese parents in the United States see benefits of Chinese schools in providing their children the opportunity to learn Chinese culture and language. The results of this qualitative study involving interviews with thirteen Chinese and Taiwanese parents indicated that there were three main reasons why parents want to send their children to Chinese schools. They are (1) maintenance of heritage language and culture, (2) perspectives of bilingualism, and (3) value of Chinese heritage school.

Key words: Chinese heritage school; Chinese culture; heritage language maintenance

1. Introduction

Chinese heritage community schools in the United States were established about 100 years ago because of their roles in helping Chinese parents and other parents of Asian descent to assist themselves and their children in keeping ties to their cultural and linguistic heritages. Even today, Chinese and Taiwanese parents in the US are concerned about their children being able to speak the language and retaining their cultural identity. In addition, there has been an increase in the number of Chinese students, those who are American born as well as those who are native born living in the US. Parents want their children to develop cultural and linguistic ties to their native countries. These parents realize the importance of learning and maintaining their native language and cultural traditions. In fact, many support Tannenbaum and Howie's (2002) research that stated that language is the means by which people are socialized into their culture.

Historically, immigrants in the US have learned the English language for employment and communication. While in the past, many immigrants wanted their children to learn English to improve their education level as well as their quality of life; today, many immigrants want their children to be fluent in both English and their native language. Yet, many of the studies about parents' attitudes regarding these issues have been quantitative, and there are very few, studies that have captured the voices of the parents. As such, this paper seeks to share: (1) the history of Chinese heritage schools; and (2) the results of a study involving thirteen (N=13) Chinese and Taiwanese parents about their perceptions of Chinese heritage schools and why they send their children to Chinese heritage schools in a city of one southwestern state.

2. History of Chinese heritage schools in the United States

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The first Chinese heritage school in the US was established in the mid-nineteenth century (LAI, 2000). According to LAI (2000), one of the earliest compulsory Chinese language classes on record was developed in 1874. The purpose of this Chinese Educational Mission in Hartford, Connecticut, was to preserve Chinese heritage for 120 Chinese students sent by the Qing government to study in America.

Between 1912 and 1945, many Chinese communities in America started Chinese language schools, especially in San Francisco and Honolulu (LAI, 2000). In 1957, there were 31 Chinese schools in the US that included 4,286 students and 152 teachers (LAI, 2001). CHAO (1996) reported that US immigration regulations promoted a new influx of immigration that incorporated well-educated immigrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong in 1965. These immigrants and their families became residents or citizens of the US. The National Council of Associations of Chinese Language Schools (NCACLS) in 1995 reported that there were 634 Chinese language schools in 47 states that included approximately 82,675 students (LAI, 2001; CHAO, 1996).

Chinese heritage schools are mainly managed by community members consisting of volunteer parents and students from local colleges and universities. These Chinese and Taiwanese immigrants volunteer to teach their youngsters in Chinese language schools. They are motivated by a strong aspiration to preserve their Chinese heritage and promote the ethnic identity of second-generation Chinese-Americans. Gordon (2005) emphasizes that well-resourced families and communities provide optimal development and effective education through supplementary education that under parents' aspiration for children's personal development and achievement.

2.1 Types of programs

CHAO's study in 1996 points out that there are three types of programs generally offered in Chinese language schools. They are weekend programs, after-school programs, and summer programs. Weekend programs are held three hours a week during the day on Saturday or Sunday. Some schools have two hours language learning class and one hour Chinese cultural performance/activity class, such as calligraphy, painting, yo-yo, gong-fu, chess and dance. After-school programs are held from around 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. Monday to Friday. Classes include Chinese, Chinese cultural-related class, tutorial lessons in English, mathematics, or other homework. Summer programs are held each day from Monday through Friday during the summer months for about six to eight weeks. The classes provide students with intensive training in Chinese language and Chinese culture.

2.2 Two different systems of Chinese heritage schools

Chinese heritage school systems are run by either Chinese or Taiwanese communities. Although the Chinese schools share Chinese cultural heritage, due to the historical evolution and political circumstance, the schools run by Chinese and Taiwanese use different phonetic systems and Chinese characters. Hanyu Pinyin and simplified Chinese characters are taught in schools under Chinese community settings. Zhuyin Fuhao and traditional Chinese characters are taught in schools run by Taiwanese communities.

Zhuyin Fuhao (see Table 1) was adopted from the Wade-Giles system and was modified by Herbert Allen Giles in 1912 (Laychuk, 1983). It is a syllabary system still used in Taiwan as the symbols b (ㄅ), p (ㄆ), m (ㄇ)... There are 37 phonetic symbols which represent different pronunciations to recognize each Chinese character.

Since the 1950s, Hanyu Pinyin (see Table 1) has been the standard Chinese phonetic alphabet system (LAI, 2001). Hanyu Pinyin is Roman alphabetic letters used as the standard mandarin romanization system to teach simplified Chinese characters. In the 1950s, the People's Republic of China (PRC) government simplified the Chinese language. The Simplified Chinese Characters are used in Mainland China, Singapore, Malaysia, and most Chinese-printed publications. To preserve the traditional culture, the Traditional Chinese Characters have

remained and students are taught in traditional Chinese characters in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau.

Table 1 Zhuyin Fuhao, Hanyu Pinyin and International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) notations

Onsets			Rimes		
Zhuyin	Pinyin	IPA+	Zhuyin	Pinyin	IPA+
ㄅ	b	[p]	ㄚ	a	[a]
ㄆ	p	[p ^h]	ㄛ	o	[o]
ㄇ	h	[x]	ㄜ	e	[ə]
ㄇ	m	[m]	ㄨ*	u*	[u], [w]
ㄈ	f	[f]	ㄨ*	i*	[i], [j]
ㄉ	d	[t]	ㄩ*	ü*	[y]
ㄉ	t	[t ^h]	ㄟ	ei	[ei]
ㄊ	n	[n]	ㄞ	ai	[ai]
ㄌ	l	[l]	ㄞ	ao	[au]
ㄍ	g	[k]	ㄡ	ou	[ou]
ㄍ	k	[k ^h]	ㄢ	an	[an]
ㄎ	r	[ʒ]	ㄣ	en	[ən]
ㄏ	s	[s]	ㄤ	in	[in]
ㄏ	z	[ts]	ㄤ	un	[un]
ㄏ	sh	[ʃ]	ㄤ	ang	[aŋ]
ㄑ	c	[ts ^h]	ㄤ	eng	[əŋ]
ㄑ	zh	[tʃ]	ㄤ	ing	[iŋ]
ㄑ	ch	[tʃ ^h]	ㄤ	ong	[uŋ]
ㄒ	j	[tʃ]	ㄤ	er	[ər]
ㄒ	q	[tʃ ^h]	ㄤ	ie	[iɛ]
ㄒ	x	[ɕ]			

Notes: *Also used for medial glides, as in GUANG [kwa], TIE [t^hj] or JUAN [tʃyan]. *The IPA notations are those used by LI & Thompson (1981, pp. 5-7);

Source: P. Bertelson, CHEN H. & B. Gelder. (1997). Explicit speech analysis and orthographic experience in Chinese readers. In: CHEN H. (Ed.). *Cognitive processing of Chinese and related Asian languages*. Chinese University Press, 37.

By employing different phonetic systems and Chinese characters, the Chinese schools offer different Chinese instructional systems. That reflects in the method of teaching, textbooks, pronunciation learning, Chinese writing, and parents’ choices. However, more and more Chinese heritage community schools provide both types of characters and both types of transliteration methods to prepare students to be in China, Taiwan, or Chinese communities abroad (LAI, 2001).

Asian-American children who attend the Taiwanese-Chinese schools are taught the traditional Chinese characters and Zhuyin Fuhao. The characteristics of the Chinese school in the Taiwanese community are (1) belonging to the governance of the Overseas Compatriot Affairs Commission (OCAC), Taiwan, (2) using the facilities and classrooms of local university, and (3) recruiting teachers from master and doctoral Taiwanese students of the universities. Many Asian-American children who attend a Chinese school managed by the China system are (1) supported by Consulate General of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in Houston, (2) using textbooks designed by Jinan University in Guangzhou, and (3) recruiting teachers from volunteers (Chinese parents and residents).

Generally speaking, mandarin is the primary language used in class. For children who were born in the US and at primary level, teachers express and teach in English more often. Depending on the student’s level and teacher’s instruction, the curriculum may vary. The schools use textbooks from China and Taiwan which are designed for overseas compatriots or Chinese as second language learners. Most teachers use flash cards, posters, music, films, and pictures as supplementary educational materials.

3. Methodology

In naturalistic inquiry, interview is one type of data collections for utilizing human sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This qualitative study was conducted by interviewing and involved thirteen parents who sent their children to learn Chinese in a city of one southwestern state. The study was approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the parents were interviewed between October and November 2007. Five parents sent their children to a Chinese school that was operated by the Chinese community, eight parents sent their children to a Chinese school that was operated by the Taiwanese community. The two Chinese schools shared different classrooms in the same building. The parents usually wait for their children in empty classrooms located in the building and eleven parents were interviewed in the school setting while they were waiting for their children to attend classes. One couple, John and Kelly, were interviewed at their home. This qualitative study was guided by two research questions:

- (1) What are the reasons parents send their child(ren) to Chinese heritage schools?
- (2) What were the benefits and experiences for their child(ren) to attend Chinese heritage schools? Describe the benefits and values of the experiences.

More specifically, the study addressed the following questions:

- (1) Describe your background. What is the age of you and the age of your child(ren)?
- (2) What are your child(ren)’s place of birth and their age when they came to the United States?
- (3) What is the language spoken to your child(ren) at home?
- (4) What are the reasons you give to your child(ren) for having them learning Chinese?
- (5) What are the reasons you enroll your child(ren) in Chinese heritage schools or Chinese programs?
- (6) What Chinese schools or regular programs are your child(ren) attending?

All the names of the parents and children in the study are pseudonyms. Four participants were first-generation immigrants from China and four were from Taiwan. One American parent married an Indonesian of Chinese descent, three American parents married Taiwanese, and one Korean parent married Taiwanese. All parents had higher education degrees or were working on terminal degrees at the local university. Some parents were employed in companies within the community. More information about the participants is described in Table 2.

Table 2 Profiles of participants

No.	Name	Nationality	Educational level	Intercultural marriage	System type	Note
1	Emily	China	Master		China	
2	Alice	Taiwan	Master		Taiwan	
3	Batty	China	Bachelor		China	
4	John	USA	Bachelor	married Kelly		
5	Kelly	Taiwan	Bachelor	married John	Taiwan	
6	Mark	China	Ph.D.		China	
7	Kevin	USA	Ph.D.	married Indonesian	China	
8	Joyce	China	Bachelor		China	
9	Bill	Korea	Ph.D.	married Taiwanese	Taiwan	
10	Haley	Taiwan	Master	married American	Taiwan	
11	Gina	Taiwan	Master		Taiwan	
12	Nancy	USA	Bachelor	married Taiwanese	Taiwan	Adopted 2 children from China
13	Ivy	USA	Bachelor	married Taiwanese	Taiwan	

Most of the interviews were conducted in Chinese with some in English. The majority of the field notes were written in Chinese and some written in English, and the descriptions were transcribed in English. According to

Lincoln and Guba (1985), content analysis is a systematic process that provides a division of the text into units of meaning. Our data were sorted using a content analysis in which three main categories were: (1) maintenance of heritage language and culture, (2) perspectives of bilingualism, and (3) value of Chinese heritage school.

4. Findings: Three categories

4.1 Maintenance of heritage language and culture

Vygotsky (1997) believes that human beings pass along large amounts of knowledge across generations not biologically, but culturally. We can say “language” is the mediator to deliver knowledge culturally and a bridge of generation gap between the first generation immigrant parents and the second generation immigrant children.

In our study, maintenance of heritage language was noted among the parents. Mark responded when he said straightforward that, “She (My daughter) is Chinese, so she needs to learn Chinese”. It is natural for most Chinese and Taiwanese parents to think that way. They will either speak Chinese at home or send their children to Chinese schools in the close Chinese community. Mark also suspected that it will be difficult for students to learn Chinese without fundamental understanding. It will also be harder for them to learn Chinese when they are older. Bill had similar feeling when he stated that his two sons are Chinese descendants, so they have to learn Chinese.

The main reason that John sent his daughter to learn Chinese was that he thought of it as “the cultural thing”. He thought that his daughter needed to know about her culture. Kevin enrolled both his son and daughter in the Chinese school because he thought that his children should know that they are of Chinese descendant. He felt that his children could explore their Asian culture and learn how to understand it more.

4.2 Perspectives of bilingualism

Within the broader theme of perspectives on bilingualism, we noticed that there were three areas that parents noted for sending their children to Chinese heritage schools. They were the need for learning two languages, for communication and social skills and for professional competitiveness. The parents believed that their children should learn two languages and one of the languages should be Chinese. They felt that Chinese is a universal language and that it is more popular today. Gina made a comment that “if students have more than one language ability then they would get more benefits”. Ivy concurred when she stated that “it is important to learn other languages”. Kevin and Bill felt that language is a tool for people to access different linguistic groups. Some agreed that students should be able to master both English and Chinese and that it was most important for Chinese and Taiwanese immigrants.

We found that most parents did not expect their children to write Chinese characters; but were more interested in their children developing communication and social skills. For example, Alice and her husband often took their daughters back to Taiwan. They hoped their two daughters will be able to communicate with their grandparents and relatives when they return home. Kevin and his wife are frequent travelers and Kevin expected his children to help them communicate with others in Chinese when they traveled to Asian countries. He stated that writing Chinese characters was not his first priority. Joyce reiterated similar feelings when she stated that it is important for her children to communicate with people in China when they go back. She also encouraged her children to learn Chinese. She wanted them to be able to ask directions and read road signs in Chinese. Haley’s son, Peter, talked to his grandparents every week by phone and often returned to Taiwan. Peter plays with his cousins when he returns. Haley wanted Peter to be able to converse with grandparents and play with cousins was the reason she wanted her son to learn Chinese. In the study, many parents wanted their children to learn Chinese

to keep the language alive, meet people, and make friends. They felt that speaking the same language tied families together, and that being able to speak one more language gave their children more access to their culture.

CHANG (1998, p. 157) states that “the interdependent global economy requires that youth be prepared with bilingual and cross cultural skills so that they can be competitive and productive in a multicultural and multilingual society”. In our study, many parents felt that learning Chinese would help them be more marketable in the future. Alice stated it best when she described her cousin who is American-born and works at an American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) where it is an advantage for her to speak Chinese. Kelly shared information about her daughter’s future and John agreed. John believed that knowing the Chinese language could expand his daughter’s opportunity. He said to his daughter, “If you learn to read and write Chinese, there are so many jobs for you.” Gina said that her son, Allen, got a summer job, because he could speak Mandarin fluently. Speaking the language fluently, provided him an opportunity to expand his business by successfully selling his products.

4.3 Value of Chinese heritage school

Based on our qualitative study, parents felt that there was much value in their children attending Chinese heritages schools. Parents also thought that social networking was one of the values they received for sending their children to Chinese heritage schools. We noticed that there were differences between native-born parents and intermarriage parents about their language speaking at home. Our study shows six families have children who are second generation heritage Chinese learners. Four families have both father side and mother side from China and two families both father side and mother side from Taiwan. The parents from this group (parents from the same countries) speak Chinese at home and also encourage their children to speak Chinese them. Emily said, “My daughter couldn’t speak English before she went to school. She spoke Chinese at home. I let her know that she must speak Chinese at home.” Emily and her husband would say to their daughter, “I don’t know what you are talking about” when she spoke English to them. Alice told us that her two daughters know they have to speak Chinese at home.

Chinese heritage community schools provide a networking opportunity not only for parents but also for their children. The parents felt that the experience was positive as noted in several comments. Emily wanted to let her daughter know that there were many other children learning Chinese. Joyce felt that the Chinese school as a place for parents to exchange thoughts on helping children to learn and excel in Chinese. Nancy mentioned that the Chinese school is a place where her daughters could see other Chinese people. Haley appreciated the values of the parents, teachers, and principal of the Chinese School. She said, “Everybody in Chinese school is attentive and diligent.” Batty praised the Chinese school for its fair tuition and qualified teachers but most importantly that her daughter liked to go to the Chinese school.

5. Conclusion

In this study, we found three reasons that Chinese and Taiwanese parents in America sent their children to Chinese heritage schools. These reasons were (1) maintenance of heritage language and culture, (2) perspectives of bilingualism, and (3) value of Chinese heritage school. Most Asian immigrant parents think that learning Chinese is important and that their care and concern for Chinese (native language) were important as noted in our findings in the theme, maintenance of heritage language. Based on the results, most parents sent their children to learn Chinese because it is important for their children to keep their native language and to retain their culture. The American parents who adopt children from China, such as Nancy, cared about their children’s cultural identity

development. However, Gina noted that there were “more and more immigrants from Mainland China tended to ask their children to speak English and no Chinese”. According to Gina, these parents wanted their children to assimilate into the American culture. These themes were similar to CHEN’s (1996) report when she stated that most Chinese parents in the US are eager to prepare their children to assimilate into America. These parents maintain and build up their children’s Chinese abilities. However, in reality, once their children enter the American education system, their knowledge of Chinese language and culture may be eliminated.

Sending young children to learn a second language was an overwhelming phenomenon. De Houwer (1999) points out that more and more people nowadays want their children to grow up to be bilingual. The case for the immigrant parents is slightly different. Most immigrant parents have to raise their children bilingually. Danico and Ng (2004) indicate that since the first generation immigrants are foreign born, they immigrate to the US with the language and cultural values of their homeland. The second generation, however, grows up in the US, has fluent English rather than their parents’ native language. Many immigrant parents in the US are facing the dilemma of wanting their children to acquire English fluently and to maintain their heritage language at the same time (Worthy & Rodríguez-Galindo, 2006).

The first generation wants their next generation to have more access to the mainstream and be more acceptable to others. They think speaking good English is holding a ticket to enter a better life in the US. Therefore, one of the swift ways for immigrants to assimilate into a country is to speak its dominant language. Yet, during this migration process, in order to preserve their cultural identity and their heritage, the immigrants from different ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups, encourage their next generation to master the heritage language. However, we found similar patterns from the parents like Emily, Alice, Batty, Mark, Joyce, Haley, and Gina.

Students’ population shows the diverse groups in Chinese schools. It also represents the difference within the parents’ population. The types of student groups in Chinese schools are classified into four major groups by LEE (1996): (1) second generation heritage language learners; (2) first generation heritage language learners; (3) learners with Chinese heritage background who do not speak mandarin in the family; and (4) non-Chinese heritage language learners. According to LEE (1996), second generation heritage language learners are the majority enrolled in Chinese language schools. The students are Chinese-Americans whose parents’ first language is Chinese. Our findings parallel to LEE in that we found most students are second generation heritage Chinese learners and several students are Chinese heritage background who do not speak Mandarin in the family.

Although it was not stated by the parents, yet, from our observation, there is another group rising rapidly into this study. More and more American parents adopt children especially girls from China. In this particular group, American parents enrolled their children in the Chinese language schools for inheriting Chinese culture, identity and language. Usually, American parents will attend the class with their children to acquire Mandarin and Chinese culture. LIAO (2004) found that in an Oklahoma study of American parents who enrolled their children in a Chinese heritage school that American parents wanted their children to attend the school. One American parent stated, “She (My daughter) is Chinese and I want her to know her native language.” While another American parent wrote, “She is Chinese. She understood Chinese at the age of three. We hope she has maintained her understanding and will be able to speak Chinese fluently.”

In summary, the voices of the parents clearly stated that having their children attend Chinese heritage schools was important not only for their children but it also provided value for themselves. They believe that their children should be able to speak the language and communicate with members of their families and communities to help them retain their heritage language. Moreover, having their children become bilingual also strengthens their

children's social and future competitiveness in the job market. The parents have positive value of enrolling their children in the Chinese heritage schools. From the results of this study, we conclude that Chinese heritage schools serve the purpose for which they were developed and that even today, parents continue to have a desire for their children to attend Chinese heritage schools. Therefore, we believe that Chinese heritage schools will continue to exist in the US, especially at a time when the demographic population of people from Asian decent continues to increase.

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