Cultural Heritage Language in Third Generation Chinese-Americans

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Abstract

There has been little linguistic research into third generation Americans regarding language, and even less about them trying to maintain their ‘cultural heritage’ bilingual abilities, perhaps because most researchers assume that, by the third generation, people are predominantly English speaking. This study explores whether there are third generation Americans who are not monolingual English speakers, and how and why they became successful in learning their heritage language. Interviews were conducted with five third (or later) generation Americans in their 20s who were learning or had some proficiency in their heritage language. From the interviews, I identified common reasons for learning their heritage language and factors that helped or hindered them. I found that learners’ successes were fostered by participation in the heritage language through areas such as social circles, family, and international pop cultures. My findings also provide encouragement and guidance to third generation heritage language learners.

Introduction

In this paper I will be exploring “cultural heritage language” development in third (or later) generation Americans. This topic interests me because I am a third-generation Chinese-American who chose to learn Mandarin, my “cultural heritage language.” Growing up I did not speak Chinese, though I was surrounded by it to some extent since I lived in San Francisco. When I began learning Chinese in high school to fulfill my foreign language requirement, I was annoyed by the proficiency that my fellow Chinese-American classmates already displayed and frustrated by their surprise that I did not speak any Chinese at home. I was confused why their Chinese was better and why they looked at me as if I were missing something.

I realized later that part of our reactions was due to a generational difference; I was a third-generation American surrounded by second and 1.5 generation Americans, and language development in each generation is different. As Richard Rodriguez (2006) states in his article “The Overwhelming Appeal of English,” “As in past waves of immigration, the first generation tends to learn only enough English to get by; the second is bilingual; and the third tends to be English-dominant if not monolingual....[B]y the third generation [bilingualism] is extraordinarily difficult to maintain” (591).

Since I rarely met people like me, third-generation Americans trying to maintain their “cultural heritage” bilingual abilities, I became curious whether there were more people like me, and how successful we became at learning our “cultural heritage language.” What were the reasons that we were successful or unsuccessful?

In this paper I define generations of American immigrants as follows: First generation refers to the first generation to immigrate to America, second generation to the first generation born in America, and third generation to the
second generation born in America, and so on. I define those who were born abroad and immigrated to America prior to puberty as 1.5 generation Americans.

As for the term “heritage language,” there are a number of definitions and debates surrounding just what it entails. For the purposes of my paper a “heritage language” is a language other than English that has some family significance. I chose this definition, based on Fishman (2001), because the term ‘heritage’ implies a family relation, something that is passed down through blood. It is this family connection as a motivator to learn a particular language that interests me.

A “heritage language learner” is anyone who is learning his or her “heritage language.” While some definitions specify that a “heritage language learner” is someone who speaks the language at home as a primary language or has other community exposure to the language, I have simplified the definition because a language can still be connected to one’s heritage without it being used every day. Heritage language is also not simply one language, but can be a number of languages connected by culture and history. In the case of the Chinese language, there are multiple varieties that include, but are not limited to, Cantonese, Toisanese, and Mandarin. This variety complicates the notion of heritage language, because each of these is distinct in its own way, and one does not equal the other, yet they are all grouped under the umbrella term “Chinese.” So for someone of Cantonese linguistic heritage, they may or may not consider another variety of Chinese to be their “heritage language.”

This paper explores various questions about an individual’s relationship with language. Why do people begin learning their ‘cultural heritage language’? Why do they continue, or stop, learning it? Answers to these questions allow us to see how participation in language in a variety of life circumstances is beneficial to language learning and maintenance.

**Methodology**

I collected data by conducting interviews with third (or later) generation Americans who were learning or had some proficiency in their ‘cultural heritage’ language. Interview questions covered family background, ‘heritage language’ proficiency, development, motivation, and identity. Then I networked, asking all my friends and friends of friends or boyfriends of friends, even posting it on my Facebook page and instant messaging that I was looking for third generation Americans learning their ‘cultural heritage’ language. My advising professor also helped me find people to contact, and I sent out several email inquiries. From various sources, I was able to find nine people to interview, one Japanese-American and eight Chinese-Americans. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the five Chinese-Americans, all in their twenties:

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<th>Pseudonym</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Brian</td>
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<td>Toisan</td>
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<td>Katherine</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>Toisan/Cantonese</td>
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<td>Daisy</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Toisan/Burmese</td>
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<td>John</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td>Cantonese</td>
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I conducted most of my interviews in person, using my computer’s sound recording software as my recording device. Two of my interviews were conducted over Skype, and also recorded on my computer. After conducting the interviews, I transcribed and coded them, by marking in the margin terms such as ‘identity,’ ‘friends,’ ‘Mando vs. Canto’ (as in Mandarin vs. Cantonese), ‘pop culture,’ and ‘family/siblings,’ to name a few. Once my interviews were coded, I used the coding to pull out quotes and form themes. These themes are the main discussion points in my paper.

Interviewee Profiles

**Ken, 22-years-old, college student.** Ken is a 3rd generation Chinese-American, of Toisanese (Taishan, Hoisan) descent. He was raised by his Toisan-speaking paternal grandmother and is the only grandchild of 10 that has any proficiency in Toisanese. He is active in a number of Chinese-related student clubs at his school, including the Chinese Students Association and the Taiwanese Students Association.

**Brian, 24-years-old, working.** Brian is a 3rd generation Chinese-American of Toisanese (Taishan, Hoisan) descent. He was not raised speaking Toisanese, but instead decided to learn it from his grandparents as a child/adolescent. He went to a bilingual English and French school from elementary school through high school. Brian is a certified medical translator for Toisanese. He has participated as a counselor and translator for other Chinese-Americans involved with “In Search of Roots,” a program in San Francisco Chinatown that takes Chinese-Americans back to their ancestral villages in China.

**Katherine, 22-years-old, college student.** Katherine is a 4th generation Chinese-American of Cantonese and Toisanese (Taishan, Hoisan) descent. Both of her parents are monolingual English speakers, but from being friends with 1.5 and second generation Chinese-Americans, Katherine developed an interest in learning Cantonese, and later Mandarin. She is now majoring in Chinese, and previously spent a year studying Mandarin in Taiwan.

**Daisy, 23-years-old, working.** Daisy is a 3rd generation Asian-American of Burmese and Toisanese (Taishan, Hoisan) descent. Though her parents are bilingual, one speaking Burmese and English, the other Toisan and English, Daisy grew up speaking only English and had no interest in studying Chinese in any form until college. Before graduating, she spent a semester in Shanghai, though her Mandarin did not improve very much.

**John, 21-years-old, college student.** John is a 3rd generation Chinese-American of Cantonese descent. Though he grew up at a Chinese Christian school where Cantonese was taught every day, and took Mandarin for three years in high school, he currently uses Cantonese only to order food at Chinese restaurants or (jokingly) to give simple commands to his friends.

Findings

From my interviews with various third generation Chinese-Americans learning their cultural heritage language, common features appeared in response to what prompted their decision to begin learning the language, what language to decide learning, and what helped some of them succeed in learning or what caused some of them to give up or give it a break. Much of their decisions to start, or to
choose Cantonese or Mandarin, had to do with how much participation in a language they already experienced in various areas of their lives. When the heritage language was present in their familial and peer social interactions, and when it connects to other interests that they can share with their family or peers, the heritage language is more likely to be maintained.

**Deciding To Learn**

As third generation Americans, many of the interviewees were not exposed to their cultural heritage language in the home. Rather, they came across it in more peripheral ways, such as interactions with grandparents or friends, and exposure to Asian popular culture. When faced with a foreign language requirement in school, some decided to take the opportunity to learn their cultural heritage language. For some, this desire came about as a way to connect with their ethnic identities and to feel that they belong in the skin they are in. Others felt, that the heritage language would enrich their family lives, either by enabling them to have better relationships with certain family members or by building pride in their heritage to perpetuate in their family. Interest in the popular culture of their heritage language also arises from the desire to connect with peers.

**Identity and Legitimization.** By the third generation, Americans from immigrant cultures tend to be assimilated into American mainstream society. Their sense of ethnic identity varies amongst them. Whether they think of themselves as Chinese who happen to be American, or as Americans who happen to be Chinese, the central question remains: what does “being Chinese” mean? Each individual has his or her own definitions for what it means to be both Chinese and American, and these definitions influence the reasons that each decided to learn Chinese. Norton (1995, 2001) looks at a learner’s investment in the target language as something highly emotional and involved in identity construction. Likewise, my interviewees show varying levels of investment in their language learning based on how they view their own identities, and how they see the target language fulfilling their personal identity needs. Katherine gave her reasons for deciding to learn Chinese as follows: “Um, well actually I wanted to take Mandarin to fulfill a language requirement. And I chose Mandarin because I really wanted to learn Chinese. Because I’m Chinese, but I don’t know any Chinese.” As seen from this statement, Katherine feels that those who are ethnically Chinese should be able to speak Chinese. Because Katherine does not already know Chinese, she feels that she is missing something as a Chinese person, and must learn it in order to be legitimate.

Daisy echoed Katherine: she began learning Chinese “because I am Chinese, and somewhere down there I have a sense of Chinese pride.” To have pride in a Chinese identity is to connect with it, and learn its language. For her, language plays a large role in cultural integration.

Ken also viewed learning Chinese as a way to connect with his heritage culture: “Maybe, I, uh, it’s the idea that uh, we feel that we need to know that because we need to know our heritage bloodline.” His insistence that he “need(s) to know” shows that he views a cultural and language connection as vital for understanding his own ethnic background. As for Ken’s identity, he said confidently, “I’m a Chinese-American, I’m proud to be a Chinese-American, I love my Chinese heritage. And yet, I love my American heritage too. Because our family has
acculturated, assimilated....” Ken managed to embrace all aspects of the immigrant experience and create for himself a rich cultural identity. He did not see being Chinese-American as choosing to be more Chinese or more American, but as loving both aspects of his background.

Brian is proud not just of being Asian but specifically of being Chinese: “I just, whenever people ask, I say Chinese. People like to differentiate, they say like, ‘Oh, Chinese-American? Chinese? Are you Asian-American?’ I just say Chinese; it’s easier. Because most of the time they ask me, like what my ethnicity is. And I dunno, I just say Chinese.” Brian said, “the influence wasn’t always present at school, so my like um, my ability to—like embracing it is my own doing, because, like, you know, to reconnect with that part of my identity. Not just being like, not just being Asian or whatever. I really wanted to connect to my family history.” Being Asian but not being surrounded by positive reinforcements of being Asian led Brian to want to embrace this part of his identity.

**Family.** Just as my interviewees expressed the need to connect with heritage, they also expressed the need to connect with family members. Wanting to communicate with family members and be able to develop better bonds or relationships often motivates learners. Also, a relationship with a family member who speaks the heritage language and has played an important role in the learner’s development often motivates the desire to learn the language.

Language learning is often a key to bonding with family members, especially with those who are elderly. Ken started learning Toisan and Cantonese as a child, when he watched Chinese programming with his grandmother. For him, it was “a certain way for me to bond with my grandmother.” He also felt a responsibility to his grandmother and family heritage because, he says, “I’m the only one that carries the last name, that’s why... She has 10 grandchildren, but there’s two that only follow her last name. Because my dad only had 2 kids and it was only me and my sister.” Ken feels that family is very important and the language of his family’s ancestors is therefore just as important.

Brian felt that his family’s heritage language, Toisanese, was an important part of his family’s identity. He said,

> I had the desire to keep it, the language, going in my family, or like, yeah I didn’t want it to die out. So my um, that stemmed from my, um, my willingness to learn and speak to my grandma in Chinese, to make sure I kept it alive too. Even though all my grandparents are fluent in English, I try to speak in Chinese to them too, as much as possible.

Because of his sense of connection with family and its relationship with Toisanese, Brian pushed himself to study the language.

Communicating with her Toisan grandparents was also one of Daisy’s reasons for starting to learn Mandarin. She explained,

> They don’t know Mandarin, but if I know the language, and I learn how to read and write, it kind of allows me to communicate better with them. Or just give us another common interest, like Chinese culture, Chinese history, or just the language, the written language in general.

She felt that learning Mandarin helped her to get to know her grandparents better and helped improve her relationship with them. Family played an important role in her decision to learn Mandarin because she desired that connection. Daisy
further said, “[it’s] because I felt like they’re getting old and I really do care about where they come from.” Learning a Chinese language of some form felt like the only way for her to get to know her grandparents on the level that she desired.

**Social Circles and Pop Culture.** The types of friends that one has and the types of pop culture that one has interest in play a significant role in shaping one’s other interests. Generally, people find friends who like what they like, or they want to like the things that their friends like. Through those common interests, there is a sense of bonding and belonging; seeking that sense is what often motivates a people’s interest in learning a language, regardless of, or even because of, cultural heritage.

The pop culture of Chinese-speaking countries in particular, and of Asia in general, has been making its way into young Asian American lives in recent years. Interest in not just music and movies, but also television dramas, especially idol dramas (serialized television featuring popular young singers), is a possible factor in the increased interest in Chinese and other Asian languages.

The Hong Kong film industry has been active since the invention of motion pictures, but it was not until the martial arts films of the 1960s that it really gained international popularity. Many of those films became cult favorites, even in the West. For a long time, the Hong Kong film industry was the most significant film industry of the Chinese-speaking world, and actors from mainland China and Taiwan had to go to Hong Kong and learn to speak Cantonese in order to have a successful film career. Mainland China and Mandarin language films did not really take off in the western world until *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* in 2000. And the popular Taiwanese idol dramas of today got their big start in 2001 with the airing of *Meteor Garden*, which was adapted from a popular Japanese manga (*Cinema of Hong Kong*).

Likewise, for a long time Hong Kong was the only place in the Chinese-speaking world with a significant music industry. Cantopop kings were loved in mainland China and Taiwan by Mandarin and Cantonese speakers alike. Then in the mid- to late 90s, and even more so in the early 2000s with the rise of idol dramas, Taiwanese musicians such as Jay Chou and Leehom Wang began to gain popularity in Chinese-speaking communities. Today they are bona fide stars who have led the way for hordes of other Mandarin language singers on either side of the Taiwan Strait. A number of American-born Chinese have even gone back to Taiwan to launch their singing careers. Popular Taiwanese singer Vanness Wu got his big break from acting in the pioneering drama *Meteor Garden* (吳建豪).

Later, the boom of various forms of Chinese language media spread across the Pacific and into overseas Chinese communities. Young Chinese Americans discovered the movies, dramas, and musicians that spoke a language that had a familial connection, and desired to better understand the lyrics of songs or the plots of stories. Their interest in the popular culture of their heritage language was one reason they became heritage language learners.

Ken, in particular, emphasized this point, telling me that all his closest friends are Asian, and most are speakers of a Chinese language (Toisanese, Cantonese, or Mandarin). In addition, many of them are heavily into Asian pop culture, not just Chinese, but also Korean and Japanese pop cultures. Growing up, Ken gravitated toward these peers, and thus he had ample opportunity to practice speaking Toisanese, Cantonese, and Mandarin. He surrounded himself with all kinds
of language input, listening to popular music, watching television shows and movies, and having the chance to discuss and share these interests with his friends.

Katherine explained that her desire to start learning Cantonese began in “maybe high school, or middle school. Because then a lot of my friends are Cantonese. Like 2nd generation, so their parents speak it, and then they would speak it. And when they would I would be like, ‘Oh, what are you guys trying to say?’” She longed to feel more connected to her Cantonese friends and share in their experience of talking with their parents. Katherine felt that being able to understand them without translation was vital for connecting more deeply with these friends.

Another reason Daisy learned Mandarin was to connect with friends. She explained,

Cause a lot of my friends, a lot of the friends that I hang out with, they speak either Cantonese or Mandarin and I just thought it would be interesting to learn, cause I never learned before. I never even had a desire to even learn. My parents never forced me to go to Chinese school. So I just never...I dunno, it’s just something new, and decided to try it out at Berkeley.

Her peers’ influence caused her to have interest enough for her to want to try out a language.

**Which Language to Learn.** A number of factors seem to come into play when third or later generation Chinese-Americans choose to begin learning their cultural heritage language. First, while they may be of Cantonese or Toisanese descent, access to the language affects when and what language group of Chinese they learn. Many will learn Mandarin because it is the only dialect offered at their school. Besides availability, other factors that go into choosing Mandarin over another Chinese language are the appeal of Mandarin language media and the perception of its future usefulness.

Leung and Lee (2010) discussed how other varieties of Chinese are often overshadowed by Mandarin. While some interviewees learned Chinese (Cantonese or Toisanese) at home, all of the interviewees still chose to learn Chinese in school, and, except for the case of John in middle school, all learned Mandarin because that was what was offered. Some schools do not offer the languages Cantonese or Toisan because Mandarin is the official language of China.

Ken is highly proficient in Cantonese and Toisanese, which he began learning from his family, Cantonese-language programming, and friends at a young age. But he also saw merit in learning Mandarin. He explained, “I’ve learned Mandarin because just in case—cause I’m an econ major, so business. So if I were to go to China to do a business trip....”

Katherine wanted to learn Cantonese but settled on Mandarin because, “in school it was Mandarin. I don’t think they taught Cantonese.” When she began learning Chinese in high school, she decided that, although Cantonese was the language of her family, any Chinese language was still Chinese. When she first heard Cantonese, she thought, “Oh, I really want to understand it. Cause I am Cantonese.” Although Katherine sees Cantonese as being part of her identity, she sees Mandarin as related enough to help in strengthening her identity as a Chinese-American.
Daisy also chose to learn Mandarin in college because that was what was offered. Although she knew that Mandarin was not the language of her grandparents, who had motivated her to begin learning Chinese in the first place, she, like Katherine, still saw any Chinese language as Chinese. She did not particularly identify with her Toisanese cultural heritage and expressed to me that she grew up very Americanized and so felt no need to be particular about which Chinese language to learn.

John learned Cantonese during middle school because that was the only foreign language offered at his private Chinese Christian school. But when he entered high school Cantonese was not an option, so he chose Mandarin as his foreign language, in part because he thought that the transition from Cantonese to Mandarin would be easier switching to another language.

**Learning Success.** Those who were able to begin and continue their learning in their cultural heritage language did so for a number of reasons. Their participation in that language served several related purposes in enriching their life and interests. Cho (2000) and He (2006) looked at factors such as community and proximity to the heritage language, interaction with the popular culture of the heritage language, and language attitude, and how these motivated heritage language studies. As in He’s (2006) study, many of my participants had the desire to connect with family and heritage through language learning. But, as in Cho’s (2000) study, issues such as attitude toward the language (e.g., whether they viewed the heritage language as being necessary), affected their success in learning.

**Identity and Investment.** Oftentimes people’s success at any activity depends on the amount of investment they have in learning and practicing it. By investment, I mean the individual’s willingness to be engaged and involved in learning and participating in an activity, especially as this involvement relates to emotions (Norton, 2001). Comanaru and Noels’ (2009) article also connected to the issue of motivation through identity and discussed heritage language in relation to a “sense of self.” The best way to succeed at any task is to put forth effort and put a lot of oneself into the learning or the doing. If a learner has enough personal devotion, then they will be more likely to keep learning, even when it is not convenient or necessary. Oftentimes, this type of investment is dependent on the individual’s sense of identity and how it benefits from investment in that language.

Risager (2006, 2007) looked at how language and culture are interconnected, and how participation in culture is vital for participation in language. My interviewees’ experiences seemed to agree with Risager’s claims that language cannot be learned independently of culture or be solely confined to the language classroom. The interviewees that were most successful at language learning immersed themselves in both traditional and pop heritage culture, and surrounded themselves with people with similar interests.

Brian discussed the importance of being able to speak Toisanese and Cantonese in relation to his identity: “Just because, like I said, I don’t want it...to lose that language or that part of my identity. So it’s a pretty prominent part of my identity, being able to speak.” For him, he did not feel that he was whole without his ability to speak Toisanese or Cantonese. Brian regarded Cantonese as so close to his identity that it was his affective language: “[I]f I was explaining to you my emotions, I use Cantonese.”
As for Ken, he did not begin by regarding an ability to speak Chinese as a necessary part of his Chinese-American identity. He explained that this was something that came to him later:

Because, the thing is that I realize that I am the 2nd generation, 3rd generation, that I would want to learn my language. Because I have seen a lot of people that are in my generation and totally have no knowledge of the language and culture....Young age, I actually thought differently, because my mom said, 'Do you want to go to Chinese school?' She asked me that when I was little. And I said, 'no.' But I was a kid back then, I don’t know what I was thinking....When I am older now, I, yeah, I decided to learn it.

Ken has been teaching himself Toisanese and Cantonese through Chinese-language media and interactions with others since he was young, but it was only later that he decided to learn to read. He took the initiative to learn Chinese in college by enrolling in a course in Mandarin. From observing others of his generation, he realized that they were out of touch with their family backgrounds because of a language barrier. Understanding of his family’s history, and therefore its culture, was important to Ken, so he pushed himself to learn Chinese languages.

Katherine has a resilient spirit and responds to other’s disappointment in her still-growing ability to speak Chinese by trying harder.

I think it makes me want to try harder. But then, sometimes I’ll be like, ‘Ugh, I’m so frustrated’ and then I’ll want to give up. Cause then like in my Chinese classes, most of them are like Cantonese speakers, and they like already know Chinese... why don’t I give up? I think because I’ve seen that I’ve improved. Like when I went to Taiwan, like from the beginning I didn’t know how to keep a conversation, I didn’t know how to form correct sentences, and talk to anyone. But afterwards, I could like speak and whatever, like willingly.

Katherine demonstrates her high level of investment in her learning of Mandarin by not giving up despite difficulties and discouragement. She is personally dedicated to mastering the language and therefore pushes herself even when she is uncertain. From those experiences she hopes to learn and grow more in her abilities as a Mandarin speaker.

Family. DeCapua and Wintergerst (2009) and Hinton (1999) analyzed the role that family plays in influencing identity and language development, whether that was encouraging or discouraging the heritage language. If parents are more supportive and encouraging, learners will often have more pride in their heritage identity and be more successful at learning (DeCupa and Wintergerst, 2009). But, if parents view the heritage language negatively and push for English and the success that they perceive that it can bring, then learners will also share this view, and perhaps not invest as much in language learning (Hinton, 1999). Both Yang (2003) and Cho et al (1997) looked at the motivation of heritage language learners and how that motivation affected their performance in language classrooms.

For Brian, family interaction, especially with his grandmother, helped him to maintain his interest in learning Chinese. He explained,
Probably because I had the, cause I had the desire to keep it, the language, going in my family, or like, yeah I didn’t want it to die out. So my um, that stemmed from my um my willingness to learn and speak to my grandma in Chinese, to make sure I kept it alive too. Even though all my grandparents are fluent in English, I try to speak in Chinese to them too, as much as possible.

He was motivated to keep up his Chinese language speaking ability not only for himself, but also so that it would continue on in his family. That he had his grandmother to help facilitate his language maintenance played an important role in his success. Without her there to speak with, Brian would not have had the chance to practice at home, because his parents do not speak much Toisanese or Cantonese. Today, Brian’s ability in Toisanese, Cantonese, and Mandarin exceeds that of his parents.

Like Brian, Ken was also influenced to learn Toisanese through interaction with his grandmother.

Well, the thing is that I was raised by my grandma, and she taught me Toisan-wa [Toisanese]. Until when I was a bit older, in my late teens I guess, I was introduced to Cantonese and I was actually raised with TVB...Yes, and I would watch TVB and I would learn my Cantonese. I never went to Chinese school though. But occasionally I would be curious how to, uh, read these words. So then I would ask my grandma, and she would give me a newspaper, and I would learn from the newspaper. That’s how I did it.

Due to the early importance of Ken’s grandmother in his life, he started his language studies with a great familiarity with Chinese language and media. His grandmother facilitated his learning of Chinese by providing him with access to the language through television and his interaction with her, and by helping him to understand things that he did not.

Ken also continues to succeed at language, despite his own cousins labeling him as a ‘fob’.1 “They’ll say this [jokingly], ‘You’re so fob.’ Or something like that. And then I said, ‘Oh, thank you.’ I really don’t care, you call me a fob I’m fine with it. But then when THEY speak Chinese, trying to speak with my grandma in Chinese, I laugh at them.” Even people who are close to him echo this sentiment, “if they’re very comfortable with me, like a close friend or something—they say, ‘You’re such a fob’ or something like that. They’ll say that.” Being labeled as a ‘fob’ can be seen by some as a big insult, as if telling an American that they are not a real American or not American enough. But Ken lets this interaction with his family slide right off him and uses it as fuel for his desire to learn the language. He takes pride that he can do something that his cousins cannot, which is to speak perfect Toisanese and Cantonese.

Through his ability to speak Toisanese and Cantonese, Ken also enjoys a favored grandson position that his cousins and sister, none of whom can speak Toisanese or Cantonese fluently, do not. He has the closest relationship with his grandmother and great-aunts and uncles and said that because of this, he is the family historian: “In the entire family, I’m the one that actually knows the entire Chinese history. Because my grandma and grandpa would tell me stories.”
Ken’s fluency in Cantonese is so good that in interacting with family friends, he says, “if I speak Cantonese in a—when I speak Cantonese, they accept me more and they don’t even compliment me at all.” This is because they assume that he is from China and a native Cantonese speaker, instead of a 3rd generation American who made an active decision to start learning.

**Social Circles and Pop Culture.** Just as an interest in pop culture can motivate some to learn a language, it can also be the factor that encourages them to continue learning and practicing it. Initial interest in popular culture can fade with time, but sometimes it can be enough to sustain one’s interest. A study (Menard-Warwick, 2010) examining the influence of English-language pop culture on Chilean teachers of English while they were learning the language found that interest in pop culture is a key component in a successful language learner. My interviewees reflected this, as the most successful learners in my pool of interviewees all actively enjoyed Mandarin or Cantonese language music and television dramas. They also associated with people with similar interests who then allowed them more access to discussing the pop culture in the language, and more encouragement for them to continue doing so.

Williams’s (2008) article shows that Japanese language learners with an interest in anime and Japanese pop culture feel more related to the language and therefore have a personal interest in learning the language. Likewise, Murray’s (2008) article on Japanese learners of English also showed that an interest in the pop culture of the target language helped motivate learners and increase their success. The responses by my interviewees agree with Williams’s and Murray’s findings that pop culture allows learners more access to the language. Interest in pop culture encourages them to explore the language more, outside the classroom and in everyday life, even if it is passively. That passive enjoyment can become an active enjoyment when they use the pop culture interest as a way to connect with peers that also speak the target language. And as in Pickard’s (1996) article, pop culture provides means for out-of-classroom learning. My interviewees who have pop culture interests do indeed continue to pursue opportunities to study the language outside the classroom through pop culture.

For Ken, watching Mandarin-language Taiwanese dramas helped him with his Mandarin studies in college. He said, “I learned Mandarin, but at the same time, to learn more about Mandarin, I always watched Taiwanese dramas.” He enjoyed watching these shows; they not only kept him motivated to keep learning, but also improved his Mandarin by providing him with exposure to the language.

Brian mentioned that he has been called ‘f.o.b.’ by his friends, both those who are white and those who are Asian (but do not speak Chinese). He said, “I am ‘f.o.b.’ to them because I speak Chinese. And sometimes it’s my preferred language too. But like I said, it depends on the context situation. So because of that they label me as ‘fob.’” He replies to this by saying, “Some of the things I do are fob, I listen to fob music, you know, I eat fob food….Because I know there are some elements of that label that do apply to me and so it’s not, you know, not a big deal.” Brian is involved in Asian, or ‘fob,’ culture and it is that involvement that allows him to excel in Chinese language. If he did not like the music or the food, then perhaps he would have less reason to maintain Chinese as his preferred language in certain contexts.
Katherine also says that enjoying the popular culture of Chinese-speaking places has helped her language development.

I think cause then, I always started watching the Taiwanese dramas and like listening more to Chinese music, so I guess maybe that helped...Uh, music, was from my friends, like in high school. When they would send me Jay Chou songs. And then for dramas, because I started with Korean dramas, and got bored, so I decided to try Taiwanese.

By constant exposure to Mandarin through music and television dramas shared by her friends, Katherine gets to practice her listening and reading and has motivation to keep learning because she wants to learn more and keep up with all the new things. While music and shows do get translated into English, often this does not happen fast enough to keep up with the latest in real time with friends. So for her to be able to interact with her friends and discuss their shared interest in Mandarin language pop culture, Katherine needs to learn and understand on her own.

**Giving it the Backseat**

Several of my interviewees decided to stop learning Chinese after learning for only one year, or even after many years. There are a number of reasons why one would push language learning to the side and opt to focus one’s energy on other areas, but the overarching factor seems to come down to investment.

**Labels and Identity.** As mentioned by Rodriguez, by the third generation Americans will either be predominantly or monolingual English speaking. The language difference between those of Asian descent who can speak an Asian language and those who cannot can cause a divide, and thus labeling. But the labels that one encounters can also reveal something about how individuals view themselves and their identity. Brown (2009), Jeon (2001), Shankar (2008), and Koboyashi (2008) all looked at labels such as ‘fob,’ ‘banana,’ and ‘white-washed’ and how these affect an individual’s construction of identity and connection to their heritage. Often because of an aversion to a certain label, people will reject the learning of certain languages that are associated with those labels. My findings show that while the Chinese-Americans in my study use these labels jokingly, they do reflect some reality and difference between groups.

When asked whether she had ever been labeled ‘banana’ (white on the inside, Asian on the outside) or white-washed by peers, Daisy replied, “Well, yeah, I guess so. But not in a bad way, per se. Like, I would even call—I might even consider myself white washed...” Daisy explains her reason for considering herself ‘white washed’: “I’m ethnically Chinese, culturally American.” Another time, she said, “I grew up very Americanized, so, there are no surprises how good my language level is (laughs).” She has never been closely connected to her Asian heritage and does not see this as a loss, because she embraces her American cultural identity.

Furthermore, when Daisy went to Shanghai to study Mandarin for a semester, instead of developing an increased appreciation of Chinese culture, she developed an increased sense of love of being an American and living in America.
Cause coming back from China was just a huge reverse culture shock, I was just really happy to be home and really happy to be able to communicate with everyone without have to worry about it or stressing too much about getting lost and not being able to ask people for directions, or yeah. Just very comfortable and familiar, so... I wouldn’t—I might even say that going to China made me appreciate the US more and embrace my American culture more.

Daisy responded to her Shanghai experience by discovering how much of an American she really is, culturally, and deciding that that was just fine. She does not feel a need to be anything that she is not and enjoys being American.

John talked about his interactions with others and the exchange of labels as being nothing special: “Yeah, so it really wasn’t a big deal at all. They didn’t make fun of me; I didn’t make fun of them. I mean, I would call them ‘fob’ at times and they would call me ‘white washed’ but it’s just all fun and games. It’s whatever, yeah.” For him, these labels meant nothing; they were not true and not false, just meaningless jokes. While giving a label highlights a difference between yourself and another group, and increases a sense of identify with one group or the other, John does not really see himself as a ‘fob,’ as someone who speaks Chinese and is into Chinese things, such as music and dramas.

Not considering himself a ‘fob’ does not mean that John does not consider himself as a part of the Asian community. John explained:

Ok, well, ethnicity, I guess I’m Canto, because that’s what my uncle speak and aunts speak, and my grandparents. And culturally I’m American. I definitely identify more with them [Americans] than Asian, but I definitely have a mix of both, I’m not completely out of sync with Asian culture, because I do hang out at Chinatown at times and then um, I do, I’m still in an Asian basketball league. So I do participate in those. And pretty much, I hang out with primarily Asians....

So John still considers himself as being Asian, but this involvement does not include language. Therefore, John participates in Asian community activities that do not encourage language maintenance, and therefore he lacks a community and language affiliation to support continued learning of Chinese.

**The Environment/Investment.** For some people, the idea of mastering another language, especially one’s cultural heritage language, is appealing, but not appealing enough for them to make opportunities to use or continue to learn the language. Sfard (1998) and Pavlenko & Lantolf (2000) discussed that learning is more than just sitting in a classroom; it is also participation in the culture of the target language, and causing a learner to become a part of and connect with others and to reconstruct their own identity. When the language is convenient to take or a requirement in school, people may choose to take it, but when it is no longer so easily accessible, they may lack the desire to create chances for language contact and practice.

John explained that he did not make an active decision to stop learning Cantonese or Mandarin; it just became difficult to manage with his other work load:
I didn’t purposely let it go in college, it’s just that you just don’t—my major is exercise biology, so I don’t really have any use for Chinese. And since my parents, no body, speaks Chinese, I don’t really have a use for it. I saw that [Chinese class at UC Davis] was 5 days a week, so...I had to focus more on my own major. The demands of his studies forced John to prioritize, and given his future goals, Chinese did not make it to the top of the list. Putting Chinese aside was a practical decision.

In college, John was still surrounded by Asian-Americans, but unlike his experience in high school, he no longer had as much exposure to Chinese languages. In regards to friends, John said, “in high school I had a few that were, yeah, I guess fresh off the boat. And then um, when I hung out with them—because my school was near Chinatown in SF—so sometimes we’d go to Chinatown, we’d go to downtown, get some food, and then they’d be speaking in Chinese.” But as for those more “fresh off the boat” friends who often spoke in Chinese, “I stopped hanging out with them probably in high school...in Davis is pretty much, they...everyone knows English. You have to.” By changing his physical location for school, John also changed social groups, and thus no longer interacted with those who brought him into contact regularly with Asian language and culture.

When Daisy began learning Mandarin in college, it was not because of a burning desire to master a language and connect deeply with her heritage. Instead, she says,

My feelings towards learning the languages, they weren’t that strong, and I don't have like a real strong inclination to learn Chinese. I never did. Like, I definitely did not have any desire to learn Chinese before I started at Berkeley. And even my first 1 1/2, 2 years at Cal, I didn't have any desire to learn Chinese. It was just a sudden thing that came over me, like, 'Hey, I should probably do this.'

Given that her initial ties to the language were not strong, it is natural that when the time came that she could no longer easily take Mandarin classes at school, she would stop. Easy access to language instruction was why Daisy, like John, gave it a chance in the first place.

In her social life, Daisy is also not surrounded by influences that would encourage her to engage in her Asian heritage. She said, “I know some of my friends listen to a lot of Chinese pop, and when I was abroad I got a lot of—we exchanged mp3’s and songs, like Jay Chou and Wang Leehom. And yeah, I liked it, but I wouldn’t say that I listen to it here, now.” While she was abroad and surrounded and immersed in Asia, it was easy for her to give its music and other forms of pop culture a chance. But the moment she returned to the United States, she let that fall to the wayside. As for other types of Asian entertainment such as dramas, Daisy has never had any interest in them, and says of her friends, “No, I don’t. A lot of my friends do, but I mean, heh... Actually, I have friends that are into it, but my close group of friends are not.” Daisy explains that of her friends, the ones that she is closest to are not the ones that participate heavily in Asian popular or traditional culture. Daisy said, “Most of my friends are Asian,” but they are Asians in America, with no interest in the popular music or dramas of Asia. Therefore, Daisy is surrounded by people more interested in the American
mainstream than in Asian languages and culture, and since her closest friends are not involved in Chinese pop culture, she sees no need to be. Consequently, she has even less to encourage her to continue her Chinese language studies.

Another thing that contributed to Daisy’s willingness to give up learning the language, besides the fact that lessons were no longer easily available, was how much the difficulty of the language discouraged her. The following interview excerpt reveals her lack of deeper desire to maintain the language:

> Writing the characters over and over, that was discouraging. Because I felt like, it almost felt like a waste of time, because I felt like I had other stuff to do, and then writing the characters is like going back to first grade. Yeah, that was more frustrating than anything. So it kind of discouraged me from continuing because I didn’t know if I wanted to spend that much time on it.

For her, Chinese was not worth the effort of painstakingly learning characters one by one.

Also expanding on how her change of environment affected her Chinese language studies, Daisy explained,

> I would say that I stopped learning, 1) because I’m not in school and there’s no formal education, no formal classes that I’m taking. Cause the classes really force you to do the homework, and there’s a test and there’s an end goal. But it’s—so it’s more hard to have the motivation to learn on your own. Um, and, sort of continuing off of that, I came home and I got busy. I got busy with loving the American culture (laughs).

She points to how a classroom environment is the push that she needs to stay on top of learning, and without a teacher, tests, and an ultimate “end goal,” she finds learning a language to be not worth the effort. In an environment that lacks classroom structure, Daisy could not maintain her language learning. Also, she enjoys being in America and doing American things too much to think about another language and culture. With so many happy distractions, and without the structure provided by class, learning Chinese does not readily cross her mind, and thus language learning takes a back seat to the rest of her life.

**Summary**

Participation is a key component involved in third generation heritage language development. Whether it involves a connection with the home and family or with friends and peer culture, participation plays a role in success. How much those areas of one’s life are involved in the heritage language will affect a learner’s participation in the language. When heritage language learners decide to begin learning it is often because their interest has been sparked by the people they associate with, or wish to associate with, whether these people are their own family member or peers. Often this desired association also has to do with the learner’s identity construction; they feel that knowing the language will give them a better sense of self. In my study, heritage learners often chose to learn Mandarin, rather than the Chinese language of their family (Cantonese or Toisan), simply because Mandarin was the one Chinese language offered in their colleges. Learners’ ties to the heritage language are best maintained when their interest in the language is
rooted in those original motivators of connecting with family and friends and of
discovering or strengthening one’s own identity.

From these findings we learn that there are still opportunities for third or
higher generation Americans to learn their heritage language, even if it is no longer
prominent in the home. One of the most important parts is exposure to language.
Learners should have an interest in the culture of the language, traditional or pop,
in order to facilitate a connection. If learners have an interest in something
connected with the language, such as music and television, they will have that
exposure and can use that interest to create further interaction in the heritage
language. By finding peers with similar interests, they then make opportunities to
access the heritage language and that in turn encourages continued interaction.
Also, if there are any relatives still proficient in the heritage language, developing a
deeper relationship with them would be beneficial for language practice. Mainly,
creating one’s own opportunities for language exposure and interaction through
personal interests and peer and familial relations will help heritage language
learning. Learning language is about more than just the classroom, but includes
interaction in everyday life.

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Notes

1. The word *fob* originally started as the acronym F.O.B. from the phrase “fresh off the
boat,” which was originally used to describe new immigrants. Gradually, *fob* (pronounced “fahb”) became its own word, and is often used by Asian-Americans to
describe individuals who retain Asian cultural interests or behaviors (Jeon, 2001).
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