

Constructing and Reconstructing Chinese American Bilingual Identity

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1. Introduction

Historically, the identity of those who are ethnically Chinese and live in the United States was continuously re-defined: from being seen as primarily 'Chinese' in the early twentieth century; to embracing America and rejecting Chinese-ness in the mid-twentieth century; to adopting both a mix of Chinese-ness and American-ness, and a Pan-Asian American, multicultural identity in the late twentieth century (Chun 2000). As Bill Moyers said on the recent PBS series *Becoming American: The Chinese Experience*, quoting an unnamed historian, "The Chinese in America have been patronized, welcomed, lynched, despised, excluded, liked, admired, but rarely understood or accepted" (Moyers 2003). This development and alteration of Chinese American identity, both within and outside the Chinese American community, continues today.

In this paper, I aim to discuss some of the issues involved in what makes someone who is ethnically Chinese identify as 'Chinese', 'American', or 'Chinese American', and how being bilingual interacts with this sense of ethnic identity. As part of a larger study that examines these issues in the very large, diverse and diffuse Chinese American community in the San Francisco Bay Area, in this paper I am focusing only on the preliminary results from bilingual young adults (ages approximately 18-35) who fall into two main categories: those who are American-born (often called second generation), and those who are foreign-born (that is, born in a Chinese-speaking country) but immigrated to the United States as children (often called 1.5 generation) (Lo 1999). In particular, I seek to explore three main questions:

1. How do these two generations (American-born and foreign-born) differ by language use and their sense of ethnic identity?
2. How does bilingual language use influence ethnic identity?
3. How do community practices influence ethnic identity?

To examine these questions, and generally to explore the relationship between ethnic identity and bilingualism among these young bilingual Chinese Americans, I use a combination of methodologies, both quantitative and qualitative: responses from a questionnaire which focuses on language use, attitudes, identity and practices; interviews; recordings of conversations; and ethnographic observations. This combination allows for an investigation of the act of 'being' and 'becoming' (Giampapa 2001) Chinese American, and what 'Chinese American' means for these subjects. As we will see, this examination demonstrates how identity is fluid and socially constructed in many ways (Blackledge and Pavlenko 2001; Bucholtz 1995; Mendoza-Denton 1997), and how identity is contrastively 'styled' (Eckert 2000; Irvine 2001) through both linguistic interaction and community practices.

2. The community and the participants

First, a brief introduction to the community and participants. As I mentioned, the Chinese American community in the San Francisco Bay Area is very large, diverse, and diffuse. California in general has the largest number of ethnically Chinese in the United States, and the San Francisco Bay Area, along with the Los Angeles and New York metropolitan areas, has one of the highest urban concentrations of ethnically Chinese in the country.

Economically, in the Bay Area this group is very diverse, ranging from the very poor recent immigrants from southern China who live in Chinatown areas, to wealthier recent immigrants from Taiwan, to well-established Chinese American families who have lived in the United States for several generations dating back to the 19th century.

Linguistically, this group ranges from those who know no English to those who speak both English and a variety of Chinese daily to those who know only English. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, in California almost 3% of those over the age of 5 speak Chinese in the home. Although exact numbers are not available for the San Francisco Bay Area, a large percentage of these speakers do live in this area.

As a part of a larger study, I recruited 50 young participants (20 men and 30 women, 25 foreign-born and 25 American-born) to complete the questionnaire. These participants were recruited through a variety of venues: postings on the web, universities, email lists, friend-of-a-friend networking, and word-of-mouth. As it turned out, this group is educated — almost all are either college graduates or currently enrolled in a university — and ‘middle class.’

Of these 50 participants, I conducted hour-long interviews with 8 of them: with 3 American-born women, 2 each with American-born men and foreign-born women, and 1 with a foreign-born man. Some of these participants have also self-recorded themselves and their family and friends in everyday bilingual conversations.

Generally, the participants in this study, regardless of which generation they belong to, are fluent in English, with varying degrees of fluency in a variety of Chinese – mainly Mandarin or Cantonese, but also Toisanese and other varieties. All of the participants *do* describe themselves as bilingual. While all of the participants can read and write in English, most are not literate in Chinese. As such, the questionnaire was written in English.

3. Generational differences

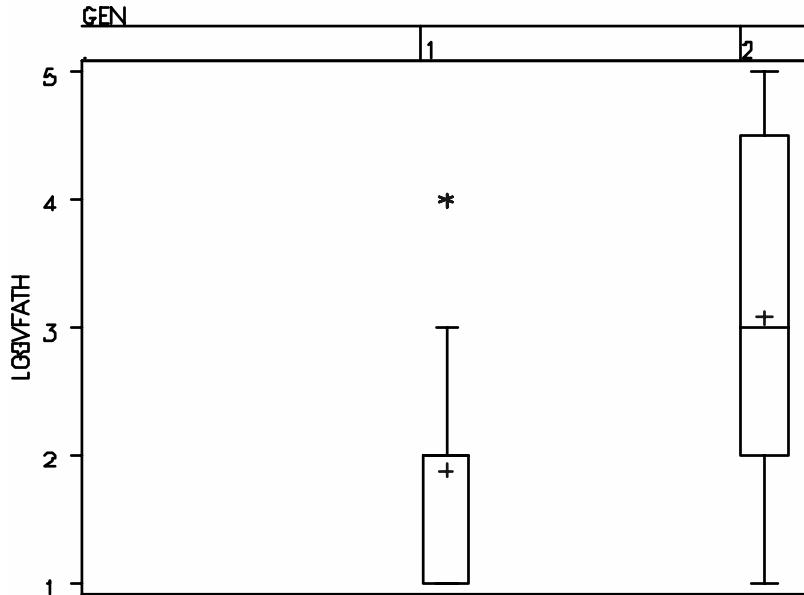
With this background in mind, let us now consider our first question: How do the two generations (American-born and foreign-born but immigrated as children) differ on language use and ethnic identity? Lo’s (1999) work on Asian Americans in Los Angeles indicates that there are definite differences between these two groups in how they use language and how they construct their ethnic identity. Interviews with participants in my own study, and ethnographic observations in the Chinese American community suggest that these two generations have differences in their language use (with generally the foreign-born generation speaking more Chinese or ‘better’ Chinese) and community practices (generally, the foreign-born generation is seen as having closer connections to ‘traditional’ Chinese behaviors, religion, beliefs, while the American-born generation is seen as more ‘Americanized’).

Participants also report that each group has a particular, as one interviewee put it, “fashion sense”: they dress differently, and even drive different types of cars. As the participants reported, stereotypically, young American-born Chinese Americans dress like mainstream Americans and would be the only ethnically Chinese to drive an American-made car, and young foreign-born Chinese Americans wore particular brands of clothing, styled their hair in particular ways, and drove modified Japanese cars.

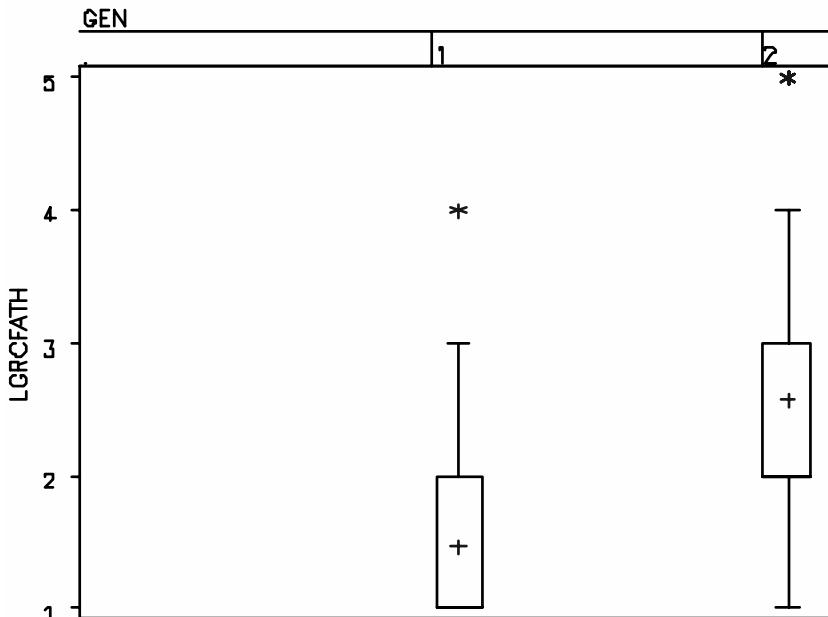
By examining the reported patterns of language use for each generation from the questionnaire, we can see that there indeed is a pronounced difference in the amount of Chinese foreign-born participants reported using with their parents versus the amount American-born participants reported — basically, the foreign-born participants used more Chinese and the American-born participants used more English. We can see this in the boxplots in (1) and (2), which illustrate what language the participants reported using with and receiving from their fathers. A similar pattern was reported for the language that the participants reported using with and receiving from their mothers.

Boxplots Key

Generations 1=Foreign-born (FB) 2=American-born (AB)
Language choice 1=Only Chinese
 2=Mostly Chinese with some English
 3= Both Chinese & English about equal
 4=Mostly English with some Chinese
 5=Only English



(1) Boxplot: Language given to father by generation



(2) Boxplot: Language received from father by generation

(3) is an example of bilingual conversation from one of the participants, Penny, who is 27 and American-born. She reports giving equal amounts of Chinese and English to her parents and receiving mostly Chinese with some English from them. This is reflected in the excerpt in (3), and is consistent with what the American-born participants in general report (Note: transcription conventions are listed in the Appendix).

(3) Conversation Excerpt

Penny: AB, 27, daughter (reports giving equal Chinese/English to parents, receiving more Chinese than English from them)

Bill: FB, 54, father

Rose: FB, 50's, mother

Ling Ling: Bill's mother, Penny's grandmother

Jyutping Cantonese Romanization

- 35 Bill: *Gong a waa* (.) *ngo kuw fu aa* (.) *ngo maa go go*. (.) Brother *mai mai lo sie di cin laa*.
 <<My uncle, my mother's brother>> <<took all the money>>
- 36 Penny: *Lei go ma go* brother?
 <<Your mother's brother>>
- 37 Bill: Uh huh. *Keoi yuw go* brother *go*. =
 <<She had a brother>> <<brother>>
- 38 Rose: = *Keoi ge* grandfather *bei sai ge zai* (.) *m bei //ge di lei//*
 <<His (grandfather) gave it all to the son, and didn't give anything to the daughters>>
- 39 Bill: //Grandfather// *bei sai zai* (.) *geom saam ge lei mou*. =
 <<gave it all to the son, the three daughters got nothing>>
- 40 Rose: = *Neoi mou*.
 <<Girls, nothing>>
- 41 Penny: Ling Ling?
- 42 Bill: Ling Ling *mou* (.) *mou laa dou cin aa maa m bei cin bei heoi dei aa maa*.
 <<Ling Ling didn't, didn't get any money because no money was given to her>>
- 43 Penny: So (.) Ling Ling was born in Malaysia?
- 44 Bill: Yeah.
- 45 Penny: I didn't ever know that.

This pattern — that the foreign-born group uses more Chinese with their parents than the American-born participants — is what we would expect following the reports from interviews and ethnographic observations. Looking further at the questionnaire responses on language use, however, this is the last pronounced difference that we find. Overall, these two generations report the same linguistic behavior for the rest of the questions — they report giving and receiving Chinese from their grandparents, giving and receiving mostly English with some Chinese with their siblings and friends who know Chinese, and (not surprisingly) using only English with their friends who do not know Chinese. This pattern is quite like that which Li Wei (1994) found in his study of Chinese speakers in Newcastle, England. Additionally, both groups equally reported that code-switching was a 'natural' behavior for bilinguals, and something which they report doing with their parents, siblings, and friends.

Examining the questionnaire responses on ethnic identity and community practices likewise indicates that the two generations are not, at least quantitatively, very different. On the questionnaire, the participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they identified with a particular identity — 'Chinese', for example. The degree to which they identified with this could be 'very strong', 'strong', 'somewhat strong', etc. By far the strongest ethnic and cultural identities for these respondents were 'Chinese American' and 'Chinese' — and there was no significant difference in how each generation identified with these or any other identities (such as 'American', 'Asian American', etc.), with one

exception: ‘American-born Chinese’, which obviously the American-born generation strongly identified with while the foreign-born group did not.

Both groups reported participating at similar rates in various community practices such as celebrating holidays (both Chinese and American), preparing and eating food (both Chinese and American), and using Chinese and English language media such as movies or newspapers.

So, the quantitative data do not indicate any strong differences between these two generations except in that the foreign-born generation uses more Chinese with their parents than the American-born generation, and the American-borns identify with being American-born Chinese more than the foreign-borns. Otherwise, this preliminary look suggests there are no differences in identity, community practices and language for these generations. This disagrees with what the participants had been telling me, and what I had observed in the community. How do we resolve this apparent contradiction? Let’s first examine questions 2 and 3 to see where we can get with this.

4. How language use and community practices influence ethnic identity

Questions 2 and 3 both deal with influences on ethnic identity: how does bilingual language use have an influence on ethnic identity, and how do community practices influence ethnic identity?

Quantitatively, the questionnaire responses suggest that language use does not have an influence on ethnic identity for these young people. The amount of Chinese language, for example, a participant reports using appears to not predict how strongly he or she identifies with being American or Chinese or Chinese American — for example, more Chinese usage does not mean a stronger sense of being Chinese, more English does not mean a stronger sense of being American, and so on. The same can be said for who these participants use Chinese or English with, and the degree of fluency they report having: so, for example, speaking more Chinese with one’s parents did not result in having a stronger sense of being Chinese or Chinese American, and being able to speak a variety of Chinese ‘very well’ instead of ‘somewhat well’ does not mean that one identifies as being more Chinese.

We have the same issue with Question 3: community practices appear to not have an influence on ethnic identity, at least quantitatively. The questionnaire responses suggest that the frequency with which a person participates in particular community practices such as celebrating holidays, shopping at Chinese markets, or watching Chinese language television, is not a good predictor of how strongly one identifies with being Chinese, American, or another ethnic identity.

Qualitatively, however, we have a different story. What the participants told me during their interviews and what participants wrote in the open-ended questions on the questionnaire suggest that the participants believe that language use and community practices *do* have an influence on ethnic identity.

First, a look at how participants describe their language use as having an influence on their sense of identity. In response to the open-ended question “Describe a situation that makes you feel more Chinese,” participants wrote:

- “Speaking Chinese.” (Adam, AB, 21)
- “Speaking and writing in Chinese.” (Mei, FB, 34)
- “Reading in Chinese.” (Matthew, FB, 25)
- “Engaging in activities using Chinese (reading, speaking, watching movies)”. (Luke, AB, 28)

In response to the question “What are some reasons for learning Chinese,” participants primarily wrote about personal reasons dealing with cultural identity, roots, and family (as opposed to reasons for learning English: it is practical, it is necessary for a job, it is used in American society):

- “I’m Chinese. That’s most important.” (Andrew, FB, 33)
- “My culture and roots.” (Rodney, FB, 19)
- “Possessing the ability to speak, understand, and read Chinese would be crucial in helping me to appreciate and treasure my cultural heritage. In addition, it would improve my communication with my Grandparents, older Aunts and Uncles, and other extended relatives. Finally it would be a skill I would carry with pride since it is my ethnic background.” (Edith, AB, 31)

- “Old school Chinese people will only think of you as Chinese if you can at least speak [it].” (Zach, AB, 26)

When I interviewed Clara (AB, 28), she said that to be Chinese, one has to be able to speak Chinese because “language gives you insights to a culture’s nuances.” Matthew (FB, 25) said in his interview that knowing Chinese was an important part of being Chinese: if someone who was ethnically Chinese did not know Chinese, that person would be somehow less Chinese.

Related to this were responses to the question “What are some things that make a person American.” Answers to this question focused on English language use and having no knowledge of the Chinese language or culture:

- “Speaks no Chinese and doesn’t know much Chinese history at all.” (Deana, AB, 29)
 - “Not knowing any other language besides English.” (Rhonda, FB, 26)
- and responses to the question “Describe a situation that makes you feel more American”:
- “Talking in English, watching English T.V./movies.” (Leonard, FB, 19)
 - “Talking in English, being with English speaking friends.” (Elizabeth, AB, 21)

Clearly, these participants feel that language can have a strong influence on one’s ethnic identity.

Answers to the open-ended questions on the questionnaire and responses in the interviews likewise reveal that these participants feel that community practices also have an influence on one’s ethnic identity. When answering “Describe a situation that makes you feel more Chinese,” participants wrote about Chinese cultural practices, holiday, food, etc.:

- “When I get the craving for pork’s blood, one of my favorite dim sum dishes.” (Miranda, FB, 30)
- “Preparing for Chinese New Year and celebrating the new year by passing out red envelopes.” (Kitty, FB, 32)
- “Eating Chinese food with my family, smelling home cooking, i.e. strange soups, taking my shoes off when I enter a home.” (Leroy, AB, 24)

And in response to “What are some things that make a person Chinese,” they focused on knowledge of Chinese culture and language:

- “The culture, family and the values you gain from your parents.” (Andrew, FB, 33)
- “Having Chinese parents, speaking Chinese, celebrating Chinese holidays, eating and cooking Chinese food.” (Jennifer, FB, 23)
- “Their understanding of their culture and their language. I know friends that are Chinese by nationality but they are American through and through because they don’t speak the language or care about the culture.” (Sarah, AB, 29)

The importance of community practices also has an influence on American identity, as we can see in the responses to the question “Describe a situation that makes you feel more American,” where answers concentrated on stereotypically ‘American’ activities and spending time with non-Chinese:

- “I feel more American when I engage in activities with a definite American bent, such as watching American football, celebrating Thanksgiving, grilling on the 4th of July, discussing the flaws of the current administration’s domestic policies, etc.” (Wally, FB, 30)
- “Hanging out with non-Chinese friends, going to political rallies, going to classes and writing English essays.” (Jennifer, FB, 23)

And in response to “What are some things that make a person American” — again, a focus on ‘American’ activities and behavior:

- “Getting jingoistic about America during the Olympics/ times of war, voting, speaking out, emphasizing individualism, trusting the American press over the Chinese press.” (Zach, AB, 26)
- “I guess someone who’s into American culture, who celebrates the American holidays. I know some Chinese family who has never celebrated Thanksgiving. Not that they have to, it is just that they would never have a turkey. I wouldn’t consider these people American, even if they’ve lived here for a very long time.” (Jinying, FB, 25)

Again, these qualitative responses suggest that the participants view both language use and community practices as having a strong influence on ethnic identity — which is not reflected in the patterns from the quantitative responses from the questionnaire.

5. Resolving the contradiction

This brings us to a final question: how do we resolve this seeming contradiction? I would like to suggest that these preliminary results are not a contradiction, but rather are evidence of the fluidity of identity, and that the two methods focus on different aspects of identity. So, as the questionnaire responses suggest, these participants already view themselves as being Chinese, Chinese American, American, etc., but as the interviews, open-ended responses, and observations suggest, some practices (in this case, language use and community practices) can make the participants feel or appear more Chinese or American or Chinese American. We can say the same thing about generational differences: in general, there are few language behavior, community practice, or identity differences between American-born and foreign-born participants, but some practices (as reported by participants, dress and language ability) do mark the two groups as different from each other.

Consider the notion of style as described by Eckert (2000), Irvine (2001) and others — where ‘style’ is the way to act out a particular identity in order to be contrastive with others. As Eckert and Irvine describe, this contrastiveness can be acted out through a variety of means: dress, language, community practices, etc. This is what the participants report for themselves: by participating in particular linguistic, community, or behavioral practices, they feel more “Chinese”, or “American”, or “Chinese American”, and distinguish between the two generations. These activities are part of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ (Giampapa 2001) Chinese American. As one participant wrote in response to the question “What are some things that make a person Chinese American”:

- “What makes a person Chinese American is the synergy of being Chinese and being American. Being Chinese means you have a different set of rules. Like respect [for] your elders, you never turn your back [on] your family, doing better than your parents did when they came here. As an American, you have individuality, the “American Dream”, freedom to do what you please. Being Chinese American means straddling both worlds and having a fine balance.” (Gloria, AB, 28)

This balancing act, “having one foot in one world and the other foot in the other world” (Clara, AB, 28), requires constant adjustment as these participants construct and reconstruct their Chinese American identities.

A final lesson learned: while these preliminary results are very much part of a work in progress, I don’t think I would have been able to begin to understand this situation without the use of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Each method can only reveal part of the situation, not the whole — each can only be a piece of the puzzle. The questionnaire, while it does reveal general linguistic behavior and community practice patterns, cannot capture the day-to-day alternations in these patterns. The interviews, ethnographic observations, conversations, and open-ended questions on the questionnaire, on the other hand, can capture alterations, beliefs, and fluidity, but not the general patterns. I think it is important to use multiple methodologies in order to ‘triangulate’ the processes involved in bilingualism and ethnic identity.

Appendix

Transcription Conventions

text	English speech
<i>text</i>	Cantonese speech
<<text>>	English translation of Cantonese speech
//text//	Overlapping speech
=	Latched speech
(.)	Micropause
.	Falling intonation
?	Rising intonation

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