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Chinese Adolescent Immigrants' Decisions on Heritage Language Maintenances in the United States

The United States has known as the nation of immigrants. The population consists of people from different countries all over the world. Among these immigrants, a large group of them are Chinese. In 2010, there were 1.8 million foreign born Chinese immigrants on the soil of the US. Chinese has grown to the second largest immigration group in the US (Kristen McCabe, 2012, Para 2). With the large Chinese immigrant population, Chinese language has developed to the third-most-spoken language in the US with more than 2.4 million speakers (U.S. ACS, 2009). These people can be a huge contribution to the nation's language diversity. Yet, recent studies show that a large proportion of the second generation Chinese immigrants choose not to maintain their heritage language, and use English as their only language. Different researchers have raised different hypotheses to explain these adolescent immigrants' decisions on whether or not to preserve their ethnic language. In this paper, I will introduce factors that have great influence over these second generation adolescent immigrants' decisions on heritage language maintenance, including familial, social and school factors.

The familial factor has great influence over adolescent Chinese immigrants' decisions on whether or not to maintain their heritage language (Luo & Wiseman, 2000; Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009; Cheung, 1981). As claimed by Zhang and Slaughter-Defoe, many Chinese immigrant parents are very proactive in promoting the heritage language (2009). They are willing to devote large amount of time and money to help their children preserve their ethnic language. The reasons that the parents are promoting Chinese among their children are the advantages of learning Chinese and the maintenance of the ethnic identity. The parents recognize

that the ability to speak Chinese is a valuable “resource” (Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009, p 83) which gives their children advantages in both academic achievements and future career, especially in this globalized world. As many college-level educational institutions now value language diversity, the ability to speak another language can be helpful in the children’s future education. Also, in this globalized world, multilingual talents are more favored in work place (Garcia, 2005; Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009). Based on the interviews carried out by Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, many Chinese parents, who are immigrants themselves, “are keenly aware of globalisation trends and the importance of multilingualism in a globalised society” (2009, p.83). Since many Chinese parents have high expectations of their children, they wish the children can acquire Chinese language as a resource for their future developments and an advantage which their English-speaking peers do not possess.

Another major reason the parents are promoting heritage language among the adolescent immigrants is to maintain their ethnic identity. As most Chinese parents are proud of the Chinese culture and language, they would like their children to preserve the distinct ethnicity as a Chinese. The Chinese parents regard Chinese language as “the key distinguishing characteristic of their ethnic group” (Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009, p.147). Hence, many Chinese parents are willing to put in tremendous amount of efforts to promote Chinese language, in order to transmit the Chinese identity to the children.

There is considerable evidence to support that such direct promotion by the parents has a positive impact (Luo & Wiseman, 2000; Cheung, 1981). In Cheung’s research, he concludes from his data analysis that “Ethnic language retention by children is strongly correlated with parents' direct promotion of ethnic language” (1981, p40), while Luo and Wiseman claim in their results “[support] the prediction that father and mother's attitudes are positively associated with

immigrant children's ethnic language preservation” (2000, p.320). Hence, there is a positive correlation between parents’ direct promotion and the heritage language maintenance.

Yet, the effectiveness of these direct efforts can still be affected by the different family relationships. As Luo and Wiseman suggest in their research, the cohesiveness of the parent-child relationship and grandparent-child relationship can influence the adolescent immigrants’ decisions on whether or not to preserve their heritage language (2000). Due to the traditional Chinese family structure and the role fathers play in that structure, the father-child cohesiveness is a less decisive factor compare to the mother-child cohesiveness. Since in Chinese culture, fathers are “less approachable”, while mothers are the “emotionally-devoted caretakers” (Luo and Wiseman,2000, p.320), the children are more emotionally attached to the mothers. Hence, as suggested in Luo and Wiseman’s research, cohesiveness of Mother-child relationship is a “significant positive factors on children's Chinese proficiency” (2000, p.315). When the children and the mothers share a cohesive relationship, the children are more likely to fulfill the parents’ demand and to study Chinese. However, when the mother-child relationship is not cohesive, the children tend to be more rebellious and hence less likely to agree to study Chinese.

Another important familial factor that has great influence over the adolescent immigrants’ decisions is the grand-parent relationship. Based on their survey results, Luo and Wiseman conclude that “The more cohesion between grandparent and grandchild (GCC), the higher the children's ethnic language maintenance” (2000, p.318).When the children are close to the grandparents, who usually have limited English proficiency, these Chinese children have to acquire certain level of Chinese proficiency in order to effectively communicate with their grandparents. As suggested by Zhang, “Children have to learn to speak the heritage language in order to communicate with their families back in China” (Zhang, n.d., p13). Hence, these

children have more opportunities to speak Chinese in their life compared to others, which helps them to acquire a higher level of Chinese proficiency. Depending on different family situations, these familial factors can promote or prevent heritage language maintenance among adolescent Chinese immigrants (Luo and Wiseman, 2000).

Yet, parents' efforts alone are not enough to promote the heritage language maintenance. One strong support most Chinese family reaches out to is the co-ethnic networks. Such networks not only provide support for the parents' efforts, but also give incentives for the American-born children to learn Chinese. As suggested by Zhang in her research, the Chinese people in the US have developed different co-ethnic groupings based on different backgrounds (n.d.). Within each community, the members provide both support and incentives for heritage language maintenance.

One significant support is the non-profit Chinese language schools. Such schools are initiated and managed by volunteer parents with the funding donated by the committed Chinese parents who are from the same co-ethnic communities. As Ms Sun, a former principal of a Chinese language school, has said in Zhang's interview that " [a]lmost all the Chinese schools were started by the parents because it is the parents who want their children to learn Chinese language and culture" (n.d., P17). Zhang's research shows that many American-born Chinese immigrants have attended such school to improve their Chinese proficiency (n.d). These schools serve as a strong support to the parents' promotion, since many Chinese parents with strong will to educate their children with Chinese may not have enough time or resources to teach their children. With strong co-ethnic networks, the founding and management of these schools becomes possible, since some passionate parents in the community are willing to provide the time and money required to found these schools. Members in the same co-ethnic groups encourage other parents to continue their efforts in promoting Chinese. Hence, the strong co-

ethnic groups serve as “a collective force and external support system contribute to confirming and advancing [parents’] pride in their heritage language and culture and strengthening their desire to transmit them to their American-born children”(Zhang, n.d., p18).

These co-ethnic communities not only provide supports to parents’ efforts, but also give the children more incentives to learn Chinese. While such communities have a major social role in the immigrant families, proficiency in Chinese is required to be actively involved in the communities’ activities. With constant “co-ethnic gatherings” within the communities, the children are required to have certain level of proficiency in Chinese language (or Cantonese) in order to effectively communicate with other people (Zhang, n.d., p18). The active involvement in these co-ethnic communities where heritage language and culture are highly valued also allows the second-generation of immigrants to better appreciate the Chinese traditional culture and language and be proud of their identities as Chinese. As suggested by Luo and Wiseman in their research, with more communications with other Chinese-speaking friends, the children are more likely to preserve their heritage language (2000). The constant contacts with Chinese language have made the language more relevant to the children, and hence give them more incentive to learn the language (Zhang, n.d.).

The school education system is another important factor that influences the adolescent immigrants’ decisions on heritage language maintenance. The current public school system often diminishes the children’s passion towards Chinese language. Zhang and Slaughter-Defoe point out in their research that though many children share a strong interest in Chinese language school during their childhood, they gradually lose the enthusiasm towards Chinese after they enter the schools (2009). There are several reasons for such shift in interest: Firstly, since Chinese is a very difficult language with very different characteristics compare to English, the learning

process becomes more difficult and time-consuming. Therefore, the time they spent on learning Chinese has to “[take] up either their after-school hours or weekend hours when they should have enjoyed non-academic activities,” which is regarded as “unprofitable” by most Chinese children (Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009, p.89). Since they use only English in school to finish school work and communicate with other peers, the opportunities to use Chinese become rare. Also, in the lower level of education, the ability to speak a second language is not relevant; these young children cannot foresee the advantages of learning Chinese in their future education and career. Therefore, most children regard Chinese as a useless language in the US schools. Hence they do not want to continue devote large amount of time and effort into Chinese learning.

Besides the extra workload in learning Chinese, the “English-only” policy in most public schools also prevents students from maintaining their heritage language. Though the US has no official language, the “pressure groups such as English First and US English have been promoting English monolingualism and cultural assimilation” (Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009, p.79). Most public schools use English as the language of instruction and do not allow other languages. Li points out in his research that the “English-only” policy prevents the Chinese students from using Chinese frequently since it gives the Chinese students “negative perceptions of the Chinese language and the meaning of being Chinese”(2006, p.376). Such view is supported by Garcia who asserts that the use of the term “heritage language education” instead of “bilingual education” puts Chinese (and other heritage languages) in an inferior position compare to English (2005, p.603). Instead of taking pride in Chinese culture and language as their parents, these adolescent immigrants regard the Chinese identity as inferior. These adolescent immigrants experience huge pressures for “linguistic and cultural conformity” (Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009, p.90). As suggested by Zhang in another research, the unpleasant experiences caused by

the “inability to speak English” during their childhood have long lasting effects which lead these children to feel “inwardly ashamed of their heritage language” (n.d., p20). They hence choose to only speak English in order to fit into the school environment.

The decisions on whether or not to preserve ethnic language are related to the immigrants’ attitudes towards their ethnic identity. Since most elder immigrants, especially the first generation of immigrants, take pride in the Chinese language and culture, they regard themselves as Chinese. Yet for the American-born Chinese children, unlike their parents, they “do not feel the same connection and attachment to China, their parents’ homeland, and are unable to identify with the Chinese language” (Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009, p.90). Also the great pressure for “linguistic and cultural conformity” leads some children to further detach from their Chinese identity, in order to blend into the major society (Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009, p.90). These factors encourage the second generation immigrants to identify themselves as American instead of Chinese, which makes Chinese language irrelevant to them. Hence, the way these adolescent immigrants identify themselves has a huge impact on their attitudes towards Chinese language learning.

To conclude, while the Chinese parents have spent large amount of time and efforts to promote the maintenance of heritage language among adolescent immigrants, the effectiveness of these efforts depends on various factors, including family relationships cohesiveness, co-ethnic networks and the school system. One concern that has been raised among research done by Li and Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe is the cooperation between the familial efforts and the school system. Currently, the public school system is deterring immigrant students from maintaining their heritage language. However, in this globalized society, language diversity in the US can be a great resource in future developments for both the individuals and the nation. In

order to make the Chinese heritage language more relevant, a reform should be introduced in the current mainstream education system to give more credits to the proficiency in second language other than English, so that the young adolescent students have more incentive to continue their heritage language study at the elementary school level. With the help of the school system, heritage language maintenance can be better promoted, which enhances the language diversity in the US.

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