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Critically Problematizing the Term "Chinese": Implications for Language Teaching for Chinese Diasporic Communities

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Abstract
While Chinese in the form of Mandarin is currently heavily emphasized in language teaching arenas, little research has looked at the maintenance of other equally relevant Chineses. "Chinese" has been highly diversified in the U.S. and Asian contexts for centuries. Inattention to this diversity sparks the need for a critical viewing of placing too much worth in the political economy of Mandarin at the expense of all the other varieties of Chinese in the local ecologies. In looking at local-level processes we can better understand how to bring minoritized varieties forward. This paper will begin with background information on the varieties of Chinese, followed by a description of the methodology and data collected by the authors, along with the implications this data have on "Chinese" language teaching for Chinese diasporic communities in the U.S. We call for the re-envisioning and reconceptualization of the multiple discourses of "Chinese."

Keywords: Non-Mandarin Chineses, Chinese diasporas, language teaching, heritage learners, United States

1. Introduction

While Chinese in the form of Mandarin is currently heavily emphasized in language teaching arenas, little research has looked at the maintenance of other equally relevant Chineses. Chinese has been highly diversified in the U.S. and Asian contexts for centuries. Thus, inattention to this diversity, specifically in the U.S. context, where the authors reside, sparks the need for a critical viewing of placing too much worth in the political economy of Mandarin. Ironically, despite huge spikes in interest in Mandarin worldwide, Mandarin in the U.S. is still considered a Less Commonly Taught Language (LCTL), making other varieties of Chinese, which receive even less attention and funding, Truly Less Commonly Taught Languages (TLCTL) (Gambhir, 2001). The terms LCTL and TLCTL are used primarily in U.S. contexts as means to organize, engage, and ally speakers, instructors, and learners of foreign languages that receive relatively low course enrollment numbers compared to "bigger" languages like Spanish, French, German, and Italian. It warrants mention, though, that many TLCTLs in the U.S. are actually languages that are spoken by a huge majority of people in the world. Thus, in looking at local-level processes of these minoritized varieties, we can better understand how to bring them forward in the U.S. contexts (Hornberger & King, 1996).

This paper will begin with background information on the varieties of Chinese, followed by a description of the methodology and data collected by the authors, along with the implications this data have on "Chinese" language teaching for Chinese diasporic communities. We call for the re-envisioning and reconceptualization of the multiple discourses of "Chinese."

2. Background of "Chinese" Imbalance

Those involved in language maintenance argue that to reverse any language threat, it is crucial to understand the historical and social circumstances which have created the threat (Nettle & Romaine, 2000). To understand the interrelationship among the many varieties of Chinese, one must view the macro-level processes of how the term "Chinese" came to refer to only Chinese in the form of Mandarin, and why this must be critically problematized, as not doing so directly impacts non-Mandarin Chineses and their speakers. Through the linguistic lens of mutual unintelligibility, a language like Cantonese is a separate language from Mandarin, although enough overlap in phonology, intonation, and particularly grammar and script allow Cantonese speakers to use their existing knowledge as assets when they learn Mandarin. Yet from a more sociolinguistic lens, "we usually do not speak of Chinese in the plural" (Ramsey, 1987, p. 17). This ideology is bolstered by the fact that standard written Chinese, matching most closely spoken Modern Standard Mandarin (MSM), overrides all oral varieties of Chinese because it is (more or less) the shared writing system of speakers of all varieties of Chinese.

Additionally, the name for these varieties of Chinese, called 方言 (MSM: *fang*1*yan*2), has long been erroneously translated as "dialects." The meaning is better captured with "topolect" (Mair, 1991), referring to language groups (Sinitic or otherwise) by topographic distribution; the mistranslation and perpetuation of the term "dialect" without cultural and historical prefacing further solidifies the ideology that "[t]he language variety that has the higher social value is called a 'Language', and the language variety with the lower social value is called a 'dialect'" (Roy, 1987, p. 234).

Keeler (2008) notes the long-standing translingual practices of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic understandings of what langage is:

> The notion of 'dialect' as understood by some Chinese speakers today is part of a way of thinking about language change and language relatedness that was elaborated by European and American linguists in the 19th century. Any discussion of the translation into 'Western' languages of the Chinese words for 'dialect' or 'language' must make clear that the Chinese words themselves are palimpsests of over a century of events of translation and cross-cultural negotiation (p. 345).

Palimpsests, where parts of a document are written over more than once or erased, often incompletely, to make room for more text, help to characterize the current state of the "Chinese" confusion, and why disentanglement is duly required, especially when considering the field of language education. The

metaphor of a palimpsest reminds us that we must also consider languages diachronically, not just synchronically.

Research on language policy and planning notes that in creating national hegemony, states often engage in creating this hegemony that ignores language diversity in order to define who is in and who is out (Billig, 1995; Blackledge, 2008) and education becomes a major means to achieve this end. More equitable approaches to education that take into account linguistic diversity, especially the learning experiences of speakers of non-dominant languages, are being explored (e.g. Canagarajah, 1999; Katz & DaSilva Iddings, 2009; Lin, 2004). Lam (2005) writes of China:

> A land of many languages and dialects, China is also faced with making linguistic choices; so are learners in China. Focusing on one language or dialect means less learning resources for others…. At the individual level, the language learning experience of learners in China is certainly not linguistically discrete; each learner tends to be exposed to more than one language and more than one dialect. Hence, a multilingual approach is quite essential for an appreciation of the realities of language education in China (p. 18).

We argue that there is also a critical need to acknowledge the varieties of Chinese residing in the local language ecologies of the Chinese diaspora.

Leung's (2009) study of semantic prosody, or co-occurrence of words shifting towards positive or negative semantic values, in U.S. newspaper corpora shows clear semantic prosody for the word "Mandarin" with "language," "Chinese," and "fluency". Conversely, for the word "Cantonese," there is semantic prosody with the words "dialect," "Chinatown," and "restaurant." Here, metalinguistic commentary about "Chinese" has propelled Mandarin to a status above all other Chineses, in the process impacting on how non-Mandarin Chineses are thought of and talked about.

Gambhir's (2001) distinction between Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs) and Truly Less Commonly Taught Languages (TLCTLs) provides a useful lens through which to view Chineses. While Mandarin is currently considered a LCTL, this label is misleading since Mandarin is also considered a "critical language" to the U.S. in policy and public discourse, thereby receiving unprecedented governmental and educational attention. Other Chineses, then, are TLCTLs. As Gambhir points out, in the U.S., there is a strong need to distinguish the two because TLCTL programs often enroll fewer students, most of whom are heritage language learners. Hornberger and Wang (2008) define heritage language learners (HLLs) 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). Since the current discourse on "Chinese" refers to Chinese in the form of Mandarin, and folk discourse never talks about it in plural (cf. Ramsey, 1987), this renders funding for other Chineses unavailable and furthers the power imbalance between Mandarin and non-Mandarin Chineses. In advocating for the preservation of smaller languages, Crystal (2000) lists multiple reasons as to why language diversity is necessary, including the fact that languages express identity,

languages are repositories of history, and languages contribute to the sum of human knowledge (pp. 27-44). For the same reasons Crystal (2000) cites, we argue for the importance of maintenance of non-Mandarin Chineses.

3. "Diasporic Voices": Whose Voices?

Keeping these power imbalances in mind, we now focus on how the inattention to multiple Chineses has activated processes of erasure, where "ideology, in simplifying the sociolinguistic field, renders some persons or activities invisible" (Irvine and Gal 2000, p. 38). Drawing from our own research with Chinese American diasporic communities with various times of arrival to the U.S., we show how various Chinese Americans of non-Mandarin Chinese backgrounds contest "Mandarin as Chinese" ideologies and adopt inclusive discourses about Chineses that attribute worth to all the Chineses in their lives.

Wei and Hua (2010), in examining the perceived hierarchy among the varieties of Chinese among Chinese diasporic communities in Britain, Australia, and Singapore, found the "Chinese as Mandarin" ideology to be prevalent (p. 158) and note that language shift "is happening very rapidly in the Chinese diasporas" (p. 165). They state that it is "clear that Cantonese, Hakka and Hokkien are losing their place to Putonghua" (p. 170). They are not the first (nor the last) to claim this in their findings. Weger-Guntharp (2008) describes the university-level Mandarin classroom as one where Cantonese plays a role for half of the class. She writes:

> Participant 26 identified Cantonese as his native language; and during the interview session, he mentioned his years spent studying at Cantonese school, "So I didn't learn anything there, just like Cantonese, which is not useful here". Participant 18 said of her unwillingness to use vocabulary, "I don't want to say [a word] and it's wrong, and then plus it's in Cantonese, so then everyone's like 'What?'". And Participant 5 commented, "My parents wanted me to take Chinese, because I am Chinese, except almost no one speaks Mandarin in my family, so it's pretty pointless [to take classes here]" (p. 223-224).

Though convenient as metaphors, Wei and Hua's dichotomy of Chinese languages as "winning or losing out" against each other and the dichotomy of "useful or useless" languages amongst Weger-Guntharp's participants critically overlooks the possibility of an alternative ideology for Chinese diasporic communities: the inclusion of multiple Chineses. Our work with Chinese American communities and our linguistic positioning as speakers of multiple varieties of non-Mandarin Chineses have shown us that to assume that communities of non-Mandarin Chinese speakers are just shedding defunct linguistic appendages is to discount the collective agency of minoritized and non-dominant discourses. Groups that do not benefit from dominant language ideologies are never completely disenfranchised, as it is always possible to challenge and contest those in power through counter-hegemonic language ideologies (Achugar, 2008). A language-as-resource (cf. Ruiz, 2010) orientation to multilingualism reminds us that even the most marginalized languages can be seen as resourceful because their multifaceted values are not just defined along

the economic sense, but intellectual, aesthetic, cultural, and citizenship senses. Ruiz (2010) cites the fact that many communities have used their languages for generations without the instrumental values to show that values are not defined by outside communities.

We now share data collected from our own qualitative research in progress with two Chinese diasporic communities in the U.S.: urban Philadelphia and the San Francisco Bay Area to show how different Chineses are played out in the lives of some Chinese Americans. The foci of our respective research projects extend beyond just heritage language learning, so we have chosen select quotes from our Chinese American participants that deal specifically with commentaries about the interrelationships among varieties of Chinese.

3.1. *Philadelphia*

Wu's research takes place in a kindergarten-to-eighth-grade school in Philadelphia that enrolls 440 urban students from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds. The school offers "Chinese" (referring to Mandarin) language education to all students. Two tracks are offered: Mandarin as a foreign language and Mandarin as a heritage language, with about one-third of students in the heritage track. Over 80% of the students in the heritage track come from *Fuzhouhua*- (福州話)[1] and/or Cantonese-speaking families. Part of Wu's ethnographic research delves into the Mandarin learning experience of seventh grade ethnic Chinese students from non-Mandarin language backgrounds. Wu purposely focused on this group because older students were more able to articulate their thoughts and she had built good rapport with this group since 2009 through her involvement as a teaching assistance and volunteer at the focal school. Along with extensive classroom observations of the heritage language class, a total of 13 students in the heritage track were interviewed, which represented 90% of the student population in the seventh grade heritage students. Interview data suggest the linguistic realities of these students reflect the co-existence of many varieties of Chinese, not just Mandarin, which influences their Mandarin language learning experiences.

Maggie, a seventh grader and third-generation Chinese American, grew up with Taishanese (called *Hoisan-wa* by many of its speakers) and learned Cantonese and *Fuzhouhua* from her mother and Mandarin at school. When asked what language(s) she would like speak with her future children, she says, "I would like to speak Chinese, like Taishanese. No. I am not that good at Taishanese yet….but [I am good at] Cantonese and Mandarin. I was taught Taishanese at a younger age. And English coz we are in the United States" (Interview, February 21, 2011). Though "Chinese" only refers to Mandarin within the school context, it has a broader definition for Maggie, who actually

[1] 福州話 is oftentimes called "Fujianese" or "the Fujian dialect". Thanks to an astute reviewer's suggestion, we have decided to use the term "Fuzhouhua" in pinyin (and not "Fujianese" or "the Fujian dialect") to challenge the dialect-language dichotomy, since what is "Fujianese" is not necessarily "Fuzhouhua" (or vice versa).

includes other varieties of Chinese that she knows under the very term. She thinks of passing down not just Mandarin but also Cantonese, her stronger variety of Chinese, to the next generation, despite the fact some may consider Cantonese as having less value in the current linguistic marketplace. Maggie sees Cantonese as a resource, not only because it helps her connect to her family, but also because it helps her learn Mandarin. Maggie uses Cantonese to understand Mandarin in class: "When she [the teacher] speaks Mandarin, I try to put the Cantonese words and compare…to see if they match. But sometimes the Cantonese words don't match the Mandarin in pinyin. So I kind of use the parts of words written and see if I know any separate words" (Interview, February 21, 2011). This compare-and-contrast strategy might account for Maggie's relatively high Mandarin performance in class.

Most of the ethnic Chinese students in the heritage class live in linguistic realities that include more than one variety of Chinese, and Mandarin is not necessarily the only variety that they want to learn. When asked if they would like to learn *Fuzhouhua*, Cantonese, or Mandarin if they were all offered at school, a *Fuzhouhua*-dominant speaking student, April, says, "I want to take Cantonese because half of my friends are mostly Cantonese. I don't know Cantonese so I want to know Cantonese" (Interview, February 16, 2011). Another Cantonese-dominant student, Monica, who speaks Cantonese with her paternal grandmother and Mandarin with her maternal grandmother, also wants to learn Cantonese because "when I say Cantonese to my grandma, we only say certain words. So when I talk to other people in Cantonese, sometimes they say words that I've never heard before" (Interview, February 16, 2011). While it should be mentioned that declared attitudes sometimes do not mirror actual behavior, these students' voices still provide a glimpse into how contemporary Chinese Americans encounter multiple Chineses in their daily lives, and their motivation to learn one variety over another for heritage or social network reasons.

3.2. *San Francisco Bay Area*

The San Francisco Bay area has been home to Cantonese-speaking immigrants from the Pearl River Delta region for over 150 years (Chang, 2003, p. 79). As Cantonese heritage language schools and Cantonese-English bilingual programs are being abandoned for Mandarin programs, there are now increasingly fewer opportunities to maintain Cantonese institutionally. Leung's work on *Hoisan-wa* (台山話, also known as Toishanese or Taishanese), one of the ancestral heritage languages linking nearly all early Chinese immigrants, shows that *Hoisan-wa* receives absolutely no formal institutional support. Put under a different light, this also means that even without institutional support, *Hoisan-wa*, despite ongoing changes in context of use and esteem, has managed to remain visible through over 150 years of Chinese immigration and language diversity in the U.S.

Part of Leung's research on Hoisan language and cultural maintenance in the San Francisco Bay Area included conducting sociolinguistic interviews with 100 Chinese Americans of Hoisan heritage. Interviewees, ranging from ages 6-

97, many belonging to different generations of the same family, were asked to discuss various issues of language maintenance, including ways Hoisan-wa is used in the family, intergenerational communication, and perceived challenges. The larger research project looks at language change across generations as well as how Hoisan-wa is being incorporated into modern and relevant contexts.

The following excerpts come from Clarissa and Agatha, two fifth-generation Hoisan-heritage women in their late 20's whose fathers are Hoisan-heritage Chinese Americans married to Taiwanese Mandarin-speaking mothers who are first-generation immigrants to the U.S. Both Clarissa and Agatha have varying degrees of beginning Cantonese fluency (and only very passive understanding of *Hoisan-wa*) and are conversationally fluent in Mandarin, as this was the variety of Chinese that their mothers used in the home. When asked what roles Cantonese and *Hoisan-wa* play in her life, Clarissa responded that when she speaks with her paternal family, she would try her best to use whatever Cantonese or *Hoisan-wa* vocabulary she could. "I could have said it [in Mandarin], but I guess I think 'Oh, I speak to my dad, his side is Cantonese, I try to use Cantonese when I can, and then to my mom, she likes it when I speak Mandarin so I use Mandarin with her'" (Interview, January 29, 2011). Agatha noted that her father, who also speaks minimal Cantonese and *Hoisan-wa*, did not know much about his family's history and ancestral heritage until he met Agatha's mother. "In a way, my mom and my Mandarin side helped us understand my dad's history better. This is the how I even know where we came from" (Interview, April 16, 2011).

These quotes demonstrate how, even when Mandarin Chinese is the dominant Chinese in these Chinese American women's lives, non-Mandarin Chineses are not seen as "losing out" or "useless"; rather, there is a sense that there is a time and place for each variety, each having a contemporary role and worth.

4. Discussion

Our findings have implications for "Chinese" language teaching in the U.S. and broader reconceptualization of "Chinese" in diasporic research, which we address below.

Hornberger and Wang's (2008) definition of heritage language learners (HLLs) pays special attention to HLLs' negotiated identities and struggles involving dominant/local ideologies, dominant/heritage cultures, and standard/dialect language forms. HLLs interact in an ecological system where their language learning and use shape and are shaped by their self perceptions, positioning, and interactions with various people and institutions in the specific contexts under larger sociopolitical and historical influences. In many Chinese language programs, speakers of other Chinese varieties are often placed with Mandarin speakers in the heritage track, but their knowledge in non-Mandarin varieties is discounted by the teachers and their needs are often left unaddressed, causing much frustration in studying a language that is assumed to be their heritage language (Kelleher, 2008). Wiley (2008) writes:

> The status of Mandarin as a common "heritage" language for all ethnic Chinese is open to debate. Despite this fact, there is currently little attempt in the U.S. to promote HL instruction in other Chinese languages (with the exception of Cantonese) such as Taiwanese or Hakka. As these are languages of the home and local communities, they could also be considered HLs (p. 96).

In fact, Cantonese, Taiwanese, and Hakka *should* be considered HLs since they have collectively been so for over 100 years. As Guangdong and Fujian have been the major migrant-sending provinces of China, Cantonese (Liang and Morooka, 2004), Hakka, *Fuzhouhua*, and Hokkien (also known as Southern Min or Taiwanese) are HLs of many Chinese diasporas, one should be mindful about the impact of Mandarin language hegemony on other varieties of Chinese and their speakers. There are also similar parallels in Singapore, where as a result of the "Speak Mandarin Campaign" launched in 1978, the long-standing non-Mandarin Chineses once spoken in domains like the home and the family have now been replaced by Mandarin (Li et al., 1997).

In a time where the Chinese government has strenuously promoted Mandarin beyond the borders of China (e.g., the establishment of Confucius Institutes) and where a growing number of countries have invested hefty resources in the teaching of Mandarin because of its marketability, there needs to be more work that looks at, values, and celebrates the plurality of languages used by "Chinese diasporas" across the world. We call for more researchers to look at the experiences of speakers of non-Mandarin Chineses and to view their languages and heritages through the lenses of additive and flexible multilingualism.

We cite an eighth grade newcomer student from China in Wu's research, Yemin, who insightfully comments, "Nowadays, even the United Nations has assigned one day as International Mother Language Day because each language represents incredible knowledge of humankind" (Original interview in Mandarin, April 17, 2011). Yemin told his classmates that in China students would get punished if talking in *Fuzhouhua* at school, but he had long wondered, "Why can't they [Mandarin and *Fuzhouhua*] co-exist?" (Fieldnotes, November, 12, 2010). His question triggered much discussion among the students about how their home languages, like *Fuzhouhua* or Cantonese, were more relevant than Mandarin in their communities. This in turn made the Mandarin teacher wonder if teaching Mandarin while simultaneously fostering *Fuzhouhua* or Cantonese students' linguistic repertoires might be better for them in terms of preparing them to become competent language users in the U.S. context. In many Chinese diasporic communities where varieties like Cantonese, *Fuzhouhua*, Hakka, and Shanghainese are home languages to many ethnic Chinese, we believe it becomes critical that Chinese diasporic research and researchers do not reinforce "Chinese equals Mandarin" ideology but rather use Chinese diasporic spaces to provide counter-hegemonic discourses, following Ang (2001) who proposes that Chinese diasporic communities offer an arena that allows Chinese living outside China "to be Chinese in his own way...living a de-centered Chineseness that does not have to live up to the norm of 'the essential Chinese subject'" (p. 38).

Thus teachers of "Chinese" heritage language students should recognize their unique status as border crossers and develop pedagogies and curricula that take into consideration their multilingual backgrounds. In line with the view that all language teachers are engaged with bottom-up language planning (Hornberger, 1997; Ricento & Hornberger, 1996), we hope our paper has highlighted the importance of recognizing and valuing multiple Chineses as well as the re-envisioning and reconceptualization of the multiple discourses of "Chinese" in diasporic communities in the U.S. so we can bring multiple Chineses forward (c.f. Hornberger & King, 1996).

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