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FINAL Report

Heritage Language Learning and Ethnic Identity Maintenance: A Case Study of the Chinese-Canadian Adolescents

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Executive Summary: Heritage Language Learning and Ethnic Identity Maintenance: A Case Study of the Chinese-Canadian Adolescents.

The multiethnic and multilingual nature of Canada is growing rapidly as a result of increased immigration from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, as well as Central and South America. According to Statistics Canada (2003), more than 200 different ethnic origins were reported in the 2001 Census question on ethnic ancestry. As well, almost 5,334,000 individuals (i.e., about one out of every six people) reported a mother tongue other than English or French. This represented an increase of 12.5% from 1996, three times the growth of 4.0% for the population as a whole (Statistics Canada, 2002).

Indeed language is both a part of culture and a vehicle for the transmission and preservation of culture, providing a focus for cultural identity development. An ethnic group's language, which has often been considered one of the most socially significant ethnic patterns, provides efficient communication among group members, preserves the ethnic culture, and maintains collective ethnic identity and solidarity (Feuerverger, 1989; Fishman, 1977; Giles & Johnson, 1981; Giles et al., 1977; Isajiw, 1981, 1990; Li, 1995; Lieberman, 1970; Reitz, 1985; Sengupta, 1987). Ethnic identity, on the other hand, constitutes a crucial part of self-definition that affects the way in which individuals feel about themselves, process information, and present themselves in the social environment (Sue et al., 1998). As well, it serves basic psychological needs, such as the sense of belongingness and of historical continuity (McGoldrick & Giordano, 1996). Previous studies have demonstrated the connection between the lack of a sense of ethnic group belongingness and the feelings of inferiority, fear, insecurity, and maladjustment among members of minority groups (Gushue, 1993; McGoldrick et al., 1996).

For many immigrant children, attending an heritage language school from an early age is common practice. This is especially the case in large metropolitan areas where heritage language classes have been incorporated into the public school curriculum or offered by community organizations. In fact, Pannu and Young's (1980) study of 76 ethnic language schools in Toronto, Edmonton, and Vancouver pointed to the tremendous potential of these schools for the development and inculcation of ethnic identity, training of future ethnic leaders, reproduction of ethnic elites at both the community and national levels, and drawing together of community members by galvanizing them through various symbolic activities. Moreover, minority students' literacy in their ethnic language can contribute to their academic achievement, supporting the view that advanced bilingualism promotes academic excellence, has been well documented (Bankston & Zhou, 1995; Cummins, 1981; Cummins et al., 1984; Duran, 1983; Lindholm & Aclan, 1991).

A plethora of recent studies are available on heritage language retention and ethnic identity maintenance of various minority groups in Canada (Bosdki, 1991; Clarke, 1996; Dhruvarajan, 1993; Feuerverger, 1991, 1986; Karumanchery, 1996; Lalonde et al., 1992; Mitsopulos, 1989; Noro, 1987; Nakahara, 1991; Okuno, 1993; Sengupta, 1987; Tan, 1992). Comparatively speaking, research on heritage language learning and ethnic identity retention among the Chinese has been surprisingly sparse in view of its complexity and importance. In fact, previous studies on Chinese language retention employed an ethnographic approach with small sample size and focused on young children (Chan, 1989) or investigated the effects of a single variable (e.g., parental influence) on heritage language retention by Chinese children (Cheung, 1981).

Using a multivariate approach, the present study examines heritage language learning and ethnic identity maintenance among Chinese-Canadian adolescents in Calgary. This study addresses the following broad research questions:

- a. What are the major factors that motivate Chinese-Canadian adolescents to enroll in heritage language classes?
- b. What are the Chinese-Canadian adolescents' learning experiences in heritage language schools?
- c. What are Chinese-Canadian adolescents' attitudes toward ethnic identity, language, and culture?
- d. What are the relationships between ethnic language retention and ethnic identity maintenance among the Chinese-Canadian adolescents?

METHODOLOGY

- A questionnaire survey was conducted in three Calgary Chinese language schools during the academic years 1999-2000 and 2000-2001. A total of 515 Chinese-Canadian adolescents participated in the survey by completing a self-administered questionnaire.
- The sample comprised 255 male (50%) and 255 female (50%) students with a mean age of 14.24 years ($SD = 1.92$). Almost two-thirds ($N = 323, 63.7\%$) were born in Canada and about one-third ($N = 164, 32.3\%$) were born in Hong Kong. The average length of residence in Canada was 11.96 years ($SD = 4.06$). An overwhelming majority of the students were Canadian citizens ($N = 470, 93.8\%$).

MAJOR FINDINGS

The Importance of Learning the Chinese Language

- Although a substantial majority of the sample considered the learning of the Chinese language to be important ($N = 262, 51.8\%$) or very important ($N = 147, 29.1\%$), a significant proportion of the respondents ($N = 352; 69.6\%$) were of the opinion that "the Chinese language should be taught only to those who wish to study it."

The Major Reasons for Attending Chinese Language School

▪ The five reasons (assessed on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = very unimportant to 5 = very important) considered to be the most important for attending Chinese language schools included:

- ① To be able to communicate with my parents in Chinese
(M = 4.05, SD = 1.09);
- ② Because it is important to my parents
(M = 3.91, SD = 1.14);
- ③ Because I am interested in traveling to my ethnic homeland
(M = 3.86, SD = 1.22);
- ④ To be able to speak with other Chinese in their mother tongue
(M = 3.84, SD = 1.06); and
- ⑤ To be able to watch Chinese TV programs/videos and to listen to Chinese radio broadcasts (M = 3.84, SD = 1.16).

Heritage Language School Experience

Three aspects that students expressed the highest degree of satisfaction (measured by respondents' degree of agreement with seven statements on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = strong disagree to 5 = strongly agree) included:

- ① Opportunity to make friends with other Chinese students
(M = 3.92, SD = 1.01);
- ② Being able to learn more about the Chinese culture
(M = 3.33, SD = 1.10); and
- ③ Teaching materials
(M = 3.18, SD = 1.15).

Ethnic Self-identification and Ethnic Identity Maintenance

▪ With respect to ethnic self-identification, a sizable proportion of the respondents ($N = 343$, 67.8%) were self-identified as "Chinese-Canadian." Slightly more than one-fifth ($N = 103$, 20.4%) preferred the "Chinese" label. Relatively few ($N = 55$, 10.9%) considered themselves as "Canadian."

▪ As regards ethnic identity maintenance, respondents expressed their degree of agreement with fifteen statements on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The five items receiving the highest mean values included:

- ① I am happy that I am a member of the group to which I belong
($M = 4.17$, $SD = 0.86$);
- ② I feel good about my cultural background
($M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.87$);
- ③ I participate in cultural practices of my own group
($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.99$);
- ④ I have a lot of pride in my ethnic group and its accomplishment
($M = 3.99$, $SD = 0.92$); and
- ⑤ I like meeting and getting to know people from other ethnic groups
($M = 3.99$, $SD = 0.97$).

▪ On the contrary, the five items producing the lowest mean values included:

- ① I would encourage my non-Chinese friends to learn about the Chinese language and culture ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 1.14$);
- ② I often receive praise or approval from my parents for speaking Chinese
($M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.18$);
- ③ I have spent time trying to learn more about Chinese culture, traditions, and customs
($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.06$);

④ I am involved in activities with people from other cultural groups

($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.01$); and

⑤ I have a good sense of my Chinese background and what it means to me

($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.92$).

The Determinants of Heritage Language School Experience

Using ordinary least-squares (OLS) regression analysis, two demographic variables, age ($\beta = -.083$, $p < .05$) and age at immigration ($\beta = -.122$, $p < .01$), were found to be negatively and significantly related to heritage language school experience. More specifically, younger students and those who emigrated to Canada at a younger age exhibited a lower degree of satisfaction. On the other hand, exposure to Chinese media ($\beta = .222$, $p < .001$), attitudes toward multicultural policy ($\beta = .140$, $p < .01$), ethnic pride ($\beta = .126$, $p < .01$), practice of cultural customs ($\beta = .107$, $p < .05$), and self-assessed Chinese-language proficiency ($\beta = .094$, $p < .05$) were found to be significantly and positively related to school experience. Put succinctly, those who reported a higher frequency of exposure to Chinese media, self-rated proficiency in the Chinese-language being higher, held a more positive attitude toward multicultural policy, involved in the practice of Chinese customs, and felt proud of being ethnic Chinese and of the Chinese community's accomplishments expressed a higher degree of satisfaction.

The Determinants of Academic Performance in Heritage Language School

OLS regression analysis revealed that age ($\beta = -.085$, $p < .05$), sex ($\beta = -.085$, $p < .05$), religion ($\beta = .086$, $p < .05$), self-assessed socio-economic status ($\beta = .096$, $p < .05$), exposure to ethnic media ($\beta = .104$, $p < .05$), attitudes toward multiculturalism ($\beta = .148$, $p < .001$), attitudes toward Chinese school ($\beta = .155$, $p < .001$), parental encouragement ($\beta = .104$, $p < .05$), and importance of Chinese to parents ($\beta = -.083$, $p < .05$) were found to be significantly related to respondents' academic performance in heritage language

school. In particular, respondents who were younger, female, Christian, indicated a higher socio-economic status, reported higher frequency of exposure to Chinese media, held more positive attitudes toward multiculturalism, expressed more positive educational experience in heritage language school, and received encouragement from parents performed better. It is peculiar that respondents who felt the learning of Chinese was more important to their parents achieved lower grades.

The Determinants of Academic Performance in Regular School

OLS regression analysis demonstrated that sex ($\beta = -.161, p < .001$), age ($\beta = -.149, p < .001$), country of birth ($\beta = .094, p < .05$), religious affiliation ($\beta = .09, p < .05$), Chinese language proficiency ($\beta = .106, p < .05$), ethnic self-identification ($\beta = .09, p < .05$), and ethnic capital ($\beta = .157, p < .001$) were found to be significantly related to academic performance. More specifically, students who were female, younger, Christian, born in Canada or the U.S., identified themselves as Chinese, demonstrated a higher level of Chinese language proficiency, and possessed more ethnic capital performed better academically in school.

The Determinants of Ethnic Identity

OLS regression analysis showed that age ($\beta = .119, p < .01$), Chinese language proficiency ($\beta = .328, p < .001$), intention to pursue further studies in ethnic homeland ($\beta = .172, p < .001$), intention to reside in ethnic homeland ($\beta = .112, p < .05$), and medium of communication with parents ($\beta = -.160, p < .001$) were found to be significantly related to respondents' ethnic identity maintenance. That is to say, respondents whose proficiency in the Chinese language was higher, reported a stronger desire to pursue further studies or to reside in ethnic homeland, and used Chinese as the primary medium of communication with parents exhibited a stronger ethnic identity.

The Determinants of Ethnic Self-identification

OLS regression analysis suggested that attitudes toward multiculturalism ($\beta = .095$, $p < .05$), frequency of visiting homeland ($\beta = .097$, $p < .05$), practice of cultural customs ($\beta = .248$, $p < .001$), ethnic language proficiency ($\beta = .079$, $p < .05$), intention to reside in ethnic homeland ($\beta = .107$, $p < .05$), and medium of communication with parents ($\beta = -.084$, $p < .05$) were found to be significantly related to respondents' ethnic self-identification. Alternatively stated, respondents who held more positive attitudes toward multiculturalism, visited ethnic homeland more frequently, practised cultural customs, demonstrated higher ethnic language proficiency, intended to reside in ethnic homeland in the future, and used Chinese as the primary medium of communication with parents expressed a stronger degree of Chineseness.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the present study has made a contribution to the research literature on heritage language learning, ethnic identity maintenance, and academic performance among ethnic minorities.

With respect to heritage language learning, this study revealed that an overwhelming majority of the students ($N = 409$, 80.9%) considered the learning of the Chinese language to be important. However, it was pointed out by slightly more than two-thirds of the sample ($N = 352$, 69.6%) that heritage language should be taught only to those who wish to study it. Students' wish to be able to communicate with their parents in Chinese ($N = 413$, 80.5%) and the importance of the Chinese language to their parents ($N = 360$, 70.2%) were students' primary reasons for taking Chinese language classes. Regarding students' learning experience in heritage language school, the aspect with which students were most satisfied was the opportunity to make friends with other

Chinese students. On the contrary, relatively few respondents (N = 85, 16.6%) found doing homework enjoyable. It is imperative to note that Xiao's (1998) observation of the Chinese language schools in Winnipeg indicated that students were generally unable to achieve functional proficiency in Chinese and Chow's (1983) study of the Chinese students in Toronto concluded that Chinese language schools were not very successful in transmitting writing and reading Chinese language skills. Perhaps the finding from the present study that students' apparent lack of interest in homework, coupled with factors such as limited hours of teaching per week and the insufficient reinforcement for using languages outside the schools that have been noted in the two aforementioned studies, may contribute to the problem of language schools not being able to develop adequate reading and writing facilities in their students. On a more positive note, the language schools appeared to have successfully injected a healthy amount of cultural awareness into the students and provided opportunities for students to establish a strong Chinese friendship network. Future studies should evaluate the effectiveness of ethnic language programs and the pedagogical approaches, as well as identify ways to enhance the students' learning experience.

Concerning ethnic identity maintenance, this study demonstrated that a majority of the students preferred to describe themselves as "Chinese-Canadian" (N = 434, 67.8%) or "Chinese" (N = 103, 20.4%). Although a substantial majority of the respondents (N = 418, 81.2%) felt good about their Chinese background, about two-thirds (N = 336, 65.3%) indicated their strong identification with the Canadian culture. It should be reiterated that the study of the multifaceted nature of ethnic identity in adolescence is vital as this is a time when youth are undergoing the transition to adulthood and are increasingly involved in non-educational institutions. Future studies, using qualitative approaches, need to explore the process of formation of Chinese-Canadian adolescents' ethnic identity. In-depth interviews would allow them to communicate their experiences and to share how they have been seeking their ethnic identity while living in a multiethnic country.

In view of the paucity of research on the school performance of minorities in Canada, this study has shed light on the determinants of school performance among Chinese-Canadian adolescents in both ethnic language and regular schools. The findings underscore the importance of ethnic capital and individual characteristics for academic achievement. It is notable that ethnic capital emerges as the strongest predictor. How respondents' ethnic self-identification and possession of ethnic capital have been shaped by the complex nature of ethnic socialization is an issue that deserves additional research attention. As well, the extent to which religious affiliation affects educational outcome also demands further inquiry. In light of the growing ethnic diversity in the Canadian school system, it would be worthwhile to conduct comparative studies to explore the experiences of other minority students.

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PUBLICATIONS

(a) Refereed Journal Articles

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(b) Research Report

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(c) Articles in Periodicals

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(c) Conference Presentations and Lectures

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