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Theorising the dynamics of heritage language identity development: a narrative inquiry of the life histories of three Chinese heritage speakers

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the dynamics of heritage language (HL) identity development by analysing the life history accounts of three Chinese heritage language (CHL) learners growing up in the UK. Drawing on narrative data, the study contributes to the growing body of HL identity research by capturing the individual trajectories of CHL learners engaging with different interlocutors, at multiple sites, and across the lifespan. We report the various ways our participants are positioned by the essentialist discourses of Chineseness and how they learn to (re)position themselves as competent HL learners and legitimate members of the diasporic community. The findings highlight the need to understand HL learners' identity and agency as emergent from varied social interactions embedded within one's personal history. In light of the findings, we propose an original model to theorise the dynamics of HL identity development from a historical, spatial, and relational lens, and conclude with practical suggestions to encourage HL learning and maintenance.

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Introduction

A global rise in transnational mobility has led to increasing numbers of immigrant minorities in Anglophone countries, and there are widespread concerns about the loss of heritage languages (HLs) and identities among their second-generation children (He 2006; Leeman 2015). In this context, recent studies have started to explore issues of individuals' HL development in relation to their sense of self (e.g. Abdi 2011; Blackledge et al. 2008; Creese et al. 2006; Kang 2013; Showstack 2012, 2017). These studies have often focused on how learners' identities are constructed, performed, and negotiated within HL classroom settings. Notably absent from these studies are the dynamics of HL identity development beyond HL classrooms in a range of sites such as home, school, community, and workplace, across one's lifespan. This article adds to such studies by capturing the personal historicity in the construction and reproduction of self across multiple sites — as 'children' within the family, 'students' inside the school, 'members' of the Chinese community, and 'employees' in the

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workplace. This lifespan perspective, we argue, is central to our understanding of the dynamic nature of identity construction, particularly among HL learners. It also offers valuable insights which complement the existing literature on bilinguals' experience of language acquisition across the lifespan.

The study examines the dynamics of HL identity development among three Chinese heritage language (CHL) learners by analysing their life narratives. It explores how CHL learners are positioned by two essentialist discourses of Chineseness, namely the model minority discourse and the moral discourse on authenticity, and how they exercise agency to resist that positioning and attempt re-positioning in varied social interactions. By examining the various ways of how CHL learners position themselves and are positioned by others across time and space, this article enhances our understanding of the complex interplay between power and agency in HL identity formation. It further contributes to theorisation of the dynamics of HL identity development, which is generally overlooked in previous research, from a historical, spatial, and relational lens.

Identity in heritage language development

Identity has been long regarded as a key aspect of HL development and has received increasing scholarly attention in the past decades (Leeman 2015; Tseng 2020). While earlier survey-based research tends to conceive heritage learners' identity as a fixed category (e.g. Beaudrie, Ducar, and Relaño-Pastor 2009; Comanaru and Noels 2009; Kiang 2008), recent HL studies mainly draw on poststructuralist frameworks and allow for a less essentialised understanding of identities (e.g. Doerr and Lee 2013; Kim 2020; Wong and Xiao 2010). Instead of conceptualising heritage learners' identity as static or pre-determined, many of these studies have demonstrated the dynamics of identity development and examined HL identities as discursively or narratively constructed (Gyogi 2020; Jing-Schmidt, Chen, and Zhang 2016; Park 2021). We adopt this poststructuralist view as a starting point for theorising HL identities in this study, because it enables us to avoid an oversimplification of HL learners' developmental trajectories and to see how their multiple identities, on the one hand, structure access to linguistic resources and learning opportunities and, on the other hand, are performed, negotiated, and redefined vis-à-vis HL practices.

The dynamics of HL identity development first lies in the conceptualisation of identities as complex, fluid, and socially constructed across time and space (Norton 2000; Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004). As HL learners grow and become more mentally mature, they construct their identities in a dynamic process influenced by family, school, community, and beyond (Tseng 2020). This also refers to the relational aspects of identities that learners may experience when interacting with different interlocutors from one site to another (Taylor 2014). Although a growing number of studies have recognised this dynamic nature of HL identity (e.g. Kang 2013; Park 2021), they focus more on the immediate aspects of how learners position themselves in the present, rather than why that present has come to exist from one's long social history. Further studies, therefore, need to examine HL identities by looking at the rich individual trajectories of interaction with various fields, interlocutors, and life events. In this study, we adopt the notions of 'historicity' and 'spatiality' to describe the dynamics of HL identity in flow (Hirsch and Stewart 2005); that is, how learners' identities come into being temporally and spatially in their varied social interactions across a lifespan.

The process of HL identity development is also inevitably related to the concept of power. As previous research has indicated, languages and identities are embedded within powerful discourses, which may be contested, negotiated, or found to be non-negotiable (Bourdieu 1991; Norton and Toohey 2011; Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004). For HL learners, their language learning and maintenance are not only constrained by the dominant discourses that favour English in the wider society (Lee and Wright 2014), but also susceptible to the internal hegemonic pressure derived from the essentialisation of ethnicity and heritage within diasporic communities (Creese et al. 2006; Showstack 2012). This pressure prevalent in immigrant minority groups is always reproduced within HL schools, internalised by children and their parents, and as a result, leads to forced-positioning of HL learners as 'linguistically deficient and culturally inauthentic' (Helmer, 2011, 2013; Tseng 2020, p. 131). In a study of US-born Latinos, for example, Tseng (2021) shows how this imposed deficit positioning stigmatises HL learners, damages their identities and self-esteem, and contributes to HL insecurity and avoidance. Similarly, while a stronger identification with Chineseness generally motivates CHL maintenance (He 2006; Mu 2014), in our research, these beliefs embedded within the essentialist discourses also constrain learners' identity options and negatively affect their participation in CHL learning and use. In such a case, when CHL learners are positioned deficiently, they tend to avoid speaking Chinese despite positive attitudes towards the language.

However, HL learners are not simply passive recipients of the imposed positioning; they can also exercise their agency to negotiate identities, attempt re-positioning, and deploy discourses and counter-discourses to contest those in power (Blackledge et al. 2008; Doerr and Lee 2009; Duff 2013). The concept of agency is increasingly understood as the 'socio-culturally mediated capacity to act' (Ahearn 2010, p. 28) rather than an internal state that resides within the individual (Bucholtz and Hall 2005). With regard to HL learning, a few recent studies have explored how HL learners, as active social agents, negotiate their identities within hegemonic discourses (Blackledge et al. 2008; Koshiba 2020; Showstack 2012). For example, in a study of Hispanic bilinguals in the US, Showstack (2012) shows how HL students challenged a prevailing classroom discourse based on a 'monoglossic language ideology' (García 2009) and defended their identities as legitimate Spanish speakers. Another example can be seen in Blackledge et al.' (2008) study conducted in Bengali complementary schools in the UK. Their data show that, despite the powerful discourses that framed the teaching of 'language' as the teaching of 'heritage', students were often seen to contest the imposed heritage identities through classroom interaction. However, research that highlights the role of HL learners' agency is still relatively rare and most of these studies solely focus on HL classroom settings. As Miller (2010, 2012) suggests, human agency is also discursively and historically mediated. Drawing on the notion of 'history in person' (Holland et al. 1998), she notes that individuals' agentive capacity is not uniformly shaped but comes from 'the sediment from past experiences' of one's long social histories (as cited in Miller 2012, p. 444). Therefore, we aim to extend this line of enquiry by exploring the socially formed histories of CHL learners in which their agency and identities develop. We will show their negotiation of the essentialist discourses of Chineseness when growing up in the UK and how that process leads to HL learning opportunities as well as possibilities for identity transformation.

Informed by the above discussion, we argue for a need to understand the dynamics of HL identity development by exploring the life histories of HL learners engaging with

different interlocutors, at multiple sites, and across the lifespan. We consider their life histories not to be determined, but as the consequence of the negotiations of power and agency. By examining the various ways of how CHL learners position themselves and are positioned by others across time and space, we will come to see their distinct trajectories of identity construction and HL development. Before delving into the current narrative study, we now turn to the essentialist discourses in which CHL learners' life histories are situated.

Essentialist discourses of Chineseness

Bucholtz and Hall (2004) define essentialisation as an assumption that all members of a given identity category share certain attributes which define who they are. In Chinese diasporic communities, the essentialist Chineseness discourses conflate the notions of language, ethnicity, and culture, and refer to Chinese as an idealised and homogeneous group (Francis, Archer, and Mau 2009). This essentialist representation of Chineseness does not just come from external forces but also from within the Chinese community itself (Hoon 2021). As we will show, while the increasingly heterogeneous landscapes of the British Chinese community seem to provide limitless identity options for CHL learners, people are still categorised under the umbrella term of 'British Chinese' and are confined by the hegemonic discourses on what Chinese people should or should not be like. For the purpose of this study, we focus on two essentialist Chineseness discourses that are salient in the British Chinese community — the model minority discourse and the moral discourse on authenticity.

The model minority discourse, emerging in the late 1960s in the United States, is used to acknowledge the educational/career success of Asian Americans and to portray them as a hard-working, disciplined, and problem-free minority group (Ng, Lee, and Pak 2007). This public portrayal, as Archer and Francis (2005) claim, can also be observed in the British context, frequently cited as the reason for their high academic achievement and attained upward social mobility. In fact, this imposed identity permeates well into many British Chinese's own senses of ethnic pride (Mau 2013). Mau's (2013) study showed that many parents and children have indeed accepted, or even enthusiastically embraced, the model minority discourse, and as a result, they place immense emphasis on academic performance at school. The model minority stereotype further implies that, in order to succeed in mainstream schooling, minority groups tend to conform to the norms of the dominant culture at the expense of their own heritage language and culture (Kang 2015). Therefore, it homogenises the experience of many British Chinese and affects their perceptions of themselves, the value they attach to the HL, and their educational choices.

By moral discourse on authenticity, we refer to a type of discourse that equates language proficiency to one's ethnic duty and emphasises the 'authenticity and moral significance' of the so-called mother tongue of a given heritage (Woolard 1998, p. 18). It prescribes that those who are tied to a given ethnic membership should be naturally able to speak that corresponding language fluently, as a way to fulfil his/her moral obligation and perform being authentically (Abdi 2011; Mau 2013). This discourse norm of possessing an authentic identity is integrally bound up with the monolingual native speaker ideology, which requires HL learners to reach an idealised native standard and positions those who fail to do so as 'deficiently native speakers' (Train 2007, p. 229). Thus, it fails to capture the unique

linguistic competence of HL learners through inappropriate comparison with their monolingual counterparts despite their different learning contexts (Rothman and Cabo 2012).

However, the essentialist representations of being a model minority and speaking authentic Chinese have long been regarded as positive attributes both by mainstream UK society and by British Chinese themselves (Archer and Francis 2005). As such, their hidden risks have always failed to be recognised. This requires a closer look at how these hegemonic discourses constrain learners' identity options and negatively affect their HL development. In this paper, we explore how the essentialist discourses of Chineseness structure the identity construction of our participants, and how they are contested, negotiated, and reproduced vis-à-vis HL practices. By looking at this complex interplay of power and agency, we will come to see the dynamics of HL identity development, as represented in the rich individual life histories.

The study

We adopt narrative inquiry as a methodology in this study. Narratives offer a way to bring coherence to learners' multiple and shifting identities, and thus are particularly well suited to the study of HL identities from a relational, spatial, and historical perspective (Barkhuizen, Benson, and Chik 2013; Benson 2013; Pavlenko 2007). As Wortham (2001) suggests, narratives are powerful media through which individuals express, enact, and make sense of their selves. Indeed, the social world is constituted by 'story constellations' (Craig 2007, p. 173) and human beings experience their lives and identities in narrative form (Polkinghorne 1988). Thus, documenting humans' experience involves a process of restorying – 'the living, telling, retelling, and reliving of our stories' (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, p. 387). CHL learner's life history accounts, in this sense, not only show how a person constructs dynamic identities through specific narrative resources, but also facilitate a form of agency and resistance to normative identities while giving birth to different narratives of the self (Coffey and Street 2008).

The participants of this study are John, Ryan, and Lucy (pseudonyms, aged 29, 22, and 18 respectively at the time of the study), three adult CHL learners in the UK. Hornberger and Wang (2017) define HL learners as 'individuals with familial or ancestral ties to a language other than English who exert their agency in determining if they are HLLs of that language' (p. 6). We adopt it as our working definition in this study, because it acknowledges learners' agentic role in constructing their identities and the heterogeneity within the group. The three participants were recruited through poster invitations placed in a local Chinese community centre where Chinese immigrants and their children living in surrounding areas meet and socialise. They were selected mainly for two reasons. Firstly, they all fit well with Hornberger and Wang (2017) definition of HL learners. They were children of Chinese immigrants, born in the UK, and grew up speaking both Chinese and English. All participants felt comfortable with their HL learner identity and actively learned/used Chinese at the time of the study. Secondly, despite the commonality, the three participants also showed different life trajectories of identity and HL development. The range of their experience and how they constructed their experience in their life histories provided us with richly diverse narrative data.

The data were collected from a series of three interviews conducted with each participant following Seidman's (2006) life history interview model. Each interview lasted around 60 to 90 minutes, with a clear focus and purpose that differed from the other two (Seidman 2006). The first round of interviews was intended to elicit an overall account of the participants' life history. It was guided by an interview protocol that helped participants to re-arrange the events of their lives in a chronological order based on where they had taken place (e.g. home, school, community, workplace). Questions for the second and third interviews were derived from the themes emerging from the first interview. During the interviews, initial interpretations of the participants' remarks were provided, and the participants were asked to confirm, revise, or reject these interpretations. This process improved the trustworthiness of the data and always invited new stories from the participants.

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed in three phases. The first phase employed an approach called 'narrative writing' (Benson 2014, p. 11), by which we turned data with a rudimentary narrative structure into formal written narratives that follow a chronological order. Each narrative case was then thematically analysed with the software NVivo based on an inductive coding process where categories and themes were not predetermined but emerged (Marshall and Rossman 2014). This process involved coding the data line by line and grouping the codes together to create categories and subsequent themes. After multiple rounds of coding, several broader themes were identified for retelling the stories (Clandinin and Connelly 2000), such as 'dominant discourses', 'response to discourses', '(non)participation', 'personal transformation', and so on. The final stage consisted of a cross-case synthesis that enabled us to look more closely at how the themes connected or diverged among the narratives. This three-phase analysis allowed us to capture three distinct trajectories of HL identity development on the one hand, and the similarities of the negotiations, resistance, and personal transformations on the other. In the findings section below, we present the narratives of HL identity construction of the participants engaging with different interlocutors, at various sites, and across the lifespan.

Findings

John: from 'struggling' to 'self-motivating'

Struggling to become a model minority

John was born in the UK with both his parents working in a family catering business. The family's financial hardship after immigration made his parents enthusiastically embrace the prominent model minority discourse, viewing it as a strategy to escape current working-class status and to realise upward social mobility in British society. John recalled how strict his parents were when he was younger: 'they kept telling [me] to work hard and wanted me to be academically strong' (John, first interview). He also recalled that, despite the financial hardship, his parents 'worked hard to send me to a private school... and always said they spent every penny on my school fees' (John, first interview).

Influenced by the ascribed positioning as a model minority, John's struggle to fit this expectation had become a recurrent theme in his childhood stories. Contrary to his parents' expectation — a hard-working, compliant, and academically inclined student, he described himself as 'rebellious', 'naughty', and 'not really good at studying'. Such imposed positioning

further made him feel that he did not live up to ‘being a typical Chinese,’ who, unlike him, fits the high achieving narrative.

The model minority stereotype not only stigmatises people who fail to succeed in mainstream schooling, but also has real effects on how British Chinese perceive the value attached to their HL. Since the learning and maintenance of Chinese did not directly contribute to John’s academic achievement at school, he was always told to ‘focus on schoolwork’ at the expense of his CHL development. Unlike many Chinese parents, John’s did not send him to the Chinese complementary school to learn Chinese literacy, because it was ‘quite expensive’ and ‘they could teach [me] themselves’ (John, first interview). However, in reality, John’s parents gave up his HL literacy development at an early age:

They stop trying to teach me to write, because it’s getting more and more difficult... as long as I’m able to communicate, they’re fine about that. (John, first interview)

In contrast to the Koran American students in Kang’s (2015) study, who actively re-acquire their HL as a way to contest the assimilation aspect of the model minority discourse, young John seemed to be constrained in such positioning and lacked the power to negotiate in this early stage of life.

Self-motivating to be a competent CHL learner

While the moral discourse on authenticity did not have a strong presence in the first half of John’s story, it then came into play when he took up a position in a Chinese supermarket at the age of 25. There, Chinese was not only a marker of ethnicity, but also a language that allowed him to perform professional duties. Because of this, as John’s workplace stories unfolded, we could see his self-motivating trajectory of re-acquiring CHL and becoming a legitimate CHL learner, which coincided with the trajectory of becoming a competent co-worker.

When he first started his job, John was particularly worried about his imperfect mastery of Chinese. He was afraid of being viewed as a less competent co-worker and felt ‘embarrassed’ and ‘stressed’ from time to time. John’s feeling of incompetence at work, indeed, arose from the tension between people’s essentialist assumption toward him as a Chinese and his own inability to speak the perfect Chinese language. This tension further placed him in a dilemma — on the one hand, he needed to speak more Chinese with his customers and co-workers to improve his fluency; on the other hand, the potential embarrassment of exposing his inauthenticity, especially in front of those native Chinese, discouraged him from doing so. John recalled a short period of time when he chose to keep quiet at work. However, he gradually realised that this strategy was again ‘very embarrassing,’ because it would make people feel that ‘[he does not] know how to speak Chinese at all’ (John, first interview). In this sense, keeping quiet would only reduce his credence as a competent employee in the eyes of his boss and co-workers.

As an agentive young man, John seemed determined to improve his CHL proficiency and attempted to negotiate his positioning by mobilising his bilingual resources. For example, he mentioned playing an active role with English-speaking customers or when there was a need to translate some product descriptions. Gradually, his co-workers began to refer to him as an English expert, often asking him questions concerning English. In this way, his bilingual resources became a bonus which was valued in the workplace, serving to offset his imperfect Chinese:

... [I don't feel myself as] less competent... because you can help each other learn, like I sort of ask them what this product means in Chinese, and just trying to remember for the next time; and if they don't understand the English word for some items... So it's like I can help them with their English, and they can help me with my Chinese. (John, third interview)

When mobilising his own symbolic resources, John was able to subvert the power relations between himself and his co-workers, which facilitated the reconstruction of his identity. Rather than being positioned as a deficient Chinese speaker and worker, he actively transformed this power imbalance, creating a space in which he and his co-workers could equally exchange their respective knowledge and help each other. This safe space also allowed him to feel more comfortable speaking Chinese and, in turn, as he practised more, he gained more confidence in it.

Compared with how he was constrained by the model minority discourse in his early life, John gradually learned to negotiate positioning when he grew older. We also see that he adopted a 'thought-reframing' strategy to generate an inner counter-discourse (Cervatiuc 2009, p. 259) as a way to contest the essentialist Chineseness. Instead of comparing with an idealised native speaker standard, John felt increasingly able to accept his inability to speak perfect Chinese and made the point that 'it's quite reasonable and fair to have accent' (John, third interview) as a CHL learner born and raised in the UK. This further increased his self-confidence and motivated him to make progress in learning the HL.

In sum, John's life history account shows a trajectory from struggling to self-motivating: he struggled to conform to the model minority discourse at the expense of his CHL development at the early stage of his life; however, as he grew and became more mature, he was self-motivated to re-acquire Chinese, re-position himself as a legitimate CHL learner, and at the same time, gain the credence as a competent co-worker in the workplace.

Ryan: from 'embracing' to 'challenging'

Embracing the moral discourse of being an authentic Chinese

Unlike John, Ryan was born in a family where the Chinese language and culture were highly valued. Having traditional parents who had a strong desire to maintain and pass on their Chinese traditions, Ryan was required to learn Chinese from an early age. He was sent to a Chinese complementary school every Sunday morning from 6 to 13 and took GCSE Mandarin afterwards. As the participant with the highest CHL proficiency, Ryan also displayed the strongest sense of connection with his Chinese heritage. His essentialist attitude towards being an authentic Chinese gradually emerges in the first half of his narrative.

When Ryan was about 12, his parents became regular members of a local Chinese community centre and started to bring him there at weekends. Here, he started to make friends with other British Chinese pupils who shared similar background. Gradually, the community centre became an important social site for Ryan, and because of this, it motivated him to go there regularly to meet his Chinese friends. Apart from that, he was also actively involved in some Chinese cultural events held by the centre. In the following excerpt, Ryan talked about his experience of performing Lion Dance, a form of traditional Chinese dance, when he was 14. It should be noted, by performing Chineseness, Ryan further developed a strong sense of belonging to his familial origin, which can be seen from his use of the term 'our culture' when referring to the Chinese culture:

... I've been to the Dragon Boat Festival thing, and we performed there. It's fun to celebrate our culture everywhere... people seem to enjoy it, even a lot of British people. (Ryan, third interview)

As a good pupil with a strong Chinese identity, Ryan was always considered a role model by many Chinese parents. This, on the one hand, allowed him to be proud of his Chinese proficiency, and on the other hand, made him feel superior as a proper Chinese. Being placed in a favourable position by the powerful moral discourse on authenticity, he also mobilised this discourse to make derogatory remarks about his peers with limited Chinese ability:

I know a lot of people there who are a little bit younger than me... What I find is a lot of them can't speak Chinese, and it's really a shame... It's important to know Chinese if you're Chinese, because then you can say you are Chinese, but what's the point if you say you are Chinese, but you can't speak the language, if you can't talk to Chinese people. (Ryan, second interview)

Here, we can see that Ryan internalised and embraced the moral discourse on authenticity. He clearly articulated an essentialist supposition that people with Chinese ancestry and phenotypical features should be inextricably regarded as Chinese; and as Chinese, they ought to exhibit certain intrinsic qualities, which include speaking the Chinese language.

From being authentic Chinese to being British Chinese

A turning point in Ryan's life history came when he started to socialise with a group of Chinese international students at university. These interactions with native Chinese provided him with exposure to different ways of being, speaking, and living as an authentic Chinese, which enabled him to have a new understanding of his identity as a British Chinese and a CHL speaker.

Ryan described his feeling of being 'less Chinese' when talking to those international students from China. With a different way of speaking, such as not using 'lah' or 'leh' (i.e. discourse particles commonly used by ethnic Chinese), Ryan considered himself to be different from them. He also recalled that he sometimes could not fully express his ideas in Chinese and needed to code-switch to English from time to time. This inability to engage in conversation solely in Chinese made him 'feel ashamed' in front of his Chinese friends; in other words, he felt deficient as a CHL learner compared with those idealised native speakers.

Being positioned deficiently by the essentialist discourse on authenticity, John tended to avoid socialising with Chinese international students and making progress in his HL. Compared with his behaviour in the Chinese community centre — actively socialising with Chinese people and participating in various cultural events — Ryan seemed to have less interest in maintaining friendship with Chinese international students and even avoided opportunities to practise Chinese with them. When explaining this different attitude towards Chinese, Ryan said:

... before, when I was talking about Chinese... I mean in the community centre, I guess I mean British Chinese. I'm just much closer with British Chinese people, those BBCs [British-Born-Chinese]. (Ryan, third interview)

In the excerpt above, we see how Ryan attempted to make sense of his contradictory identities. By differentiating British Chinese from native Chinese in his narratives, Ryan justified his different positionings within different contexts, and voluntarily placed himself out of the native Chinese group. It should be noted that, in this way, Ryan no longer needed to wait for people's access to assimilate into the native Chinese community; instead, he was able to re-establish a new space for himself and his friends, a 'third space' as suggested by Bhabha (1994). In this new space, a new British Chinese identity also emerged.

At almost the end of the third interview, Ryan was asked again about his identities. This time, he started to reflect upon his personal historicity and reconstruct hybridised identities:

I can't say I'm completely Chinese... or British, because I no longer think in a way that "oh, this a Chinese thing, and this is an English thing." I just have my own set of values, which is derived from both English and Chinese. (Ryan, third interview)

To conclude, Ryan's life history account presents a personal transformation from embracing to challenging: he first, with little or no resistance, embraced the essentialist Chineseness discourse; however, after he was positioned deficiently by the essentialist discourses himself, he gradually learned to reflect upon his past belief, challenge the hegemonic discourses, and reconstruct a hybridised British Chinese identity.

Lucy: from being 'disempowered' to 'empowered'

Being disempowered by the essentialist discourses

Lucy was born in the UK and went to a school where she was the only Asian student in her class. There, the essentialist model minority discourse had a strong presence in her life. When talking about the stereotypes that depict ethnic Chinese as academically strong, she used words such as 'annoying', 'degrading', and 'hurtful' to describe her feelings. She further explained that, if being successful in school was essentialised as an inherent Chinese ability, then an individual's achievements would simply be regarded as a result of his/her ethnicity. This downplayed her as an individual and made her 'feel like a useless person' (Lucy, first interview).

Apart from it, the powerful moral discourses that equate Chinese proficiency to ethnic duty also placed Lucy in a powerless position at school. She recalled a time when her teachers put her in charge of a group of newly-arrived Chinese boarders, because they assumed that she had no problem in speaking Chinese. It should be noted that, even if she found this request 'strange' and even 'scary' at that time, she did try to make friends with these international students, as she explained, 'since I'm technically Chinese, I feel kind of obligated that I should be able to speak Chinese... and to speak more to the borders' (Lucy, second interview).

Similar to John and Ryan, being positioned negatively by the essentialist discourse on authenticity, Lucy recounted a sense of embarrassment, sometimes possibly deficiency and shame, when speaking Chinese in front of those native speakers. Also similar to John and Ryan, being aware of her 'improper and accented Chinese' did not push Lucy to practise more. Instead, she reported being reluctant to use Chinese when her legitimacy of CHL speaker failed to be recognised:

It's quite stressful for me because I feel like I can't say anything properly. It's also because I don't sound that authentic, as people who were born in Hong Kong, so even if I do speak Chinese, they will definitely notice my accent. (Lucy, second interview)

Looking back at this stage, Lucy felt that her Chineseness brought her mostly annoyance and struggle. Learning Chinese at that time was more restricted to a moral liability and a fear of being criticised as a fake Chinese. Having internalised the essentialist discourses, she felt disappointed by her inability to perform full Chineseness, both as a model minority and as a perfect Chinese speaker. Consequently, the only strategy she could employ was to negate Chineseness as part of her identities and avoid participation in learning Chinese. Concluding her narrative on this stage of life, Lucy said that being Chinese was always something that '[she] tried to hide.'

Feeling empowered by a Chinese heritage

A turning point in Lucy's life came when she started to volunteer at the Chinese community centre every Sunday at the age of 16. Initially, she just went there to complete the volunteering hours required by school. However, it then became a transformative experience for her. Retelling the story, we could see how Lucy, as an agentic young woman, actively negotiated her positioning and empowered herself.

Lucy's main responsibility in the community centre was to organise a language corner, where she and her British Chinese peers could help some newly-arrived Chinese immigrants with their English. Unlike her previous experience with those Chinese boarders who made her 'feel embarrassed' as a deficient Chinese speaker, Lucy said that she 'felt more comfortable' staying with native Chinese this time. By mobilising her bilingual resources, Lucy was able to reposition herself as an English expert:

We kind of help some people who want to learn English, like some conversational English... It was also beneficial for us because it makes us feel valued... it also helps me get a bit more confidence. (Lucy, second interview)

It should be noted that, in Lucy's case, people's recognition of her bilingual identity also meant their recognition of her legitimacy as a CHL learner. This, in turn, helped her gain more courage and opportunities to practise Chinese when her identity was validated. As in John's experience with his colleagues, Lucy and her British Chinese peers gradually transformed the original language corner into a space where people could exchange their linguistic resources to help each other. In this way, apart from helping people with their English, Lucy also had an opportunity to learn some Chinese in an egalitarian and supportive environment:

They've been helping me, and they've been encouraging me to speak more and to learn more because I can learn more by speaking actually. And I'm also helping them with their English in a way. So, I think it's a good exchange. (Lucy, second interview)

Lucy also attempted to employ a 'thought-reframing' strategy (Cervatiuc 2009, p. 259) to justify her Chinese proficiency as a CHL learner rather than merely comparing herself with a native speaker model. For example, when socialising with other British Chinese pupils of her age, she gradually realised that it was perfectly reasonable for her to speak imperfect Chinese. Compared with her British Chinese friends, she stated that her Chinese

skills are: ‘not that good, but probably [...] not that bad. I think my ability is quite reasonable’ (Lucy, third interview).

Having a group of British Chinese friends further offered Lucy an opportunity to open up a ‘third space’ (Bhabha 1994). Just as in Ryan’s case above, this third space served as a comfortable site where Lucy and her friends could share their similar experience growing up in the UK, reclaim the Chinese part of themselves, and make sense of their legitimacy as CHL learners.

To conclude, Lucy’s story presents a trajectory from disempowering to empowering: rather than trying to hide her Chinese heritage, Lucy now feels that it is a source of strength and self-affirmation. Learning and maintaining CHL is no longer a moral obligation but what she truly wants to do, as is shown in this final remark:

Now I kind of feel like it’s kind of... not obligation, but I feel more responsible to actually do something with it. So I know that I have a power... Instead of just saying that I was born here but I’m not really Chinese, I can actually say that I was born here and I’m also like... I can speak Chinese and still have connections to my Chinese sides. (Lucy, third interview)

Discussion

This study draws on data collected from three CHL learners’ life histories to explore the dynamics of HL identity development. It has demonstrated how the participants negotiated the essentialist discourses of Chineseness and learned to (re)position themselves as competent HL learners and as legitimate members of the diasporic community. By studying CHL learners’ interaction with different interlocutors at various sites across the lifespan, the findings highlight the dynamics of HL identities from a relational, spatial, and historical perspective. As the narratives unfolded, we have seen how CHL learners’ identities were developed on a historical continuum; that is, how their current positionings grew out of their past histories and led to their expectations for the future. The analysis also shows how HL identities were constructed relationally and spatially with different interlocutors across multiple sites (e.g. home, school, community, and workplace). This involved CHL learners with such complex lived experiences as meeting parental demands, achieving academically, responding to ethnic expectations/duties, and performing professional competencies — all while being Chinese and learning Chinese as an HL. Collectively, this study demonstrates three distinct trajectories of HL identity development: John’s shift from struggling to self-motivating to learn Chinese; Ryan’s from embracing the essentialist discourses to challenging them; and Lucy’s from being disempowered to empowered by being able to speak Chinese.

As pointed out by previous research, the process of identity development cannot be understood without the concept of power (Block 2009; Miller and Kubota 2013). This study has highlighted the presence of two powerful Chineseness discourses, the model minority discourse and the moral discourse on authenticity, and demonstrated how they constrained learners’ identity construction and CHL development. John and Lucy recounted how they were structured by the expectations of being a model minority. John’s life history, for example, showed his struggles to perform well academically at the expense of his HL learning at home; Lucy, on the other hand, reported how this discourse placed her in a powerless position in school, leading to her negation of being Chinese at that stage of life. As for the moral discourse on authenticity, all participants recounted a sense of embarrassment and

inadequacy when being positioned deficiently due to their accented and imperfect Chinese. This sense of deficiency further structured their perceptions as CHL learners and their agency in learning and participation. Collectively, these findings highlight the fact that, while these fixed representations of Chineseness have been long regarded as positive attributes, they overlook the heterogeneity within this ethnic group and constrain the identity options available to CHL learners.

Discussion of the structural constraints provides a new perspective in understanding HL learners' (non)participation in language learning. Unlike previous research that explained HL maintenance as either an integrative or instrumental act (e.g. Lu and Li 2008), this study has shown that HL learners' language practices are structured by the power relations embedded within dominant discourses. As can be seen, all participants reported feeling 'voiceless' when they were positioned as deficient Chinese speakers; conversely, when they were positioned as legitimate CHL learners, they could successfully gain their 'voice' back and felt comfortable speaking Chinese. In a widely-cited study of five immigrant women in Canada, Norton (2000) problematises the view of naturalistic settings as ideal for language learning, since immigrants do not always have the luxury to interact with native speakers and their access to English-speaking networks is socially constrained. This study extends Norton's (2000, 2014) findings to the context of HL learning. We show that for HL learners, even if they are surrounded by native speakers and have a natural connection to the target language, they might still avoid the opportunities to practise when the power imbalance is at work. Heller (1999) points to a paradox faced by linguistic minority groups: they tend to use the same logic of monolingual/monocultural nation-state to 'break apart the monolithic identity of the state within which they search for a legitimate place' (p. 32). However, in order to do so, they construct a fictive unity, in our case, the essentialist Chineseness which in turn 'produces internally structures of hegemony similar to those against which they struggle' (Heller 1999, p. 32). As we have shown, these internal hegemonic discourses restrict the multiple realisations of Chineseness and have a negative impact on individuals' participation in CHL learning and use.

Furthermore, the findings also highlight the role of human agency in the negotiation of the essentialist conception of identity and heritage. As previous studies suggest, members of a given community do not simply inherit a fixed identity, but are rather engaged in an agentic process of constructing, negotiating, and reforming (Duff 2013; Miller 2010). This agency, however, is not *a priori* assigned but socioculturally and historically mediated (Ahearn 2010). Consistent with other studies (e.g. Miller 2012; Ros i Solé 2007), this study also found that learners' agentic capacities must be understood as emergent from their personal historicity. With respect to the participants in this study, the constraints and affordances they encountered growing up in the UK had gradually become a part of their socially formed history, which in turn, enabled them to come up with various strategies and act in new situations. These strategies, as revealed in the narratives, include reframing their thoughts to generate an inner counter-discourse, mobilising their bilingual resources to subvert power relations, and re-establishing a third space for British Chinese that enables new identity options to emerge. CHL learners' capacity to act comes from their prior experience, but at the same time, it also maps new possibilities through its own life trajectory. It is through this process of strategic (re)positioning that our participants re-construct their identities beyond predetermined categorisations, gain more self-confidence, and continue to make progress in learning their HL.

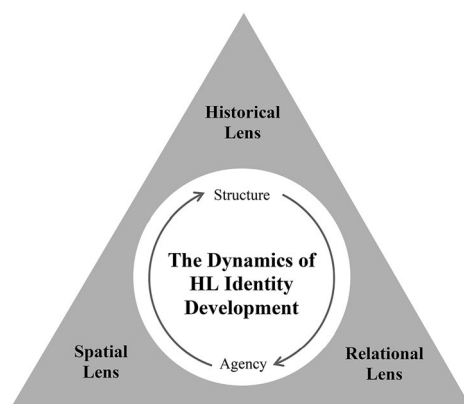


Figure 1. A theoretical model of HL identity development.

Conclusion

Based on a narrative inquiry of CHL learners, this study further proposes an original model to theorise the dynamics of HL identity development from a historical, relational, and spatial perspective. We argue that HL identities should be understood on a historical continuum; that is, learners' present identities grow out of their long social histories and lead to their positionings in the future (historicity). They could also be seen as a process of interacting with different interlocutors manifested in everyday forms of power relations (relationality). Furthermore, the dynamics of HL identities are also shaped by the complex lived experience specific to a given spatial context (spatiality). Through a historical, relational, and spatial lens, we come to see the dynamic interplay of structure and agency, which leads to different trajectories of HL identity development (Figure 1).

This study has important practical implications for HL education. Firstly, we argue that the responsibility for achieving success in HL maintenance should not solely rely on HL learners, as individuals' HL learning is inevitably positioned within power relations and subject to the influences of predominant discourses. Thus, instead of blaming HL learners for not maintaining their language proficiency, we need to raise our awareness of the hegemonic pressures faced by our learners and celebrate HL learners' heterogenous identities. Although all participants in this study gradually learned to (re)position themselves as they grew older, this may not have been possible without institutional recognition and affordances. In this regard, the study further shows the need to provide effective institutional support for the development of HL identity options. This calls for critical pedagogical approaches in HL education that create spaces for HL learners to challenge the stigmatisation, gain linguistic confidence, and (re)claim their identities as legitimate HL speakers (see also Leeman 2015). Secondly, contestation of the essentialist Chineseness indicates that there are multiple realisations of being CHL learners. As Blackledge et al. (2008) suggest, 'heritage' is not a static entity, but a site of contestation and negotiation. There is no single profile of HL learners. In this sense, we argue for the need for changes in how 'heritage' and 'HL learners' are understood, so as to better reflect individual learners' diverse linguistic backgrounds, histories, and needs. Ultimately, we hope to motivate more research to capture HL learners' life trajectories of negotiating participation, power, and identities across

multiple discursive fields. This, we further argue, could extend our understanding of how families, schools, diasporic communities, and mainstream society can make joint efforts to encourage HL learning and maintenance.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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