

# THE LOSS OF CHINESE LANGUAGE IN CHINESE DIASPORAS IN THE U.S.

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Before coming to the U.S., I had never met someone who looks Chinese but speaks in a completely American way. It was during an audition for a Chinese drill instructor that I suddenly met many students who look like someone I can relate to, yet who appeared so distant once they opened their mouths. They talked to each other in English with “American” gestures. On their note cards were the sentences they prepared for the audition—with basic words, simple grammar, and most of them written not in Chinese characters but in Pinyin (a phonetic system for transcribing the Mandarin pronunciations of Chinese characters into the Latin alphabet). Carefully, they tried to keep their note cards from the sight of others, as if those were something they should feel guilty about.

During that audition, one candidate was supposed to go on the stage and teach us some sentences using other candidates as his/her students. The first girl got on the stage, and slowly she taught us her sentence “Wo Zui Xi Huan De Yan Se Shi Lan Se (My favorite color is blue).” She spoke clearly, yet with a kind of American accent that an “authentic” Chinese person would instantly discern. She then asked some students to repeat that sentence after her, but she became evidently nervous when several of her

“students” could speak that sentence in an accent-free and more fluent way.

After the audition, with great relief, these “ABC (American-born Chinese)” quickly went back to talking to each other in English.

“—So where are you from?”

“—I’m from New York.”

“—No way! I’m from New York, too!”

This time, it was my turn to be surrounded by my foreign tongue: English; it was my turn to feel uncomfortable and guilty for not speaking “their language.” It amazed me how easily barriers can be created among people with such similar appearances, because of the difference of languages.

After that audition, I was constantly intrigued by how language, something our everyday life is saturated with, is intertwined with one’s feelings of belonging, culture, individual identity and others’ perceptions. I have always been curious: for those adolescents who were born in the U.S. but whose parents or grandparents are from China, how did English become their dominant language, the language that they feel most comfortable with? What does “not speaking Chinese” or “barely speaking Chinese” mean to them, as a member of a Chinese diaspora family, as an Asian-looking American citizen, as a teenager at school, and as an individual in the society? What does the loss of Chinese-language ability do to their interactions with their elder generations and with their peers? How do they feel about Chinese history and Chinese culture without being able

to understand the Chinese language? Does their self-perception go against other people's expectation and stereotypes, and, if so, what does that mean to them? To explore these questions, in this essay, I will first discuss the reasons for the loss of Chinese language among Chinese-Americans. I will then look into the effects of this language loss and how this loss challenges pre-existing impressions of the connections among language, race, culture, history, and identity.

### **Reasons Behind “Not Speaking Chinese”**

For Chinese-Americans, more often than not, the loss of Chinese language is something they feel they should be guilty about and apologize for. In her book *On Not Speaking Chinese*, Ien Ang, a Chinese-American author, feels the obligation to apologize at the beginning of the book for the fact that she, as a person of stereotypically Chinese physical characteristics, cannot write this book in Chinese. As seen at the Chinese drill instructor audition, those students also felt ashamed for having to write Chinese in Pinyin and speak Chinese with an American accent. The shame of not mastering Chinese, as they feel they are supposed to in the view of others, is constantly stimulated, since the use of languages is ubiquitous in our life. Whenever Chinese-Americans meet someone either “authentic” Chinese or American, they usually end up feeling accused of, or judged, by other people's puzzled and mystified expressions.

However, despite the shame these Chinese-Americans feel, it is

barely the case that the blame should be put on them, since one's childhood environment never is the matter of one's free choice. In addition, the inability to speak Chinese is due to their parent's way of education, their way of constructing the world their children grow up in. For immigrant parents, they often feel pressured to choose English over Chinese, because they think that English is the right language to learn. It begs the question: is the pressure of erasing Chinese-ness and assimilating in America so strong that parents are willing to cut out their language ties with their homeland and create communication barriers within their family?

### **Language Barrier in American Society**

The pressing need felt by immigrant parents to educate the next generation in English often comes from their own experience of linguistic segregation or even linguistic repression. Even long after one's citizenship status becomes recognized by the host country, language continues to work as a way of exclusion and expulsion. This situation is perfectly summarized by Gerard Delanty, Paul Jones, and Ruth Wodak in the introduction for their book *Identity, Belonging, and Migration*. Their book describes language separation in Europe as follows: "Language competence is perceived as one of the most relevant gate-keeping devices, with many migrants reporting hostilities when they speak their 'own' language, or that when doing so they are viewed as not competent enough in the language of the majority" (3). Bell Hooks also argues in her book *Teaching to Transgress* that standard

English is used as a weapon to silence, censor, and marginalize non-white minorities (172). For a long time, the emphasis on English ability has been way to keep non-white, non-Western elements from entering, and therefore contaminating the white and Western culture. The situation continues in current American society, where English proficiency is a written and primary requirement for students applying to colleges. For the work place, though English proficiency is not always written implicitly in recruitment requirements, as to escape criticism of discrimination, it still remains one of the underlying factors to filter through job candidates.

The discrimination that Chinese immigrants previously experienced make them consider it a necessity, or even a survival strategy to educate their children to speak English as their first language. Linguistic assimilation into their host country is believed to hold “the promise of access into a secure world of comfort, affluence and, most importantly, the possibility of upward mobility” (Ang 9). Otherwise, parents fear that their children will be doomed to a life of failure due to their language deficiency.

### **Emphasis on Education**

Before we associate English proficiency with “success” we have to discuss what “success” often alludes to in the Chinese cultural system. Throughout Chinese history, Dushu (studying) has been considered a way to change one’s destiny from poor to rich, from lower-class to upper-class, from average citizens to eminent bureaucrats. The Imperial Examination,

a civil service examination system in Imperial China established during the Sui Dynasty of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, had been the only open door for average citizens to be selected as administrative officials for the state's bureaucracy. This system lasted for over a millennium, and its far-reaching influence lingers even today, with the old feudal system shifting into the college entering exams in modern China. The unparalleled importance of education is deeply rooted in Chinese people's minds, even for Chinese people in U.S. diasporas today.

Receiving high-quality education appears to be more important for Chinese immigrants in the U.S. than for Chinese living in China because traditionally the former have lacked network and other resources outside their community to contribute to their upward mobility. Originally, Chinese immigrants came to America as laborers and formed "bachelor societies," with barely any chance to move beyond their social status. Later, the arrival of their households gave rise to the need to move outside of their enclosed community to make a better living and blend into American society as a whole family. Education paved the way for their children to move beyond a lifetime of being laborers or running small businesses.

In modern time, more and more Chinese intellectual immigrants and relatively well-off businessmen are coming to the U.S. to pursue higher education, to work in academia, or to expand their global businesses. Therefore, it is natural for these people to anticipate that their children will

receive a high-quality education and continue with their success. Building up the base for their next generation, learning to speak English as a first language is believed to be the first step towards a better performance at school and higher education, thus achieving better career development and more upward mobility in their future.

Nevertheless, success in school not only refers to the acquisition of knowledge, but is also dependent on making connection and bonding with peers. While the mastery of English can contribute to the former, it cannot guarantee the latter. Here Delanty, Jones, and Wodak's description of European society also applies to American society: "Even when immigrants have a command of the language and hold the citizenship of the host-country, they obviously feel that they are still not accepted or viewed as equal" (3). So why are they still viewed as being unequal? Not equal to whom? To Americans? To "real" Chinese? Or both? What does "not speaking Chinese" do to the power dynamic between Chinese-Americans, "real" Chinese, and non-Chinese?

### **Impacts of "Not Speaking Chinese"**

The chance for upward opportunities in American society does not come without a price, and in fact, it has damaging effects on a variety of aspects. In this section, I will analyze the impacts of "not speaking Chinese" through the three separate parts in the term "Chinese-American": "Chinese," the hyphen in between the words, and "American." I will first

analyze Chinese-American's communication with older generations within their diaspora communities, and their perception of Chinese history and culture. Then I will move to the hyphen—the feelings of “neither-nor”: how the historical connection between Chinese language, race, and nationality is viewed in the eyes of non-Chinese. Finally, I will proceed to Chinese-American's experiences in the host country of the U.S.

### **Cross-generational Communication**

Among all impacts, perhaps the most salient detrimental consequence of losing Chinese language is the barrier of communication across generations within diasporic families. Chinese-American teenagers, who are brought up in an English-speaking environment and who receive formal English education, develop a completely American way of speaking, while their parents or grandparents, only adopt some basic English in their adulthood and use it rarely or not intuitively.

One Chinese-American I know explained the pattern of communication in his house: his parents talk to him in both Chinese and English, and he responds to them in English; his grandparents talk to him in Chinese but he can only answer them in basic Chinese. Because of this, during holidays and family gatherings he was always silenced while other relatives communicated with each other in Chinese, increasing the feeling of being segregated from his family. Cases like this, where communication between the older generations and their American-born children is cut off or hindered,

are very common in Chinese diasporas.

## **Language as Historical and Cultural Connection**

History is not an objective truth, but a narration of sorts served for the benefits of those in power. For Chinese-Americans on the one hand, history is taught from a Western perspective so that a large part of Chinese history is absent. Moreover, parents who educate their children only in English and encourage them to blend into American society, lack the interest of transmitting their Chinese roots or cultural traditions to their children. On the other hand, Chinese-Americans also lose the ability to learn Chinese history in the language it is narrated, which leads to nuances in understanding due to inherent linguistic differences. Therefore, the sense of connection to Chinese roots is severely weakened with the loss of the Chinese language.

Language is not only a linguistic tool but also a cultural term. Language is not only a simple set of vocabularies and grammars, but also contains contexts, connotations, and implicit meanings that can only be understood through long-term interaction with other people from the same culture. Chinese culture, believed by Edward T. Hall to be a “high context culture” (qtd. in Sorrells 204), codes meanings within the explicit, transmitted part of the message, and many can only be transmitted through shared knowledge and nonverbal cues. For American-born teenagers who only learn and use basic Chinese with their families and a few friends, their cultural-lin-

guistic continuum is therefore cut from the ongoing interaction with other Chinese speakers. Even if they try to learn Chinese culture, considering the difficulty in translating Chinese to English while keeping the original flavor and authentic meaning, it seems impossible for these Chinese-Americans to have the same understanding of Chinese culture without “real” Chinese. This naturally formed language deficiency is often seen by others as a disloyalty, even though this “disloyalty” is to a culture they have never had any real interaction with.

### **Language as a Marker of Race and Nationality**

Language, race, and nationality have always been intertwined together throughout history. In his essay “What is a Nation?” French philosopher and historian Ernest Renan carefully evaluates five elements as the criteria of a nation, among which language is considered and discussed. Renan thoroughly rejects the conception of associating language with race, and argues, “languages are historical formations, which tell us very little about the blood of those who speak them” (17). He also makes a claim that “man is a slave neither of his race nor his language” (20).

However, more than 130 years after Renan’s essay, the difficulty of divorcing language from race and nationality still persists. For example, in *Making Nations: Sovereignty and Equality*, Jewish historian Shlomo Sand investigates the lexicon “ethnos” by saying that it implies a “blending of cultural background and blood ties, of a linguistic past and a biological

origin” (28). In *How to Tame a Wild Tongue*, Gloria Anzaldúa also says that “ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language” (59). In many cases, language is still regarded as a sign or accompanying element of race and nationality.

However, one needs to consider what it means to be racially and nationally Chinese before judging “not speaking Chinese” as disloyalty to one’s race and nation. If “race” and “nationality” are not real things to begin with, does that link still exist? Unfortunately, the revolutionary idea in academia that “race” and “nation” are social constructs rather than a scientific category has not weakened the link between language, race, and nationality in real life. The tendency to link these three elements seem to stem from human nature: the nature of using fixed definitions and clear-cut criteria to perceive the outside world, dodging from accepting complexity and embracing diversity. The link between language and race is so strong that speaking Chinese has become the only perceived natural state for them. This has made it extremely difficult for Chinese-Americans to face their inability to speak Chinese bravely and positively, and more importantly, to anchor their identity.

## **Language and Identity**

Language is a powerful means for one to maintain and negotiate identity. Since mid-1950s, there have been experiments on how language influences thought patterns and perception, as well as scientific proof that

people speaking the same language share one set of cultural assumptions and a way of thinking (Inch, Warnick, and Endres 297). Throughout human history, language has always justified itself as a means of “making identity,” and thus has been utilized historically for conquest and assimilation both during wars and during the time of Americanization. Particularly, English built its dominant status of world language not only from the times of colonization and wars, but also from the spread of cultural products that gradually assimilated other cultural identities in the modern times.

For Chinese-American adolescents experiencing the period of identity formation, their “Chinese-ness” and “American-ness” occupies different proportions in their identity. Some completely identify with being Americans and “the only time that [they] feel Chinese is when [they are] embarrassed [they are] not more Chinese” (Lowe 136); some take great pride in their Chinese heritage as it adds to their uniqueness; some find their “Chinese-ness” and “American-ness” coexist and weld into a hybrid identity; and some find it impossible to retain a balance between the two components. What we find here are different levels of identification with “Chinese-ness” and different kinds of acknowledgment towards “Chinese-ness.”

However, these differences are often neglected in other people’s overly simplified and generalized perception about Chinese identity. When we interact with people, we tend to use our previous personal experience

to give us some basic knowledge about a person based on the groups they seem to represent. Because of this conventional and stereotypical way of thinking, these Chinese-Americans constantly live with the feeling of “being caught in between”: being perceived as Asians because of their “non-whiteness”, but feeling unqualified as Asians because of their departure from the language they are supposed to master.

What we often fail to acknowledge is that identity is layered rather than holistic; it is forever changing rather than static. In “The Nature of Cultural Identity,” Lustig and Koester see an individual’s self-concept as “built on cultural, social, and personal identities” (3). Kathryn Sorrells also argues in her book *Intercultural Communication* that a person’s identity is a combination of something people themselves avow (“avowed identity”) and something they are ascribed to (“ascribed identity”) often with these two parts contradicting each other (78). These ideas challenge the “all-or-none” and “either-or” manner of seeing identity and explain much confusion and disorientations felt by people in Diasporas.

### **Language Use as the Criterion of Authenticity**

When Chinese-Americans interact with others, language appears to be an important element for testing the authenticity of a Chinese person. Accused of being “a fake Chinese,” Ang discusses the essentialist and absolute notions of Chineseness adhering to language ability by saying that “‘not speaking Chinese’ has become a personal political issue to me, an

existential condition which goes beyond the particularities of an arbitrary personal history. It is a condition that has been hegemonically constructed as a lack, a sign of loss of authenticity” (30). She also cites Ruth Ho’s claim that, compared with immigrants from countries that share the same European heritage with the US, Chinese-Americans are always far more despised for not knowing Chinese, not only by their fellow Chinese but also by non-Chinese (Ang 33).

The relationship between language and authenticity becomes salient in peer-to-peer communication of Chinese-American adolescents. For these teenagers, different levels of English proficiency of their parents, different levels of emphasis on Chinese in their environment, different frequency of visiting China, etc., all contribute to their different levels of Chinese proficiency. Thus, when they are interacting with each other, the “horizontal” influence argued by Lisa Lowe in her essay “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian-American Differences” comes across. Lowe cites the interesting interaction between two Chinese-Americans in Diana Chang’s novel *The Oriental Contingent*, where the two Chinese-American girls, being hypersensitive about nuances in their Chinese proficiency, are constantly afraid of being a “failed Chinese” when interacting. Using this novel, Lowe challenges “a cultural definition of “Chineseness” as pure and fixed, in which any deviation is constructed as less, lower, and shameful” (136).

However, a shift of mind never comes easy. The obsession with authenticity has always been a tendency in human nature. However, why does language have to be a testimony for authenticity? Who has the right to say what is authentic and what is not? Furthermore, even if language is something people should adhere to in order to be “authentic” similar to the questions R. Radhakrishnan raised in his essay “Ethnicity in an Age of Diaspora,” why can’t somebody be “Chinese” without having to be “authentically Chinese”? What is the difference and how does it matter? Moreover, why does “unauthentic” come with such a negative connotation? Must there be a hierarchy of “authentic” and “unauthentic” in people’s minds? If we totally overthrow “authenticity,” can we still celebrate the core values of each culture?

## **Conclusion**

Lustig and Koester argue, “most components of your identity become important only when they are activated by specific circumstances” (5). The realm of language use, because it is ubiquitous in everyday life, has been one of the most evident and problematic issues for people in Diasporas. Chinese-Americans who cannot speak Chinese are constantly surrounded by the guilty and disoriented feelings of being unable to identify, both by themselves and by outsiders, as neither completely Chinese nor fully American. But can there be another path? Returning to the audition for Chinese drill instructors in the introduction of this essay, how can we

make everyone feel more comfortable interacting given this dynamic?

Based on her Chinese heritage and her own multicultural trajectory, Ang claims that the solution should lie in acknowledging and celebrating hybridity. To describe her argument more vividly, Ang uses the metaphor of “the living tree”: we should recognize and acknowledge the “branches and stems” and break with static and fixed conceptions on the “roots.” (44) That is to say, to get rid of stereotypical and conventional definitions of “Chinese-ness” and embrace fluidity, hybridity and in-between-ness of “diasporic Chines-eness.” Such a way of thinking might not be conventional and comfortable, but we must to resist our convenient reduction of “Chines-eness” as some fixed, over-simplified, and seemingly natural indicators, such as language.

Finally, to quote Ang’s claim about understanding hybridity in diasporic identifications: “hybridity marks the emancipation of the diaspora from ‘China’ as the transparent master-signified of ‘Chines-eness’: instead, ‘Chines-eness’ becomes an open signifier invested with resource potential, the raw material for the construction of syncretic identities suitable for living ‘where you’re at’” (Ang 35). There will come a time when “not speaking Chinese” is not perceived as laden with guilt or shame. There will come a time when hybridity will no longer be seen as problematic and abnormal, but as common, valued, and celebrated. However, how we should get there is a more complex question that remains to be answered.

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