

*Heritage language identity matters:  
Tracing the trajectory of a Chinese heritage mother and  
contested Chinese dual language bilingual education*

Vashti Wai Yu Lee ✉

Michigan State University, East Lansing, USA

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9530-6982>

[leevasht@msu.edu](mailto:leevasht@msu.edu)

Lee Her

Lehigh University, Bethlehem, USA

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9718-2570>

[leh323@lehigh.edu](mailto:leh323@lehigh.edu)

Peter I. De Costa

Michigan State University, East Lansing, USA

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0389-1163>

[pdecosta@msu.edu](mailto:pdecosta@msu.edu)

Abstract

This article presents a narrative inquiry of a Chinese heritage mother to theorize and explicate how historical, relational, and spatial processes impacted her negotiation with power and agency in relation to her own heritage language (HL) identity development. A narrative approach enables us to draw on participant counter-stories against master narratives that erase experiences of marginalization of Asians in Asian language education in the United States. We do this through a model of HL identity development (Zhou & Liu, 2022) supplemented by an AsianCrit lens (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). We show the importance of normalizing Chinese as a HL outside of the home in terms of language maintenance as well as the impact such normalization has on the development of an affirmative Chinese HL identity. We add that spaces for such identity development

are deeply associated with language programs like dual language bilingual education (DLBE), especially as the number of DLBE opportunities grow in number and in popularity. Thus, language programs, including DLBE, have a responsibility to ensure that the language education they provide address the interests and investments of families with respect to their HL in order to decenter a primary focus on the interests of ethnolinguistic majoritized families.

*Keywords:* heritage language; identity; AsianCrit theory; dual language bilingual education; spatiality; temporality; relationality

## 1. Introduction

Heritage language (HL) learning literature on parental involvement in language acquisition has shown that parents play an instrumental role in language acquisition (e.g., Shen & Jiang, 2021, Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009). Specifically, much literature (e.g., Lawton & Logio, 2009; Tseng, 2021) has focused on the impact of parent identities in shaping their children's acquisition experience. Building on this work, this narrative inquiry examines how a second-generation Chinese American mother conceptualized her relationship with her Chinese heritage and literacies through a model on heritage language identity development complemented by an AsianCrit (Iftikar & Museus, 2018) perspective. Attention to the tensions between structural forces and individual agency in this study showed the dynamicity of HL identity negotiations and shed light on the struggles to gain heritage literacy development support, even in a society where there is increasing mainstream interest in Chinese immersion schools. Such work is of great importance to advocacy efforts that aim to counteract inequitable multilingualism where HLs' multilingual learning experiences are often characterized by limited choice and much hostility (Garcia et al., 2021).

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Heritage language identity

Admittedly, there has traditionally been little consensus over the *heritage language learner* (HLL) label – a reflection of the constructed, contested, and often unfixed nature of labels for different social categories (Leeman, 2015). One definition that attempts to leave room for socio-political contextualization of HLLs is that by Hornberger and Wang (2017), who view HLLs as “individuals with familial or ancestral ties to a language other than English who exert their agency

in determining if they are heritage language learners of that language" (p. 6). This is the definition taken up in the present study. Relatedly, an increasingly widely accepted approach to understanding identities is one that relies on poststructuralist frameworks in order to avoid essentializing the understanding of identities (Zhou & Liu, 2022). This approach entails understanding HLL identities in relation to the larger context in which learners are embedded (Hornberger & Wang, 2017). Hence, HLL identities are not fixed and objective categories; rather, they are groupings that result from social construction processes that include different contexts of language use and language education (Leeman, 2015).

While the HLL label indexes language identities different from those of first language (L1) speakers and L2 learners, the range of multilinguals who choose to identify as or may be considered HLLs are diverse and often inconsistent. Thus, the HLL label nevertheless remains a helpful term in that it allows for the discussion of common issues faced by those who grew up as ethnolinguistic minoritized individuals. Simply put, having identity claims authenticated through reference to language and how language is used can have a vital impact on one's sense of "belonging, worth, competence, and achievement" (Hornberger & Wang, 2017, p. 7). That said, we also need to recognize that the pressures for assimilation and cultural distancing – often in the form of stigma and discrimination associated with heritage languages – can lead to language and identity loss (Tseng, 2021). In the United States, discourses surrounding China as a threat continually heighten discrimination and bias against not only Chinese nationals, but against all Asian Americans. Such discourses of endangerment subsequently often fuel an acute sense of nonbelonging in the United States (Lee & Sheng, 2023). Thus, part of the pressures for assimilation and cultural distancing that Chinese HLLs<sup>1</sup> face is further complicated by current geopolitical hostility between the United States and China, regardless of the degree of personal affiliation (if any at all) to China itself.

To date, much of the Chinese HLL literature has shown the importance of fostering close family-school relationships. For example, Zhang and Slaughter-Defoe (2009) found that US schools need to work with immigrant parents and HL schools to incorporate heritage languages into the school curriculum in order to provide structural support for heritage language learning. This is because despite parental efforts to create opportunities for their children's Chinese HL literacy development, children often were highly resistant to these efforts, not seeing its relevance in their lives. In a study set in Australia, Mu and Dooley (2015) examined the transition of Chinese HLLs from initially being resistant to gradually being committed to learning Chinese. Similar to Zhang and Slaughter-

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<sup>1</sup> In keeping with the topic of this special issue on languages other than English (LOTEs), we have chosen to focus on Chinese, and more specifically, HL of Chinese.

Defoe (2009), they attributed the positive difference to a sense of belonging to Chinese families and a general valuing of Chinese in a regular school system. More recently, Shen and Jiang (2021), who examined the relationship between identity and Chinese HL development, found that Chinese HLL identities were closely related to Chinese literacies, and that Chinese literacy development was more likely to occur when a combination of several support systems such as parental involvement, access to adequate Chinese heritage language resources, and opportunities to socialize were made available.

## 2.2. Model of heritage language identity development

While many have conducted research on HLL development, few (including the aforementioned studies on Chinese HLL identities) have sought to theorize a model of HL identity development. Studies that sought to theorize HL identity development typically emphasize poststructural frameworks, and generally acknowledge the importance of: (1) attending to the impact of HLL interactions where power relations are manifested (e.g., Tseng, 2021); (2) the different spaces that interactions occur in, whether it be in classrooms, homes, or elsewhere (e.g., Mu & Dooley, 2015); (3) historical factors (He, 2014); and (4) various combinations of these three aforementioned areas (e.g., Hornberger & Wang, 2017). To address this paucity in research theorizing HL identity development, and in order to more fully articulate the relationship between historical, relational, and spatial variables impacting heritage language learner identity development, Zhou and Liu (2022) put forth a model of HLL development. In this model, they suggest that it is only by attending to these three factors (i.e., power, space and history) simultaneously with ideologies and manifestations of social structure and individual agency that HL identities can be understood more holistically.

Zhou and Liu's (2022) model of HL identity development was originally proposed and applied to the UK context, where race and ethnicity are conceptualized differently from the United States; this conceptual difference is evidenced by the UK government's explicit preference for reporting demographic reports by ethnicity and not race (Gov. UK, 2021) as opposed to the US government's stated distinction between race and ethnicity, but ironic conflation of the two concepts in demographic reports (US Census Bureau, 2023). While we draw from their model to guide our analysis of narratives of a Chinese HL mother who is based in the United States, we felt it was appropriate to supplement Zhou and Liu's (2022) model with an AsianCrit perspective in order to adequately interrogate power dynamics that perpetuate pressures on racialized HLL speakers, as they are coerced into assimilating into an English-dominant culture.

### 2.3. AsianCrit

We draw on particular tenets of Asian critical race theory (AsianCrit), as put forth by Iftikar and Museus (2018), in our study. Iftikar and Museus are advocates of the utility of AsianCrit in understanding equity issues faced by Asians, particularly in US education. Indeed, since AsianCrit was first applied to better understand challenges in education, many advocacy-related research efforts in support of Asian Americans that are grounded in AsianCrit have been published (e.g., Chang, 2022; Qin et al., 2022). In our study, we place a specific focus on the AsianCrit tenets that entail a critique of:

- 1) the normalization of Asianization in American contexts, where Asians are positioned as perpetual foreigners, a part of the model minority, but at the same time, part of a yellow peril;
- 2) the impact of transnational contexts on the Asian American experience, where the geopolitical economy has a direct impact on the treatment of Asians;
- 3) issues associated with the essentialization of Asian American and Chinese American identities, where the great heterogeneity within these groups is erased;
- 4) the intersectional identities of individuals, where we must consider the interconnected nature of people's multiple identities in order to gain a more informed understanding of their experiences.

We apply the above tenets to explore our focal participant's HL identity development over space and time. Our narrative study was guided by these two research questions:

1. What identities does a Chinese HL speaker assume in various spaces, across different time periods, with different people in her life?
2. How do spatial, temporal, and interpersonal processes impact the development of these identities?

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Participant

Our narrative data came from a larger interview-based study with parents from six Chinese families and their experiences with seeking participation in Chinese dual language bilingual education (CDLBE) (Lee, 2022). In this article, we report

findings specifically from the narratives provided by one parent, Mandy (all names in this study are pseudonyms). Mandy was selected as our focal participant because she: (1) was one of the two Chinese parents in the larger study who identified as a second-generation Chinese American who was born and raised in the United States in a multilingual home that included Chinese, and (2) accepted the invitation to return for a second interview.

Mandy is a second-generation US citizen and millennial who identifies as Chinese American. Her parents were born and raised in Taiwan, but eventually settled in the United States. While Mandy and her three US-born siblings grew up in relatively humble circumstances, her family eventually became quite materially comfortable as she neared adolescence when her parents became more established in the United States. Mandy's parents were Taiwanese, Mandarin, and English speakers. Her parents spoke to each other mostly in Mandarin, and at times, in Taiwanese. Mandy's mother spoke to Mandy and her siblings mainly in English, whereas her father felt more comfortable with Chinese, and would thus speak with them primarily in Mandarin. Mandy and her siblings communicated with their parents mainly in English, though they would also occasionally use some Mandarin. Among themselves, the siblings almost always used English to communicate with each other.

Mandy's family moved around several times throughout her childhood, but lived mostly in predominantly white and English dominant, non-linguistically diverse suburban areas without much access to a Chinese community. Thus, most of Mandy's exposure to and use of Chinese was in her home, through her family only. Mandy was quite resistant to using Chinese for most of her formative years. It was not until adulthood that learning Chinese became a larger concern for her. In her early adult years, Mandy married another second generation Chinese American Chinese heritage speaker, and had two children. She now lives in a small town of about 50,000 people and in a school district that is 89% white with 1% Asians. Mandy and her husband decided that establishing a home for their children where Chinese was valued was very important to them, which was why they took steps to ensure that their home centers Chinese in addition to seeking formal Chinese education for their two children. The latter option came in the form of applying for CDLBE for her children through a multi-tiered lottery system, and when they were rejected in their initial application when not selected by the lottery, Mandy and her husband fought hard for a second chance. Her oldest child was eventually accepted into CDLBE by skipping a grade. And at the time of the study, her second child was also accepted into the CDLBE.

In the first author's first semi-structured interview (Spring 2021) with Mandy that centered on her experiences with her daughter's CDLBE participation, Mandy made frequent references to how having access to spaces that were

welcoming of Chinese and Chineseness could have made a difference for her as a Chinese American. It also became clear in the interview that Mandy often reflected on the relationship between life as a Chinese American and her relationship with the Chinese language. The first author therefore invited Mandy back for a follow-up interview with a modified focus. Instead of asking Mandy about her experiences in advocating for her daughter's participation in a local CDLBE, the second semi-structured interview (Spring 2022) centered on her own experiences as a Chinese heritage learner and as a Chinese heritage language speaker mother. At both interviews, Mandy was reassured that she could use whatever languages she was most comfortable with; this option led to the interviews being conducted primarily in English, and on occasion, in Chinese. Each interview lasted about 90 minutes.

### 3.2. Data analysis

We take a narrative approach to analyzing our data. This data analytic approach complemented the theoretical frameworks, namely Zhou and Liu's (2022) model of HL identity development and AsianCrit described earlier, in several ways. First, the story, theory, and praxis tenet of AsianCrit emphasizes the importance of centering Asian American experiences when trying to advocate for positive transformation in social discourse (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). Second, storytelling is an important part of how people make sense of how and where they fit in the world (Barkhuizen, 2016). Thus, a narrative approach enables us to identify the ways in which people situate themselves in social interactions. We place a specific focus on interactions on a personal level, while paying attention to larger social structures of power that impact people's everyday narratives. This is important since when discussing Mandy's heritage language identity development from a historical, spatial, and relational lens, awareness of: (1) macro ideologies on a structural level, and (2) agency on an individual level that either confirm or reject taken-for-granted beliefs about HL identities can provide important nuance to our findings.

To carry out our analysis of narratives, interviews were first transcribed, read, and reread by the authors multiple times. We then conducted values-coding of the transcripts, which involved assigning descriptive labels for the values, attitudes, and beliefs that became salient from the interview transcripts (Saldaña, 2021). Because we were interested in how different spaces, relationships, and temporalities impacted Mandy's identities, values codes were then sorted according to time periods (e.g., childhood, early adulthood, and motherhood), relationships (e.g., student and teacher, mother and child, Chinese Americans and non-Chinese American), and spaces (e.g., CDLBE, home, public spaces), while

recognizing that these codes and categories are not absolute but instead are subjectively interpreted. In keeping with Zhou and Liu's (2022) model, particular attention was paid to the interconnected and overlapping nature of the three focal lenses (i.e., power, space and history) as they were manifested in our data. After multiple rounds of values coding and categorization, we arrived at three sets of identity categories (i.e., being a reluctant user of Chinese, being regretful with loss of Chinese, being committed to reversing loss) based on what values, attitudes, and beliefs reveal about Mandy's identities in different spaces and relationships across time. Finally, we identified story segments within the interviews that we thought most richly illustrated multiple aspects of Mandy's identities as well as the experiences and interactions that led to the development of those identities. It is these story segments and their analysis that we present in the findings section.

Notably, narrative research – from data collection to data analysis and through dissemination – requires extensive engagement, including being a co-constructor of stories told by participants to be retold to a larger audience (Barkhuizen, 2016). To some extent, the first author's positionality (as the field researcher), in particular, did impact the stories that were told by Mandy and the way we eventually analyzed and interpreted our findings. The first author and Mandy are close friends who first met through another mutual Chinese American friend. Because of their interests in Chinese education and the Chinese American experience, the first author and Mandy have often had informal conversations broadly related to this study's research questions over the years. In fact, this was how Mandy first got invited to participate in the larger research project on Chinese families and CDLBE.

The close relationship between the first author and Mandy created a space during the first interview where Mandy felt comfortable sharing deeply personal experiences of racialization, frustration from judgements on her Chinese, as well as hope for a better and brighter future for Chinese Americans. All three authors, who are Asians like Mandy, empathized with her because we all have lived and worked in English-dominant and predominantly white spaces. Like Mandy, the second author is also a heritage language speaker (of Hmong) and has grown up in the United States. The first author, on the other hand, is a Mandarin Chinese speaker who shares many of the insecurities with her Chinese as Mandy does. And the third author is partly of Chinese descent and has always hoped to acquire Chinese as a heritage language. At the same time, however, there are also some key differences between us and Mandy. For one, none of us has children of our own, so we are unable to relate directly to the struggles that Mandy faced in carving out Chinese-friendly spaces for her children. We do, however, have a vested interest in promoting and understanding ways of fostering equity in multilingual education professionally as critical language educators.



Collectively, these factors have put us in a unique position to adopt an AsianCrit perspective to analyzing and interpreting Mandy's stories in relation to Zhou and Liu's (2022) model of HL identity development.

#### 4. Findings and discussion

Below, we present our findings and discussion in the order of the key HL identity stages of Mandy's life. While we acknowledge the nonlinear nature of identities, we present the identity stages from childhood to parenthood to demonstrate trends in how different spaces and relationships have impacted her identity development over time. These identity stages indicate reluctance to use and to be associated with being Chinese as a child, regret for the language and cultural loss that came with pressures to assimilate as an adult, and commitment to reversing this loss as a parent.

##### 4.1. Childhood: Being a reluctant user of Chinese

As someone who frequently traversed the borders between home and the local community, which was also marked by sharp differences in expectations for the kinds of languages used, Mandy became acutely aware of the fluid and hybrid nature of her ethnolinguistic identity very early on in her life. As mentioned previously, Mandy grew up in a multilingual home where boundaries between languages were quite blurred. However, for a long time, Mandy believed that "English was the only way to go when you communicate with people." In fact, she had mentioned several times that when she was young, she "thought it was more important to assimilate to speak English only, to adopt the local customs." When invited to elaborate more on what made her feel this way, Mandy responded:

Excerpt 1: *Unwanted attention*

*Speaking Chinese was reserved for family members and specific groups, and English was for everyone else. I learned this by how others behaved when I did both . . . My best analogy is when a kid is kicking a chair in front of her. If a person is sitting in the chair and wants her to stop, all that person needs to do is turn around and look at the child a few times. Maybe even glare if she doesn't get the message. For me, when people stared at me when I was speaking Chinese to my family in a public setting, I knew I was doing something "wrong." It wasn't the kind of attention I wanted to have for doing what I thought was normal.*

Mandy also grew up speaking to her grandparents in Chinese. During the interview, she recalled "that's my memory of Chinese," adding that she would speak

to some aunts and uncles in Chinese since, “that’s all they know.” Her description of her memory of Chinese and assertion that Chinese was reserved for specific people and places reflects Mandy’s awareness of which spaces and relationships welcomed Chinese and which did not. In publicly shared spaces where Chinese and non-Chinese people were present, Mandy received stares as a child when she used Chinese. Mandy interpreted this to be an indication that speaking Chinese within earshot of non-Chinese people to be inappropriate and was akin to children understanding that they are being censured through disapproving looks by other people. In order to not appear deviant in the eyes of other Americans (or to get “the kind of attention” she did not want), Mandy described learning from this experience that English should be her default, as demonstrated by how she described English as being a language “for everyone” who was not Chinese. The lack of public spaces that Mandy felt were safe for Chinese and the pressure to use English to perform her legitimacy as an American – just like the other white, non-Chinese speaking Americans (rather than what she “thought was normal”) – meant that putting a conscious effort into learning Chinese and developing her Chinese HL identity was not a priority growing up. This consequence aligns well with research (e.g., Seals, 2018) that has illustrated the importance of supportive communities in fostering HL maintenance, and the loss that can occur when such a community is absent.

Mandy also observed that while opportunities to study Chinese formally, such as through CDLBE, are seen by non-heritage speakers as having an “added value” due to “economic benefits,” she “probably wo[uldn’t] have seen that growing up.” Here, Mandy references her awareness of Chinese being positioned as a language of international business and commerce, an aspect to Chinese language learning that draws the interests of many non-heritage Chinese students. Indeed, the studying of Chinese as a world language has been found to be valued very much by those concerned with perceived future economic benefits and national security needs as a result of transnational processes of capitalism and geopolitics (Shen & Jiang, 2021). It is important from the perspectives of Chinese speaking Americans that Chinese is not just a world language spoken outside of the United States. It is a local language with established community and community members within the United States as well, which means the instrumental view of Chinese on the global stage erases its presence within the country and the people who engage in the Chinese speaking community. Upon further reflection, Mandy added that “nowadays, being bilingual is being widely embraced. Being different is okay now. Embracing yourself, who you are, maybe in this generation now, is something you want to grow into.” Mandy’s comment here reveals much about the space and relationships which marked her childhood. By describing her belief of what she called the current generation as being more

open to embracing individual differences, Mandy contrasts this generation with hers, suggesting that monolingualism was the constructed norm, and that a sense of inclusivity of Chinese speakers was neither felt in the spaces outside of her home, nor from her interactions with those outside of her family circle. This led her to avoid opportunities to study and use Chinese, particularly in public, lest she be judged negatively.

In the following short story, Mandy talks about her experience visiting the library with her children, Henry and Liz (pseudonyms), and her husband, Tom (pseudonym). As Mandy tells this story, her reluctance to use Chinese in public spaces that began in childhood that lasted to this day quickly becomes apparent:

*Excerpt 2: Fear of backlash*

*Surprisingly at the library, Tom always talks to the kids in Chinese and during story time he would speak to the kids in Chinese. And the librarian did say, "That's such a beautiful language!" I was surprised, because even if I could speak to Henry in Chinese, I wouldn't, in a public setting . . . I don't want to stand out. Too accommodating. But Tom doesn't care. I thought there would be backlash, but these are you know, old grandmas. "Oh what a beautiful language!" You know, "We're nice people! Small town!"*

Even as an adult who now placed great importance on learning and maintaining Chinese in her family, Mandy remained reluctant to use Chinese in public spaces. Her worries are understandable, given her past experiences with the staring that were directed at her by white and presumably English speaking individuals who hear her speak Chinese. By describing feelings of not wanting to stand out and of worries about potential backlashes by using Chinese in public spaces, Mandy once more confirms her impression as a child that not only was English the default language to be used in public, but also that there would be negative consequences to revealing competence (and a perceived preference) for using a language other than English.

Mandy's hesitation to use Chinese in public spheres exemplifies Seal's (2018) stance that an individual's language choice indexes their awareness of the "different set of social rights and obligations" available to them (p. 331). This belief is so firmly rooted that despite positive feedback on the surface level given by their librarian for her family's Chinese use, Mandy almost satirically adds at the end of her story that the reason the librarian was so positive about her family's Chinese use at the library was only because she was a friendly elder from a small town that is stereotypically nice. This implies that Mandy does not believe that that would be a typical reaction. In fact, Mandy "refuse[s]" to speak Chinese in public because she wants "to be viewed as American;" to her, based on the spaces and interactions that she has grown up around, "being American means speaking English." Hence, by electing to not use Chinese, but only English

in this public space, she is participating in negative identity practices by distancing herself from a Chinese HL identity in public (Seal, 2018).

#### 4.2. Adulthood: Being regretful with loss

A very prominent aspect of Mandy's HLL identity involved juggling identities of hybridity along with the recognition of loss, as a result of not having grown up with Chinese developmental support. This loss further reinforced her hybrid identities, though in a way that was marked with a deep regret of what she felt she was unable to do despite being Chinese. A big part of this sense of loss relates to the "friendships and relationships with native Chinese speakers" with whom Mandy "really want[ed] to connect." Mandy disclosed, "when I see them [Chinese speakers] and talk to them, I think of my own parents and what it must have been for them to go to a new country speaking a new language. And I want to connect because it's so personal." Thus, by aligning herself with newcomers to the United States, Mandy affirms her identity as both a transnational person who not only is an American born and raised in the United States, but also as one who feels a deep affinity to Chinese newcomers in the United States.

At one point during the first interview, the first author asked Mandy why sending her daughter to CDLBE was so important for her. Mandy shared:

Excerpt 3: *Reality checks*

*I'm grateful that my daughter has that chance to learn Chinese, especially reading and writing, which is something I was never able to teach her . . . This is our identity. We're like we're Chinese, Chinese Americans. I mean just looking at us, we should be expected to speak the language. I've had many reality checks when people just look at me and have certain expectations of how I should speak.*

Mandy was keenly aware of the conflicting societal expectations that come with being a person of Chinese descent from the United States. This is most apparent when taking into consideration the unwanted attention for not using English that Mandy spoke of in the first excerpt with her assertion here that "we should be expected to speak the language," referring to Chinese. As illustrated previously, she felt that there was no safe space to use Chinese in public – she must use English fluently to not be singled out. There were expectations to be fluent in Chinese as well, based on notions of what someone from the United States who is socially recognizable as someone of Chinese descent should be able to do. While Tom seemed to be able to resist some of the cultural scripts that Mandy was overcome by ("he doesn't care" about using Chinese in public and being accommodating, he does not conform to "the model minority" stereotype), Mandy

did not seem as comfortable as Tom in her HL identity. This is not to say that she disagreed with his position; if anything, she had explicitly mentioned that she “really apprecia[ed] that about him” and his willingness to “fight and advocate” for their family, thereby showing that his strong HL identity had probably contributed to a growing affirmative HL identity attitude in Mandy.

Contrary to societal expectations that she be able to speak Chinese, Mandy was not able to personally teach her daughter Chinese since she herself did not grow up in spaces where formal Chinese learning support was available, and thus, did not know as much Chinese as she would have liked. Indeed, Mandy’s experience is reflective of findings from Tseng (2021) who argued an individual’s ability to behave in certain ways (and in this case, be invested and motivated to develop Chinese and a Chinese HL identity), is very much related to complex webs of social affordances and constraints. This was likely why Mandy was so grateful that her daughter had access to a public Chinese learning space that she never had, which she hoped would remove some of the social pressures to assimilate with a white and English mainstream that she experienced herself growing up. Connecting this situation to the lack of resources, the social pressures to assimilate and conceal one’s heritage, as Mandy had intimated before, shows that heritage speakers should not consider it a personal moral failure if they lacked confidence in their HL proficiency.

While it may seem at first that Mandy subscribed to the idea that Chinese Americans should be expected to speak Chinese (despite she herself not feeling like she knew enough Chinese to adequately express herself), her next sentence reveals that such a belief likely came from her repeatedly running into situations where others had heaped such an expectation on her. This underscores the complex and often contradictory social pressures that people living in hybrid spaces often face. Mandy saw herself as both Chinese and American. However, Mandy felt that regardless of what she thought, she would still be perceived as a Chinese individual based on her phenotype. Correspondingly, she would also face assumptions about what her language profile should look like (e.g., an expectation that she would be fluent in Chinese), despite this not being reflective of her lived experiences. In fact, as critiques on Asian essentialism point out (Iftikar & Museus, 2018), white supremacy homogenizes Asian looking people, often falsely assuming and reductively equating Asian with Chinese when it may not be the case. In some ways, this assumption reflects another problematic belief in society that Asians are perpetual foreigners, even though like Mandy, they might have been born and raised in the United States. This perpetual foreigner trope is deeply problematic as it delegitimizes Mandy’s American identity and right to call the United States her home, a privilege seemingly enjoyed only by white, English-speaking Americans.

While others may judge Mandy as not being Chinese enough, she was at the same time aware that it *is* possible to be Chinese without being comfortable with the Chinese language, since that is how she identified herself. In the following story, Mandy describes an interaction she had with a friend who is a first-generation immigrant Chinese mother, and how their interaction was a great reminder again of how a language barrier made it more challenging for Mandy to connect with the mother despite Mandy herself feeling like she had more in common with her than a typical white American mother:

Excerpt 4: *Buddha moms vs. tiger moms*

*I met [her] when our daughters did ballet. And now we have the same piano teacher . . . And this is the moment where I think I lost an opportunity to connect with moms that I probably would have learned more from, and they remind me of my own mother, right? There's one mom that I learned, she said, white American moms are like Buddha moms, you know 佛媽媽 · 叫她佛媽媽 [Buddha mom. Call her Buddha mom]. 我說: “為什麼叫佛媽媽? [I said, “Why Buddha mom?”]” “啊 · 因為我媽媽會說 [Oh because moms will say], “Oh honey, it's okay. Good job! You are great!” Because I was asking her like, “所以是老虎媽媽嗎? [So is it tiger mom?]” Because I am thinking tiger mom, Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mom by Amy Chua. I didn't know how to translate that into Chinese, so I said, “Oh 有老虎媽媽 [there are tiger moms], 有虎媽 [tiger mom] · 狼爸 [wolf dad].” Is that what it is? Wolf dad? 狼爸 [wolf dad] . . . And that reminded me of home. That reminded me of my upbringing. You don't need to be praised for every single thing you are doing. And so these are moments where I see when I'm trying to compliment another mom on her daughter's piano performance, for example. “Oh was it okay,” they say, “還好嗎 [was it okay?]” “Yeah! She was amazing!” You know, and just that humility . . . I regret not being able to connect with someone who I have so much more in common with than a white American mom.*

What began as a simple story about complimenting another Chinese mother's daughter's piano recital performance reveals much about the construction of heritage language and Chinese American identities. As Mandy told this story, she inserted a conversation she had with another Chinese mom with whom she was acquainted. In this story-within-a-story, Buddha moms represent white American mothers who are generous with their praises and gentle when offering comfort, while Chinese parents are represented as tiger moms or wolf dads who are more aggressive and offer praises only sparingly. Though this was the first time that Mandy learned of the contrasting parenting style of Buddha moms, she realized that she very much subscribed to it, saying that it reminded her of home and her upbringing. This reflects an important part of Mandy's identities. Mandy understands on a very personal level the difference between Buddha moms and tiger moms because she grew up in a home that leaned closer to what she would consider tiger mom-like and Chinese. This is another

instance where Mandy's hybrid identities surfaced – she was very much a product of Chinese upbringing (because of her family, both immediate and extended, and the occasional Chinese American family that she would meet as her family moved around), as well as white American upbringing due to having grown up in predominantly white spaces with white peers. It is equally interesting to note Mandy's attitude toward Chineseness as she reflected on the experience near the end of her story – when she chose to align herself closer with the Chinese mother than a white American mother – while recognizing that there are challenges to easily connecting to her Chinese culture due to her own lack of Chinese proficiency and confidence.

#### 4.3. Parenthood: Being committed to reversing loss

Recognizing the deep loss that a lack of Chinese proficiency meant for her, Mandy is now committed to reversing this loss for her children. Similar to the participants in Zhou and Liu's (2022) study, Mandy's life history and varied interactions, both positive and negative, have contributed to her fluid HL identity and her future linguistic goals for her children. Prior to having children, Mandy and her husband only communicated with each other in English, despite both of them being Chinese heritage speakers of Mandarin. Mandy said that "it's only because of the kids that we [her and her husband] started speaking Chinese." Indeed, Mandy's shift from rejecting her HL in an effort to fit in better as a child to embracing the American English mainstream and then reverting to Chinese later mirror much of the research on HLL identity trajectories of initial resistance and re-ignition of interest later on in life (e.g., Shin, 2010).

Mandy did her best to speak to her daughter and son only in Chinese for several years. This would have taken a tremendous level of determination and effort on her part because Mandy had described herself as being "very insecure" about her Chinese. Speaking "exclusively" in Chinese was not how she was used to communicating with others up to that point in her life. However, as her children grew older and their Chinese improved, she "accepted" that her daughter was "going to surpass [her] in Chinese." Mandy also commented on how she felt about not having as great Chinese learning support as her child, and revealed, "I'm not going to compete against her. I'm not going to show what I'm not." In saying this, Mandy recognized once again that she lacked the confidence of a legitimate Chinese speaker. At the same time, she also voiced acceptance for being who she was, a Chinese heritage speaker mother who struggled with her Chinese. Mandy described her son as having "pretty good" Chinese as well, as "he had an older sister also speaking to him in Chinese. But after he started

preschool, he realized that no one else speaks Chinese and so he's reverting to English a lot." Mandy added that she could not "keep up with a four-year old's Chinese anyway, so then [they] kind of have a hybrid at home." Here again, Mandy highlighted the power that a structural endorsement of an English-only policy in public spaces (in this case, her son's preschool) has on HLLs. Thus, as her children grew older and began to choose what language in which they responded to her, Mandy found herself speaking "less Chinese and more English" despite trying to create as much space for Chinese use in her home as possible. The "hybrid" nature of their communication at home is another reflection of her many identities of in-betweenness: she is both Chinese and American; she grew up with Chinese as one of her first languages, yet her Chinese use shared more commonality with learners of Chinese as an additional language. Also noteworthy is how she juggled teaching Chinese to her children, even as she was struggling to learn Chinese herself.

Other ways that Mandy actively created Chinese friendly spaces and opportunities for her children was by attending a local Chinese church and enrolling her children in CDLBE. She found that attending a Chinese church alone was not enough to create Chinese-speaking spaces because that church had more Chinese learners than Chinese L1 speakers, leading to Chinese being "difficult to maintain," and an environment of mostly hybrid Chinese and English that Mandy felt was insufficient for her children's Chinese language development.

However, unlike Mandy who grew up without any formal Chinese classes offered at school, let alone CDLBE, her children now live in an area where formal schooling offers Chinese instruction. The CDLBE is the most sought-after language immersion program due to the positioning of Chinese as a language that can lead to business and commerce opportunities with China, in light of China's growing geopolitical and economic presence (Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009). The popularity of explicit Chinese education also reflects a trend of increasing interest in Chinese across the country (Smith & Li, 2022). Opportunities to learn Chinese through DLBE in a public school meant a structural legitimization and celebration of Chinese learning and use. Mandy saw this space as an opportunity to foster affirmative HL identity in her children that was not available to her as a child. In the following excerpt, Mandy explained why heritage language identity maintenance reasons for CDLBE participation was so important for her family:

*Excerpt 5: Not perpetuating Chinese loss for children*

*The original reason why we signed our kids up was that I do not speak Chinese very well and I ran out of vocabulary when the kids were three . . . we realized that in order to foster an environment where our children could speak to grandparents or understand where they came from that they should enroll in the dual language program . . . I've*



*accepted it, but I don't want to perpetuate it for my own children if that makes sense. I don't say that my language is bad – It doesn't hurt my self-esteem. It's just, it's a fact. It's also something I think I don't want to pass down my accent or you know, carelessness in the beginning to my kids. Because in the beginning, I did not care whether I spoke Chinese or not, growing up. And then now at this age, I realized all the benefits I could have had if I had tried.*

Mandy presented herself as someone who did not speak Chinese very well and wished that she could speak better. However, she also appeared to have come to terms with this tension. She had only been able to learn Chinese through osmosis due to a host of reasons already mentioned previously (e.g., a lack of structural support for Chinese, pressure to assimilate and hide her Chineseness, etc.). In an earlier interview, she noted, "it's really hard to keep maintaining exclusive Chinese speaking when it is so much easier to speak in English sometimes . . . I wanted that extra support, and I needed it because I couldn't teach them myself." This was why she desperately needed the extra support from CDLBE to teach her children to avoid the regret that she experienced, and also on a personal level, to help expand the opportunities where Mandy could use Chinese. Mandy also traced changes in her attitude to Chinese as she transitioned to adulthood. In early adulthood and as a mother, she began seeing the power of speaking Chinese. Confidence and greater proficiency in Chinese would enable her and her children to understand their ancestry and heritage better and to help them gain access to larger Chinese communities more easily.

#### 4.4. Structural barriers to language reclamation work

Despite being committed to reversing the loss of her family's heritage language, there were also deep obstacles to this goal as well. Thus far, we have demonstrated some of the personal challenges that Mandy faced in fostering her children's Chinese HLL development. However, she also faced considerable challenges on a structural level. In the following story, Mandy shares (1) her fight along with her husband to ensure that her daughter was able to access CDLBE in the first place, and (2) some of the frustrations she felt regarding the local CDLBE's lack of consideration for the needs of Chinese and Chinese American families. The story will be presented in two segments (Excerpts 6.1 and 6.2) in order for us to provide commentary throughout the story.

Due to its popularity, those interested in CDLBE had to submit applications detailing information regarding in-school or in-district status, prior exposure to Chinese, and other student details, implying that all information provided would fall under the selection committee's consideration in the selection process. In

addition, CDLBE applications were selected through a tiered lottery system that follows a scale (in descending order) that first prioritizes applications from those who already have a sibling in the program, then those who live within school boundaries, followed by those within the school district, and finally those outside the school district. However, because the school boundaries of the local CDLBE program were located in a neighborhood that was too “cost prohibitive” for Mandy’s family, Mandy’s children were not among those who were granted first priority access in the lottery:

Excerpt 6.1: *Fighting for a chance*

*I got my little letter in the mail, saying you didn’t get in. And so I was bummed . . . But Tom was livid. And that’s when he, and I really appreciate that about him. He was going to fight and advocate for our family.*

For Mandy and her family, this rejection had great implications for the Chinese-friendly opportunities and spaces that Liz, their daughter, would be able to access. Since they knew they lived in an extremely white and English dominant small town, Mandy and her family realized that not only did they miss out on an opportunity to enroll Liz into CDLBE, they also knew that most spaces would have gone to white, English dominant families instead. Understandably so, Mandy and her husband, Tom, were frustrated because they felt their interest in CDLBE stemmed not from vague hopes for greater future economic benefits for their children but was driven by their children’s HLidentity development needs instead.

From Mandy’s perspective, non-Chinese families would only have much to gain, but nothing to lose should they not get accepted, unlike their own family, whose HL and identity maintenance was in peril. Determined not to give up such an opportunity, Tom called the district DLBE leadership and organized a meeting with them seeking clarification:

Excerpt 6.2: *Not fair for others if you already have the language?*

*When he [Tom] asked the school district language immersion leadership, they said, “Well if you already have language ability, that’s not fair to your neighbor who doesn’t.” It kind of seems like a disadvantage to have any kind of prior language training . . . So Tom would say, “Well, you advertised it incorrectly on the website. You need to update that.” . . . Tom was able to come out and show we’re not going to be a model minority, “Oh, we’re just going to be accepting of everything.” . . . [T]he district leadership bristled at that. And so there is a bit of politics, I think, involved in just making sure the language fits a certain student profile . . . But just based on what I’ve observed, it seems to advantage those who are white . . .*

The assertion of Mandy and Tom wanting access to CDLBE for their children when they purportedly “already [had] language ability” (and therefore was

deemed to be unfair to their non-Chinese, English speaking neighbors who were also interested in CDLBE) thus reflected conflicting ideologies and a shifting value of multilingualism based on which groups of individuals were considered. Mandy experienced scrutiny for using a language (Chinese) in public that is now being endorsed and institutionalized. The irony was that the institutionalization and endorsement of Chinese in the DLBE program was not for children like her own, but for children of the people whose glares led to her own linguistic assimilation. This case illustrates the discrepancy in societal attitudes (as reflected by school policy and administration leaders) towards protecting the interests of prospective elite multilinguals from dominant populations and the construction of racialized bilinguals as “undeserving of rights and resources” (Garcia et al., 2021, p. 221). What HL repertoire Mandy was able to develop and maintain despite the pressure for linguistic assimilation continues to penalize her and her family, making her feel that it was “like a disadvantage” to already know some Chinese. The approach to Chinese language education privileging elite multilinguals over racialized multilinguals overlooks many larger structural issues that made CDLBE so important for families with Chinese L1 or Chinese as a HL. For one, it ignored the fact that the Chinese living in the United States, from a young age, would be subjected to judgements about how good both their Chinese and their English should be based on their appearances. It also underscored the lack of awareness of the heritage identity needs of Chinese Americans in the face of promoting potential economic benefits of white, functionally monolingual, L1 English speakers.

Although Mandy herself did not feel comfortable confronting those with the power to select participants in the CDLBE, she was grateful that Tom did. As demonstrated by Mandy’s reference to showing the school district leadership that they refused to be a “model minority,” Mandy was aware of larger social structures that positioned Asians as minorities who do not experience inequities and expectations of Asians to comply with established norms, to accept the invisibility of their own rights and needs, including in education (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). It likely felt particularly difficult to push back at district authorities because of the dual expectation of conformity and inaccurate perception of a lack of equity issues in Asians. Nevertheless, even though Mandy did not directly confront district leadership regarding the denial of their child into CDLBE as a form of inequitable treatment, she was supportive of Tom’s willingness to “fight.” Such a supportive stance is evidence of the shift towards greater affirmation of her own HL identity over time.

Conspicuously, as the narrative unfolds, Mandy begins to more directly point to racial issues she saw in the whole process of trying to access a Chinese learning space for her children, echoing Qin et al.’s (2022) observation that Chinese parents are aware of the different evaluation criteria in education for their

children. Hence, race and ethnicity are integral parts of Mandy's identities in this story, and are intimately tied to her Chinese HL identity; these interrelated identities were what motivated her to be so invested in CDLBE and gaining equitable access to CDLBE in the first place.

## 5. Conclusion and implications

In this paper, we have shown through Mandy's narratives the power that different temporal, spatial, and interpersonal processes exert upon her HL identity development. Though Mandy used to feel compelled to hide or avoid embracing her heritage language identity in the white public space, she had grown to be at peace with her heritage language identity. Since having children, she took agentive steps to strengthen a positive sense of heritage language identity in both herself and her children. An important reason for this change over time was her recognition of a loss of connection with those of whom she shared ethnolinguistic and cultural affinity, making interactions in those spaces less comfortable than she would have liked. However, despite her efforts, there were also structural impediments to a positive heritage language identity development. These include judgements on her Chinese with Chinese L1 speakers, as well as spaces and interactions that reveal racial discrimination and a lack of regard for her heritage language needs.

In light of these findings, we underscore the urgent need for institutions that house CDLBE programs and their administrators to make a concerted effort to be mindful of the HL maintenance interests of Chinese families who have to overcome structural inequalities that curtail their ability to acquire their heritage language. To do this, efforts should be made to advocate for culturally competent leadership to ensure that language education spaces are culturally and linguistically affirming in order to prevent experiences like Mandy's from being repeated.

Our study demonstrated how the incorporation of an AsianCrit perspective can enable researchers to interrogate power dynamics at play when studying HL identity development through Zhou and Liu's (2022) model. Our findings corroborate with the body of language immersion research that has shown how HL learners often encounter numerous challenges in their desire to acquire and maintain their home languages (e.g., Tseng, 2021). Furthermore, our study adds to this important research agenda by exploring how language immersion programs can be key affirming spaces where HLLs are able to have positive relationships that encourage rather than stifle their HL identity development.

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