

## Special Issue Editorial: Teaching and Learning Chinese as a Heritage Language (CHL)

*Yang (Frank) Gong and Huichao (Claire) Zhang*

### Introduction

Chinese as a heritage language (CHL) is a unique and complex phenomenon that has gained increasing attention in recent years (Gong *et al.* 2018; Gong *et al.* 2020). The population of the Chinese diaspora is the third largest in the world (Mu and Pang 2019), which highlights the Chinese language education to later generations of Chinese descent. As more and more individuals of Chinese descent seek to maintain their connection with their cultural and linguistic heritage, the research on CHL acquisition and development has become increasingly important for educational stakeholders, such as policymakers, teachers, learners, and parents. At the same time, as the number of Chinese immigrants in English-speaking countries or regions continues to rise, the study on CHL has been paid significant attention by researchers in the fields of linguistics, education, and psychology.

The term ‘heritage speaker(s)’ can be traced back in Canada in the mid-1970s (Cummins 2005). A heritage speaker refers to ‘a language student who is raised in a home where no English is spoken, who speaks or at least understands the language, and who is to some degree bilingual in that language and in English’ (Valdés 2001: 38). CHL has gained growing interest in recent years due to its widespread use as an immigrant language (Gong *et al.* 2018; Gong *et al.* 2020). To take the United States as an example, Chinese (Mandarin as well as other Chinese dialects) is the third most spoken language at home following English and Spanish (US Census Bureau 2013). Chinese scholars typically

---

### Affiliations

Yang (Frank) Gong, Faculty of Education, University of Macau, Macau SAR, China

Email: [frankgong@um.edu.mo](mailto:frankgong@um.edu.mo)

Huichao (Claire) Zhang, Faculty of Education, University of Macau, Macau SAR, China

Email: [yc27106@connect.um.edu.mo](mailto:yc27106@connect.um.edu.mo)

include speakers of Mandarin and the other Chinese dialects. According to Valdés (2001), He (2006) broadly defined a CHL learner as someone who grew up in a Chinese-speaking household and was bilingual in both Chinese and English. Wu (2008) conceptualized Chinese heritage learners as students who have been exposed to Chinese outside of the formal education system, usually in their home or community contexts, which include both Mandarin and dialect speakers.

‘Chinese’ is generally an umbrella term that subsumes numerous dialects grouped under Wu, Xiang, Gan, Min, Cantonese, Hakka, and Mandarin (Huang and Liao 2002). Since many of the Chinese dialects are mutually incomprehensible, CHL learners often face challenges to communicate in dialects in their local community. Mandarin, also known as *Putonghua* (普通话) in mainland China, *Guoyu* (国语) in Taiwan, and *Huayu* (华语) in Singapore, serve as the standard dialect and are thus the most commonly taught variety in Chinese language classrooms (Gong et al. 2020). Moreover, while there is one Chinese writing system, it has two variants: the simplified script, which is officially used in Mainland China and Singapore, and the traditional script, mainly used in other Chinese-speaking regions, such as Hong Kong SAR, Macau SAR, and Taiwan (Norman 1988; Chen 1999). One or both forms may be taught in CHL classrooms. Hence, CHL learners may encounter various kinds of inconsistencies between their classroom and home contexts in terms of dialects and scripts, even though there is no Chinese literacy at home.

Apart from linguistic acquisition, there is a growing consensus that possessing knowledge of a heritage language is a valuable asset for both the individual and society in the following perspectives (Fillmore 1991; Peyton *et al.* 2001; He 2006). Developing linguistic proficiency in a heritage language can serve as a crucial component in forming an individual’s identity and facilitating her/his comprehensive connection to the family, community, and the country of origin (He 2006). Researchers considered that the benefits of developing heritage language proficiency can be significant to learners. Fillmore (1991), He (2006), and Peyton and colleagues (2001) synthesized that learning a heritage language entails more than simply receiving it as an inheritance and maintaining one’s cultural identity, and it also involves transforming the language by adapting it to changes in dialect, script, accent, and discourse norms and rebuilding one’s identity. Therefore, it promotes as well as highlights the significance of understanding world citizenry with appreciation of and proficiency in the Chinese language and culture (Gong *et al.* 2021a, 2021b). By presenting a collection of three CHL studies, this special issue aims to contribute to the understanding of the role of family and parents in learners’ CHL acquisition and development in different contexts.

## Research on Chinese as a Heritage Language

Since heritage language (HL) is defined as the language spoken in learners' homes (He 2006), it is inevitable to investigate the role family and parents play in the heritage language acquisition process. Research has examined heritage language maintenance (HLM) among Chinese immigrant families and their family language policies (FLP), including language ideology, language practice, and language management. Studies have found that Chinese immigrant parents hold diverse attitudes towards heritage languages. It has been reported that the parents support their children's HLM for three main reasons: communication among family members (Yan, 2003; Hu *et al.* 2014), bilingual or multilingual advantages on the job market (Hu *et al.* 2014), and the preservation of ethnic and cultural heritage (Li 2006; Liao and Larke 2008; Hu *et al.* 2014). However, children have mixed views on Chinese HLM (Li 2006; Zhang 2010; Kung 2013). For example, one Chinese immigrant child from a case study of three cases in Vancouver, Canada demonstrated positive attitudes towards CHL development, while the other two children did not perceive the need to learn a CHL due to a lack of opportunities for using Chinese in the school context (Li 2006).

Although parents view bilingualism positively for its beneficial role in children's English language and cognitive development, they typically expect their children to attain only conversational HL proficiency, with higher literacy skills to be developed after attending college (Lao 2004; Liao and Larke 2008; Hu *et al.* 2014). Compared to Chinese-dominant parents, English-dominant parents expressed their concern that increasing efforts in HL proficiency would hinder their children's college preparation and limit their English skills (Lao 2004). For instance, parents' expectations towards their children's CHL proficiency tend to be lower in bilingual families in Singapore, in alignment with its national language policy (Curdt-Christiansen 2014).

The practices employed by Chinese immigrant families to support their children's HLM involve frequent use of CHL among family members at home to promote their children's conversational proficiency (Liao and Larke 2008; Leung and Uchikoshi 2012; Chen *et al.* 2018). Parents who attached higher value to CHL narrowly exposed their children to an HL-only environment, while parents who held different beliefs did not prohibit their children from speaking English at home, believing that children would eventually learn to speak CHL as they grow older and realized the importance of Chinese (Li 2006; Yu 2010; Zhang 2010). However, although parents aimed to use HL-only FLP to enhance their children's CHL development, they often communicated in English more frequently than CHL or spoke a mixture of the two languages (Lao 2004; Yu 2010; Hu *et al.* 2014). In addition, parents seldom used Chinese with their children since they understood their children's English (Zhang 2010).

Regarding FLP management in Chinese immigrant families, parents tended to create a supportive environment to teach and use CHL at home, fostering their children's HLM. They mostly used informal pedagogies (e.g. watching TV programs and videos, reading storybooks, speaking in the HL during the dinner time) to promote their children's HLM (Kung 2013; Mu and Dooley 2015). However, it was found that there was a scarcity of authentic learning materials since Chinese books and audiovisual materials available outside China depicted Western cultures and did not accurately convey Chinese perspectives (Hu *et al.* 2014). In addition to conducting HLM activities at home, Chinese immigrant families usually enrolled their children in community CHL schools, although the children may show reluctance to attend these schools (Mu and Dooley 2015). For instance, according to Chen *et al.* (2018), parents from 258 Chinese American immigrant families perceived CHL schools as a beneficial means for their children to enhance their Chinese character recognition and vocabulary skills, cultivate Chinese literacy, and engage in CHL socialization.

To advance our understanding of CHL education and how it can be well supported, collaborative efforts across the research community are required. These efforts would help address practical issues in CHL teaching and learning and contribute to the field of language education. In this regard, researchers need to reflect on the achievement of previous studies and consider the future research agenda of CHL. Therefore, this special issue seeks to invite scholars to conduct studies on CHL education from different perspectives, such as family language policy, home language and literacy input, and language maintenance and language shift. Covering diverse topics in various contexts, this special issue aims to provide insights into the challenges, opportunities, and future directions of CHL education worldwide and beyond.

### **This Special Issue**

In response to the issues regarding CHL along with the trend of migration, three articles in this special issue trace the phenomenon of CHL language beliefs and practices in superdiverse societies to understand CHL learners, a more and more linguistically and socioculturally diverse group. The papers in the special issue build upon the agreement that CHL learners are faced with the challenges of the coexistence of multiple dialects and Mandarin, which is the default mother tongue often studied in Chinese heritage language maintenance. However, learners' beliefs and practices of maintaining their language varieties other than Mandarin, particularly in the home domain, have often been overlooked. This highlights the importance of understanding the influence of family language policy (FLP) and home language and literacy input (HLLI) on

Chinese heritage language maintenance as well as the valuable insights from different aspects of Chinese heritage language maintenance, such as language proficiency, language use, and language shift.

In the first article, Li and Shen focused on the beliefs and practices of CHL dialect speakers in maintaining their language varieties besides Mandarin, particularly within the home setting. To address this issue, this multiple-case study, guided by the family language policy (FLP) framework, had examined the language beliefs and practices of six Chinese families in early bidialectal (Mandarin and dialect) maintenance over three years (from kindergarten to Grade 3). The study revealed that while parents' beliefs on the value of their dialects differed in different families, they tended to adhere to dominant language ideologies and deprioritized their dialects at the bottom of the language hierarchy. Families that actively celebrated bidialectalism demonstrated a strong commitment to maintaining their dialects, whereas those who did not, gradually relinquished the effort to pass on their dialects to their children, even with the involvement of grandparents in maintenance efforts.

Continuing with the investigation in the role of family played in CHL learning, Ke and colleagues focused on home language and literacy input (HLLI) and aimed to identify salient types of input associated with speaking and reading abilities in the heritage language (Chinese) and the societal language (English). Using HLLI questionnaires with 53 CHL parents, this exploratory study looked at home oral and print input for Chinese heritage language learners between the ages of four and six in the US context. Principal component analysis and regression results revealed that both Chinese speaking and reading abilities are associated with oral language exchange between parents and their children, and Chinese-speaking ability is also related to print exposure to Chinese while Chinese reading ability is related to parents' practice of teaching pinyin/bopomofo at home. However, it appeared that fostering children's interest in reading English alone was sufficient for developing both speaking and reading abilities in English. Evidence-based recommendations were provided regarding home language and literacy practices for young CHL learners in the United States.

Wang and Chen investigated college CHL learners from six different Chinese dialect backgrounds in the context of migration trends toward 'super diversity' (Vertovec 2007) in New Zealand. In this study, CHL learners were conceptualized as complex social beings with a growing variety of linguistic repertoires, migration histories, and socioeconomic statuses. Based on the concept of language maintenance and language shift (LMLS), this study used questionnaires to investigate the participants' linguistic and social backgrounds and language proficiency. Results were found to be consistent with the notion that CHL learners should be viewed as a linguistically and socioculturally diverse group in terms of heritage language maintenance and learning, in part due to the rising

superdiversity in society. The findings demonstrated that CHL learners were using English more frequently, even though some of them might speak another non-Chinese language (such as Cambodian) as a heritage language. Specifically, they primarily spoke Chinese dialects at home, where newer generations were using fewer dialect types, and Mandarin was the least used language resource and tended to plateau at a low proficiency level.

Contributions to this issue have been provided by CHL scholars and the issue aims to provide critical findings regarding promoting CHL learners' bilingual or trilingual language development. We expect that the findings of the three empirical studies can help inform CHL parents and children about maintaining Mandarin and other dialects as their heritage languages. Hopefully, the findings will provide practical and theoretical implication for CHL educational policymakers, educators, and learners in the context of new Chinese immigrant generations overseas (Li *et al.* 2022).

## About the Authors

Yang (Frank) Gong, PhD, is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Education, University of Macau, Macau SAR, China. His research interests include Chinese education, language teacher education, intercultural education, and technology and language education. His publications have appeared in *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *Computers and Education*, *System*, *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, and so on. He now serves on the editorial board of *Language, Culture and Curriculum* (Taylor & Francis).

Huichao (Claire) Zhang is a doctoral student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Macau. Her research interest includes language education, Chinese as an additional language (CAL), and language socialization.

## References

- Chen, P. (1999) *Modern Chinese: History and Sociolinguistics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Chen, S. H., Zhou, Q., and Uchikoshi, Y. (2021) Heritage language socialization in Chinese American immigrant families: prospective links to children's heritage language proficiency. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 24 (8), 1193–1209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2018.1547680>
- Cummins, J. (2005) A proposal for action: strategies for recognizing heritage language competence as a learning resource within the mainstream classroom. *Modern Language Journal* 89 (4). 585–592. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3588628>
- Curdt-Christiansen, X. L. (2014) Family language policy: is learning Chinese at odds with learning English in Singapore? In X. L. Curdt-Christiansen and A. Hancock (eds), *Learning*

- Chinese in Diasporic Communities: Many Pathways to Being Chinese*, 35–58. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Fillmore, L. W. (1991) When learning a second language means losing the first. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 6 (3), 323–346. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0885-2006\(05\)80059-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0885-2006(05)80059-6)
- Gong, Y., Gao, X., Li, M., and Lai, C. (2021b) Cultural adaptation challenges and strategies during study abroad: New Zealand students in China. *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 34 (4), 417–437. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2020.1856129>
- Gong, Y., Guo, Q., Li, M., Lai, C., and Wang, C. (2021a) Developing literacy or focusing on interaction: New Zealand students' strategic efforts related to Chinese language learning during study abroad in China. *System* 98. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2021.102462>
- Gong, Y., Gao, X., and Lyu, B. (2020) Teaching Chinese as a second or foreign language to non-Chinese learners in mainland China (2014–2018). *Language Teaching* 53 (1), 44–62. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444819000387>
- Gong, Y., Lyu, B., and Gao, X. (2018) Research on teaching Chinese as a second or foreign language in and outside mainland China: a bibliometric analysis. *Asia-Pacific Education Researcher* 27 (4), 277–289. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-018-0385-2>
- Gong, Y., Gao, X., and Lyu, B. (2020) Teaching Chinese as a second or foreign language to non-Chinese learners in mainland China (2014–2018). *Language Teaching* 53 (1), 44–62. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444819000387>
- He, A. W. (2006) Toward an identity theory of the development of Chinese as a heritage language. *Heritage Language Journal* 4 (1), 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.46538/hlj.4.1.1>
- Hu, J., Torr, J., and Whiteman, P. (2014) Australian Chinese parents' language attitudes and practices relating to their children's bilingual development prior to school. *Journal of Early Childhood Research* 12 (2), 139–153. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X13515429>
- Huang, B. R. and Liao, X. D. (Eds.) (2002) *现代汉语 (第三版)* [Modern Chinese], 3rd ed. Beijing: Higher Education Press.
- Kung, F. W. (2013) 英語教學期刊 [Bilingualism and the second generation: investigating the effects and methods of heritage language maintenance and second language acquisition.] *English Teaching and Learning* 37 (3), 107–145.
- Lao, C. (2004) Parents' attitudes toward Chinese–English bilingual education and Chinese-language use. *Bilingual Research Journal* 28 (1), 99–121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15235882.2004.10162614>
- Leung, G. and Uchikoshi, Y. (2012) Relationships among language ideologies, family language policies, and children's language achievement: a look at Cantonese-English bilinguals in the US. *Bilingual Research Journal* 35 (3), 294–313. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15235882.2012.731588>
- Li, G. (2006) The role of parents in heritage language maintenance and development: case studies of Chinese immigrant children's home practices. *Heritage Language Development: Focus on East Asian Immigrants* 32, 15–31.
- Li, W., Gong, Y., and Wang, Y. (2022) 國際中文教學的社會文化視角: SSCI 期刊文獻視覺化分析 [The sociocultural perspective in international Chinese teaching: Visualization analysis on SSCI-indexed journal publications]. *Journal of International Chinese Teaching* 4 (36), 67–77.

- Liao, I. J. and Larke, P. J. (2008) The voices of thirteen Chinese and Taiwanese parents sharing views about their children attending Chinese heritage schools in Texas. *Journal of US-China Education Review* 12, 1–8.
- Mu, G. M. and Dooley, K (2015) Coming into an inheritance: family support and Chinese heritage Language learning, *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 18 (4), 501–515, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2014.928258>
- Mu, G. M. and Pang, B. (2019) *Interpreting the Chinese Diaspora: Identity, Socialisation, and Resilience According to Pierre Bourdieu*. Abingdon: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351118828>
- Norman, J. (1988) *Chinese*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Peyton, J. K., Ranard, D. A., and McGinnis, S. (eds) (2001) *Heritage Languages in America: Preserving a National Resource*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics and Delta System.
- US Census Bureau (2013, 11 September). Nearly 3 million U.S. residents speak Chinese at home, census bureau reports. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/archives/2013-pr/cb13-r90.html>
- Valdés, G. (2001) Heritage language students: profiles and possibilities. In J. K. Peyton, D. A. Ranard, and S. McGinnis (eds), *Heritage Languages in America: Preserving a National*, 37–77. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics and Delta Systems.
- Vertovec, S. (2007). Super-diversity and its implications. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30(6): 1024–1054. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870701599465>
- Wu, S. M. (2008) Robust learning for Chinese heritage learners: motivation, linguistics and technology. In K. Kondo-Brown and J. D. Brown (eds), *Teaching Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Heritage Language Students: Curriculum Needs, Materials, and Assessment*, 271–297. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Yan, R. L. (2003) Parental perceptions on maintaining heritage languages of CLD students. *Bilingual Review/La Revista Bilingüe* 27 (2), 99–113.
- Yu, S. (2010) How much does parental language behaviour reflect their language beliefs in language maintenance? *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication* 20 (1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1075/japc.20.1.01yu>
- Zhang, D. (2010) Language maintenance and language shift among Chinese immigrant parents and their second-generation children in the US. *Bilingual Research Journal* 33 (1), 42–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15235881003733258>