

Chinese as a Heritage Language in the Japanese Context: Perceptions, Attitudes and Challenges

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Abstract

China's emergence as an economic superpower and its growing influence in various arenas have generated a wave of interest in the teaching of Chinese not only as a foreign language (FL) to speakers of other languages, but also as a heritage language (HL) to overseas Chinese and their children (e.g. Zhang and Slaughter-Defoe, 2009; Wong and Xiao, 2010). Drawing on ethnographic data gathered from 20 Chinese immigrant families in Okinawa, Japan, this paper explored the immigrants' perceptions of and attitudes toward Chinese as a heritage language (CHL), and the challenges in maintaining it in the Japanese context. The findings indicated that 1) the use and maintenance of CHL was complicated by the fact that there was no consensus among the immigrants about what constitutes CHL, 2) the immigrants' attitudes were influenced by their self-perceived identities as well as the socio-political milieu, and 3) most of the immigrants were not keen to maintain use of their native language and extend time and effort in their children's CHL learning. The "ethnolinguistic identity theory" provides a useful framework for understanding the language shift and erosion among the Chinese in Japan.

Keywords

Ethnolinguistic identity theory; ethnolinguistic vitality; Chinese in Japan; language maintenance; heritage language

Introduction

In 2009, a total of 680,518 Chinese nationals (China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau all included) were recorded in Japan (Ministry of Justice, 2010). They accounted for 31.1% of the entire foreign resident population and surpassed the Koreans by 4.6% to become the largest minority group of the country. The governmental statistics, however, do not take into account Chinese Japanese, i.e., ethnic Chinese who have become Japanese citizens by naturalization, their Japanese-born descendants, and those who migrated from Taiwan

as Japanese citizens during the colonial period (1895-1945), let alone the illegal workers who overstayed their visas. The author estimates that if all are counted, the number of ethnic Chinese in Japan will probably be over one million.

Previous research on Chinese immigrants in Japan has focused on the changing lifestyles and identity issues of the Chinese communities in places such as Kobe and Yokohama, both of which have a long history of Chinese emigration. Discussions on language issues have been scarce and mostly based on anecdotal evidence. The descendants of old Chinese immigrants are typically depicted as highly assimilated into the local community in terms of lifestyle and language usage (e.g. Guo, 1999; Shou, 2007), whereas the children of new immigrants are portrayed as polyglots with fluid identities and a global perspective (e.g. Dreistadt, 1999; Noiri, 2004).

1 This study

1.1 Purpose

This study aimed to investigate language maintenance and shift among the new Chinese immigrant families in Japan. The following research questions were addressed: 1) How do the new immigrants define CHL? 2) What attitudes do they hold toward the use and maintenance of their HL? 3) What languages are used within the family? 4) What efforts, if any, are made by the immigrants to ensure that their HL is transmitted to their next generation? 5) What challenges do they face in preserving their HL? It was hypothesized that parents' attitudes play an important role in HL maintenance and that negative attitudes would accelerate language shift and lead to HL erosion.

1.2 Participants and method

The participants were five males and 15 females who resided in Okinawa. They were 33-64 years old, with an average age of 49. All of them were born and raised in Mainland China, Taiwan or Hong Kong. Their age of arrival in Japan ranged from 14

to 30 years old and their length of residence from 13 to 45 years. The participants were all married and had children ranging from age 3 to 32. Data were collected from interviews and ethnographic observations. All the interviews were conducted by the author primarily in Chinese (Mandarin or Cantonese), Japanese, or a mixture of both, depending on the participants' preferences and the "flow" of interaction. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted for 15 to 70 minutes each. Participant observations were also made at the interviewees' homes, various functions and social gatherings about how the participants interacted with their children and other Chinese.

Compared with the old Chinese communities in Yokohama, Kobe, Osaka and Nagasaki, the Chinese population in Okinawa may be smaller in size and less concentrated, but the macrostructures—social, cultural, and political—of Okinawa are closer to those that exist in other parts of Japan where there is no Chinatown or Chinese ethnic school.

2 Native language, heritage language and home language

Table 1 indicates that the participants spoke different L1s. Nearly one-third of them were native speakers of Mandarin (*Putonghua* or *Guoyu*), one-third spoke Taiwanese as their L1, while the rest spoke Shanghainese, Fujianese, Cantonese, the Suzhou dialect, and Ami, a minority language spoken by the largest indigenous tribe in Taiwan.

Table 1: First language of parent immigrants

L1	N	%
Mandarin (<i>Putonghua</i> or <i>Guoyu</i>)	6	30
Shanghainese	2	10
Suzhou dialect	1	5
Fujianese	1	5
Taiwanese	6	30
Cantonese	3	15
Ami	1	5
Total	20	100

As shown in Table 2, the participants in this study showed no consensus regarding what constitutes CHL. Although they all acknowledged the fact that Mandarin Chinese is the lingua franca for wider communication with other Chinese speakers, the only ones that did not hesitate to identify Mandarin as their HL were the native speakers of Mandarin. Dialect speakers tended to regard their home dialects as their HL, even though most of them spoke Mandarin as well. Exceptions were speakers of Shanghainese (n=1), the Suzhou dialect (1), Taiwanese (1), and Ami (1), all of whom considered Mandarin to be their HL.

Table 2: Definitions of CHL by speakers with different L1 backgrounds

L1	= or ≠	CHL
Mandarin	=	Mandarin
Shanghainese	{ = ≠	Shanghainese Mandarin
Suzhou dialect	≠	Mandarin
Fujianese	=	Fujianese
Taiwanese	{ = ≠	Taiwanese Mandarin
Cantonese	=	Cantonese
Ami	≠	Mandarin

Table 3 demonstrates that understanding and practice of "native language (L1)," "heritage language (HL)" and "home language (HoL)" varied from one immigrant family to another and that even within the same family, they might not be identical. Mrs. L, for instance, spoke Taiwanese as her L1, considered Mandarin to be her children's HL, but used mostly Japanese at home.

Table 3: Some examples of native language, heritage language and home language

Name	Gender	Age	L1	HL	HoL
K	M	64	Sh	Sh	Jp
G	F	52	Fu	Fu	Jp
H	F	48	Md	Md	Jp+Md
L	F	53	Tw	Md	Jp+Md
T	M	53	Ca	Ca	Jp+Ca
O	F	52	Am	Md	Jp

Note: Sh=Shanghainese; Jp= Japanese; Fu=Fujianese; Md=Mandarin (*Putonghua* or *Guoyu*); Tw=Taiwanese; Ca=Cantonese; Am=Ami.

Table 4 reveals that Japanese was widely used as a home language among all the families, regardless of the parents' L1s and their notions of CHL.

Table 4: Diversity of home languages

L1	HL	P-P	P-C	C-C
Md	Md	Md+Jp	Jp	Jp
Sh	Sh	Jp	Jp	Jp
Sz	Md	Md+Jp	Md+Jp	-
Fu	Fu	Jp	Jp	Jp
Tw	Tw	Tw+Jp	Jp	Jp
	Md	Md+Jp		
Ca	Ca	Ca+Jp	Ca+Jp	
Jp	Jp	Jp	Jp	Jp
Am	Md	Jp	Jp	Jp

Note: P-P=between mother and father; P-C=between parent and child; C-C=between siblings; Sz=Suzhou dialect.

In addition, different languages were used with different members within the same family. Participants with a Chinese spouse tended to use Chinese (i.e., Mandarin, Taiwanese or Cantonese)

and Japanese to communicate with each other, whereas those with a Japanese spouse used Japanese only. In parent-child interactions, Japanese was preferred. When Chinese was used, it was either Mandarin or Cantonese. The children used only Japanese among themselves.

Language choice within the home domains seemed to be governed by the ethnicity of the spouse and the abilities and preferences of the children. Tables 5 and 6 show that the language used between husband and wife was not necessarily the same as that used between parent and child. Nearly half of the parents used only Japanese with their spouses (45%). Of the 20 parents, nine (6F, 3M) were married to Japanese and had adopted their spouses' family names. They coincided with the ones that used only Japanese at home and were the least enthusiastic about transmitting CHL to their children. Surprisingly, none of the parents used only Chinese with their spouses. Those with Chinese spouses tended to communicate with their husband or wife in a mixed code with Chinese (i.e., Mandarin, Cantonese or Taiwanese) being the primary preference and Japanese the secondary.

Table 5: Language choice between parents

Language(s)	N	%
Japanese only	9	45
Mainly Japanese; some Mandarin	1	5
Mainly Mandarin; some Japanese	7	35
Mainly Cantonese; some Japanese	1	5
Mainly Taiwanese; some Japanese	2	10
Total	20	100

Table 6 indicates that Japanese was the major language for communication between parents and children in all the families. Only 40% of the parents used some Chinese (Mandarin or Cantonese) with their children, whereas 60% used Japanese only. Nearly one-third of the parents used mainly Japanese with some Mandarin. Only one parent used mainly Cantonese and some Japanese.

Table 6: Language choice between parents and children

Language(s)	N	%
Japanese only	12	60
Mainly Japanese; some Mandarin	7	35
Mainly Cantonese; some Japanese	1	5
Total	20	100

3 Parents' attitudes toward CHL use and maintenance

The participants showed two contrastive attitudes toward the learning of Chinese: as a problem or burden and as a resource.

3.1 Chinese as a problem

Mr. K, among others, regarded CHL learning as a problem or a burden. Although he was a multilingual speaker himself, he saw no need for his children, aged 17 (M) and 21 (F), to acquire any variety of Chinese for a number of reasons: 1) The children's mother was Japanese. 2) They were born Japanese. 3) They were raised and educated in Japan. 4) They had lived in Japan all their lives and were not likely to live in China in the future. 5) English is more useful and important than Chinese. Mr. K would rather hope that his children spend more time and energy on studying English. He believed English, as a global language, would benefit his children more than any kind of Chinese. To borrow his words, it would be "a waste of time and money for them to study Chinese."

A similar view was held by Mrs. N, who was born and raised in Beijing. Mrs. N first came to Japan as a student at the age of 22. Two years later, she married her Okinawan husband. She was a mother of three boys, aged 3, 7, and 13. Although Mrs. N had Chinese friends and always spoke Mandarin with them, the language was never used at home. When she was asked why she never taught or spoke Mandarin to her children, she had only one reason, "My children are Japanese, not Chinese."

Some parents did not encourage their children to learn Chinese for other reasons. Mrs. A, for instance, recalled studying Japanese very hard when she first came to Japan as a teenager. At home, she and her Chinese husband spoke Mandarin and Japanese with each other but with their two children, they always used Japanese. Mrs. A did not think it was a good idea for her children to learn Chinese for reasons that should not be taken lightly:

"We, especially me, were worried that if we made our children speak Mandarin at home or forced them to learn the language when they were little, they would develop a Chinese accent in their Japanese, and it would do them no good at school or in their future. If they spoke Japanese with a Chinese accent, they would definitely be bullied by other kids at school. I knew that because I had been there myself. I just didn't want my children to go through the same experience as I did--as a victim of bullying and discrimination."

According to Mrs. A, her personal experience and worries were shared by many of her Chinese friends and relatives in Japan. Needless to say, such concerns were caused by historical factors as well as socio-cultural and political climates.

3.2 Chinese as a resource

In contrast, some parents were quite enthusiastic about introducing their children to Chinese

language learning. Almost all of them viewed the language more as a resource for their children's future gains and economic advancement than as an important part of their ethnic and cultural heritage. One of the parents, Mrs. C, told the author,

"The Chinese language is very useful. One must learn the language in order to explore the width and depth of Chinese culture and benefit from it. I personally never thought seriously about heritage language maintenance per se, probably because my husband is Mongolian, not a Han Chinese. But we both speak Mandarin, and it's the common language among the Chinese people."

Another parent, Mrs. Y, regretted that she and her Japanese husband had underestimated the value and benefits of Chinese for their children's future. By the time the couple realized the importance of Chinese for their children's careers and construction of self-identities, it was too late as their children had grown up and lost the motivation to start a new home language. To make amends for the "mistake" they made, Mr. and Mrs. Y decided to send their youngest child to study abroad in Taiwan and to invest in their grandchildren's foreign language education by sending them to an American school at an early age and enrolling them in a Saturday Chinese language program.

4 Linguistic identity

As a fundamental means for the expression of identities, an individual's language represents her roots and sense of belonging, how she perceives herself, and how she wants to be perceived by others. Although an individual's linguistic identity is usually inherited from her parents, it may be reconstructed by the individual later in her life. In fact, many immigrants strive to accommodate themselves to the local community by acquiring the dominant language and taking up a new linguistic identity so that they can survive and succeed. This study found such evidence from two parents who reconstructed their identities by dissociating themselves from their ethnic and linguistic heritage.

4.1 Two cases of reconstructed linguistic identity

Born and raised in Hong Kong, Mr. R spoke the most languages and was the most "cosmopolitan" among all the participants in this study. His father was Shanghainese and his mother was Cantonese. Mr. R arrived in Japan at the age of 20 as a student with little knowledge of Japanese. Mr. R had an Okinawan wife and they had three children and two grandchildren. He was a naturalized Japanese citizen, had a Japanese name, and considered himself to be Japanese rather than Chinese.

Judging from the information provided by Mr. R, there is no doubt that Cantonese was his L1 and he was apparently still quite fluent in it at the time of the interview. Surprisingly, however, it was Japanese and English that Mr. R claimed to be his native languages. He gave the following reasons: 1) Cantonese had no place in his life in Japan as he spoke only Japanese with his Japanese wife and their Japanese-speaking children and grandchildren. 2) He had been using mostly Japanese and English at work over the past 40 years or so. 3) He received English education in Hong Kong and started using English as a child. 4) Cantonese was his mother's native language, not his, because she was the only monolingual Cantonese speaker in his family.

Another example is Mrs. O, an aboriginal from Taiwan who came to Japan at the age of 30 to marry her Okinawan husband. Even though she had been married to her husband for over 20 years and they had three children, Mrs. O remained a national of the Republic of China (ROC) and lived in Japan as a permanent resident. She had both a Japanese name and a Chinese name. She went by her Japanese name in everyday life but was better known among her Chinese friends by her Chinese name. Mrs. O grew up in a multilingual environment speaking a mixture of Ami, Japanese and Mandarin at home, Taiwanese with her neighbors, and Mandarin at school. Since Mrs. O's parents were educated during the Japanese colonial period, they were more fluent in Japanese than in Ami, their ethnic language, and they spoke little Mandarin. Regardless of her Ami ethnicity, Mrs. O perceived herself as more "Taiwanese" than "Ami" in many ways. She held an ROC passport and identified herself as a Chinese national. Mrs. O was an active member of one of the two major Chinese associations in Okinawa and interacted frequently with other Taiwanese wives who were married to Okinawans. She considered Mandarin her children's HL because Mandarin was the language she learned as a child and among all the languages she spoke, she was most fluent in it.

Mr. R's and Mrs. O's stories illustrate that one's self-perceived linguistic identity may change according to one's national and cultural re-identification. Unlike Mr. R, Mrs. O's linguistic identity was not influenced by her Japanese spouse or her socio-economic needs in the host country. Being a minority group member in Taiwan, she understood the importance of identifying with members of the dominant group by speaking their language. Although Mrs. O had lived in Japan for 22 years, she had no intention to become a Japanese citizen. Her reason was that she had dissociated herself once from the Ami tribe to construct a Chinese (Taiwanese) identity and was not ready to

give it up for yet another new identity.

4.2 Ethnolinguistic identity theory

As demonstrated above, an individual's notion of what constitutes his HL is not necessarily pre-determined by his first language or place of origin. Rather, it can be affected by his self-perceived identity and personal experiences. His reconstructed linguistic identity determines his attitude toward HL maintenance, which in turn affects his children's and grandchildren's HL learning. Negative attitudes accelerate language shift from the minority language to the dominant language or even lead to complete loss of the former. This study also suggested that a language shift from Chinese to Japanese was in progress among the new Chinese immigrant families in Okinawa. In this regard, the "ethnolinguistic identity theory" provides a useful framework for understanding the phenomenon.

Developed by Giles and Johnson (1981, 1987), the ethnolinguistic identity theory explains why some speakers emphasize their ethnolinguistic characteristics in intergroup interactions, while others de-emphasize them and converge toward members of out-groups. The theory views language as an emblem of group membership and social identity. It hypothesizes that when ethnic group identity becomes important for individuals, the individuals may try to distinguish themselves from out-group members by accentuating their speech styles or switching to their in-group language. On the contrary, if individuals fear that use of their native language will give rise to a negative social identity and cause them trouble, they may strive to assimilate and identify with speakers of the dominant language. If a large number of members of a minority group assimilate to the dominant language in order to achieve a more positive identity in the settlement society, it may result in subtractive bilingualism or language loss.

One of the determining factors that influences an individual's sense of ethnic belonging is "ethnolinguistic vitality" (Giles et al., 1977), which is dependent on status (e.g., economic, political, and linguistic prestige), demographic strength (e.g., absolute numbers, concentration, birthrates, migration), and institutional support and control factors (e.g., representation of one's own language in mass media, government services, education, politics). Considering the status of the ethnic Chinese in Japan, their population size, demographic distribution, and lack of political strength, linguistic prestige and institutional support, the current ethnolinguistic vitality of Chinese is estimated to be rather low. Under these circumstances, it is understandable that most of the

parents in this study did not express much concern about their children's HL learning. In a sense, the inter-generational language shift from Chinese to Japanese may be seen as the outcome of a conscious attempt to acculturate and establish a more positive social identity in the Japanese society.

5 Challenges for CHL maintenance

Undoubtedly, CHL maintenance in Japan is faced with a number of challenges:

First of all, the Chinese in Japan are a linguistically diverse group. CHL is a complex notion that involves not a single standardized form of the Chinese language but mutually unintelligible varieties, each of which is tied strongly to the individual's ethnic and cultural identification. For many of those who define their heritage in terms of their home dialects, Mandarin Chinese is learned as an FL rather than an HL.

Second, parents do not always play a positive role in their children's CHL learning. They may impede maintenance and contribute to HL erosion. A vast majority of the parents in this study showed no interest in transmitting their HL to their children or increasing its use at home. Their attitudes were deeply influenced by their past experiences and self-perceived identities as well as socio-political variables. The fact that they were not keen to maintain use of their native language within the family and extend time and effort in their children's CHL learning can be viewed as a way to dissociate themselves from members of the in-group and a strategy against the anti-Chinese sentiments that exist in the host country.

Third, in cases where positive attitudes and actions were observed, success in CHL maintenance was rare in the next generation, mainly because the social context was not conducive to CHL learning. In Clément's (1980) model of L2 learning and Lambert's (1974) discussion of bilingualism, social context is a core element in the development and acquisition of L2 competence. Social milieu affects one's motivation and attitudes in HL learning, often more so than in the learning of an FL. This is mainly due to the inherent affiliation of an HL with one's ethnic and cultural origin. Regardless of a positive attitude, CHL maintenance will not be easy in Japan not only because of the linguistic diversity of the Chinese community and the government's lack of interest in promoting multilingualism or preserving the minority languages and cultures, but also because of the unstable relationship between Japan and China.

Genesee, Rogers, and Holobow (1983) argued that perceived motivational support from the other-language community is an important determinant of L2 achievement. While it is true that

there have been no governmental measures against the use and learning of Chinese and practice of Chinese customs in Japan, there has been no governmental support to promote Chinese language learning either. Given these conditions, CHL maintenance in Japan continues to be a personal ordeal whose success depends on continuous efforts and perseverance of individual learners and long-term support from their families.

6 Conclusion

To recapitulate, this paper has shown that contrary to the general belief that one's heritage is ethnically, culturally, and linguistically defined, the Chinese immigrants expressed divergent opinions on the issue. Their understanding of CHL was influenced not only by their linguistic and cultural backgrounds but also by their personal experiences and self-perceived identities. While an immigrant's HL is usually considered to be equivalent to his or her language of origin, the participants in this study extended the notion of HL to include their home dialects, the national (or standard) language of their home country, or the language they were formally taught at school. Researchers and scholars should be careful not to oversimplify CHL as meaning just one language, notably, Mandarin-based standard spoken and written Chinese. Rather, it is an umbrella term that encompasses all dialects and sub-dialects within the Chinese language family, regardless of the size of their speaking populations and whether they have a written form or not.

Furthermore, although all the parent immigrants in this study were fluent in two languages or more, their children were mostly Japanese monolinguals. In a study of the old Chinese community in Kobe, Guo (1999) reported a language shift from Chinese dialects to Japanese. Findings of this study suggest a language shift in a similar direction among the new Chinese immigrant families in Okinawa. The major difference between the two is that while it took the old immigrants in Kobe five generations for language shift to complete its course, it took the new immigrants in Okinawa only two generations. The future of CHL maintenance looks grim in the current socio-political milieu in Japan. Unless the ethnolinguistic vitality of Chinese increases, the shift is probably irrevocable.

Nevertheless, as different immigrants have different life experiences that shape their identities and perceptions of heritage, it is unclear to what extent we can generalize these results. The size of the sample was small and reflected limitations in terms of age, gender, and place of origin. The study, nevertheless, illustrates some facts regarding the language issues of the Chinese immigrants in Japan and provides an insight into the pivotal role parents

play in HL maintenance and erosion.

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