

The Role of Parents in Chinese Heritage-Language Schools

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Abstract

This paper looks at the Chinese heritage language schools in metropolitan Phoenix area and examines what role parents of the students play in the schools. Based on semi-structured interviews, class observations and publication from the local Chinese schools, this study shows that although Chinese schools have benefited from the support of parents in many ways, the excessive dependence on them has contributed to some problems in Chinese schools, including low quality of teaching and inadequately prepared teachers. Recommendations are made to improve the situation by exploring the potential resources unavailable among parents. More connections need to be built with Chinese international students, scholars and faculty in education or Chinese program at local universities.

Introduction

With the passage of English-only policies in California, Massachusetts, and Arizona in recent years, bilingual education programs have diminished greatly. Proposition 227 in California (passed in 1998), though not completely replacing bilingual education, significantly limited the role of languages other than English for instruction and made English immersion education the preferred intervention for English language learners (Rossell, 2002). Proposition 203 (2000) in Arizona, which was intended to be even more restrictive than Proposition 227, essentially eliminated instruction in a language other than English, except for students who qualify for a small number of dual language immersion programs that continue to operate sporadically throughout the state. It is worthwhile to point out, however, that because these restrictive policies are aimed at public education (Wright, 2004), their overt impact on heritage-language schools has been nil. Accordingly, while Spanish–English

bilingual programs in public education have been largely shut down since the passage of Proposition 203, Chinese-language schools and Korean-language schools, which work independently of the public education system, have become even more widespread and vigorous. These heritage-language schools provide a supplemental native-language support beyond the English-only instruction provided in public schools, and in many cases, they play a decisive role in heritage-language preservation.

Heritage-language schools are normally operated by local community members. In particular, community parents who are interested in maintaining their home languages and who participate in these schools are often responsible for the success of the heritage-language schools. Active parent participation has long been an integral part of many community heritage-language programs. Chinese schools are no exception; in fact, most Chinese-language schools are organized and operated by parents interested in maintaining their home language and cultural traditions (Wang, 1996). There is an unspoken expectation that when parents enroll their children in a heritage-language school, they will be expected to assist in the school in multiple ways. Some parents become active members of the school's administrative staff, while others prefer classroom teaching and helping teachers with learning activities (Chao, 1996). Regardless of the type of participation, the interaction among parents, teachers, and children helps build a positive learning environment for learning Chinese and engaging in Chinese-language cultural events. In spite of the benefits of parental involvement in Chinese-heritage schools, there are also some drawbacks that may occur when parents become overly invested (Compton, 2001). This paper has a twofold purpose: (a) It seeks to explore both the benefits and potential drawbacks of parental involvement in a weekend Chinese heritage-language school, and (b) It examines connections between the Chinese heritage-language school and the local Chinese community. Hopefully, the study will provide new insight into how Chinese heritage-language schools can make better use of community resources and achieve greater success.

Diversity Among Chinese Communities

Since the last census in 1990, the Chinese population in the United States has increased steadily. The 2000 U.S. Census indicates that the Chinese population in the United States has increased from about 2.3 million in 1990 to approximately 2.8 million in 2000, and the Chinese language is now ranked the third most frequently spoken language in the United States, behind English and Spanish. To promote the retention of Chinese among the increasing Chinese population, Chinese schools have emerged nationwide with the support of local Chinese communities (Chao, 1996).

It is noted that Chinese communities demonstrate great diversity in terms of when and how they come to the United States. Historically, they can be divided into three groups based on the three waves of immigrants. The first wave occurred during the mid-19th century. Most of these Chinese immigrants came from the coastal areas of China, particularly Guangdong province. They spoke their hometown dialect, Cantonese, one of the major southern Chinese dialects, but used traditional Chinese writing.¹ The mid-20th century witnessed the second wave of Chinese immigration, which was made up mostly of Taiwanese professionals and anti-Communist elites. They spoke Mandarin, currently the official oral form of the Chinese language for Taiwan and the People's Republic of China. Their writing still used the traditional Chinese characters. The third wave entered the United States from mainland China during the last quarter century after the People's Republic of China and the United States established diplomatic relations in 1976. Interestingly, this large wave included Chinese from all socioeconomic groups and backgrounds (Chang, 2003). Most of them spoke Mandarin, with some also speaking their hometown dialects. All of them adopted simplified Chinese as the writing form, which is taught in education system in the People's Republic of China. It was created by reforming the traditional Chinese writing characters in the 1950s by the Chinese government (State Council, 1995). The diversity in spoken and written languages of Chinese communities shows their impact on the local Chinese heritage-language schools.

Method

The metropolitan Phoenix area is an appropriate setting for this study since it has a sizable Chinese population. There are currently six weekend Chinese schools in Phoenix.² All of the schools operate as nonprofit organizations to promote Chinese language and culture among Chinese families living in greater Phoenix.

This study is directed toward these Chinese heritage-language schools. I used qualitative methods to collect and analyze data, which consisted of semi-structured interviews with individual teachers and administrators in Chinese heritage-language schools, and observations of the Chinese-language classes. I also gathered information from publications of these Chinese heritage-language schools, including their yearbooks and monthly newsletters.

The interviews include four people. Interviewee 1 is the current principal of School 1. Interviewee 2 is the current teacher of School 2, who also taught in school 5. Interviewee 3 is the previous principal of School 2. Interviewee 4 is a teacher in School 3 more than three years and has helped to organize many Chinese community events. They all have full-time jobs besides their positions in Chinese schools. All of them have children enrolled in Chinese schools except Interviewee 1. Given their close connection to their school and their

acquaintance with other Chinese schools in Phoenix area, they are able to provide very meaningful and extensive information about the local Chinese schools. I personally knew Interviewee 1 and Interviewee 3, and asked them to participate in the study. They were very supportive and referred me to Interviewee 2 and Interviewee 4 respectively. After obtaining their agreement, I conducted the interview separately. I relied on semi-structured interviews based on questions I had created beforehand. I also used gathered data from conversational open-ended interviews. The semi-structured interview questions asked about the relationship between the Chinese schools and parents in the community, and the connection between Chinese schools with Chinese communities as well. In the classroom observations, I focused on the ways teachers interacted with children to get a sense of their preferred instructional styles and to see how they related the instruction materials to students.

In the analysis of the data, I looked for specific categories corresponding to issues regarding the connection among Chinese schools, parents in the community, and the local Chinese community. I was particularly interested in finding out where and how connections were built, and where and how any disconnection seemed to arise.

Findings

Because the Chinese schools are largely community-based, they respond primarily to the various needs of the local Chinese community. The variety of language backgrounds of the Chinese community that attends each school determines what form of writing and oral Chinese is taught in that particular community-based Chinese school: two schools among six teach Mandarin Chinese and simplified writing form; two other schools provide both simplified and traditional Chinese character instruction; one school offers both Cantonese and Mandarin classes; one focuses on traditional Chinese writing and Mandarin speaking.

In addition to directly and indirectly influencing the curriculum, parents in the community contribute financially to the Chinese schools. As indicated by Chao (1996), the funding of a Chinese-language school normally comes from tuition and fund raising. Although tuition is determined by student enrollment, fund raising depends largely on the network and enthusiasm of parents from the community. In this study, I found that School 2 solicited its funding largely from parents in the community. One important way to obtain funding is to make good use of the corporate volunteer programs. Since many Chinese parents work for Motorola, these Chinese parents bring financial support through the Motorola Volunteer Grants Program (Motorola Inc., 2001). Under this program, Motorola employees who do substantial volunteer work for nonprofit, tax-exempt public charities in their community can apply each

year for two grants (for separate organizations) of \$150 each to qualified organizations in which they are involved as active volunteers. As a result, Chinese parents are able to bring significant funding to Chinese schools. In 2003, School 2 alone obtained \$3,150 from Motorola, the most generous financial supporter of that year. Parents working for Intel Corp. brought \$1,800 in the similar way for School 2 through programs like Volunteer Matching Grants Program (Intel Corp., 2003). The funding obtained this way by parents accounted for 44% of the total financial support of School 2 in 2003. Apparently, corporations and businesses with a high concentration of Chinese employees turned out to be the major donors. Another way to solicit financial support is to seek individual donations, many of which come from Chinese parents in the local community. For School 2 in 2003, individual donations amounted to \$1,450, representing 13% of the total donations of that year. Other Chinese schools solicit funding primarily the same way although the funding they obtain individually varies from each other.

It is interesting to note that the connections between Chinese-language schools and the Chinese community appear to be built through efforts of parents in the community. In areas where there are parents who are committed to preserving Chinese language and culture, and who have the financial resources, community schools are built and tend to prosper. It is in this sense that Chinese schools are like a magnet, drawing power first from parents in the community and then diffusing it to the larger Chinese community. How far community schools reach depends largely on where parents have connections. Because there are many Chinese parents working for Intel and Motorola, the Chinese School 2 is able to extend its connection to these two companies. Essentially, partnerships are established with the help of large numbers of parents who work in these companies. It is parents who bridge schools to their workplaces outside their local Chinese community.

In addition, the supportive strength and diversity among Chinese parents contributes largely to the multiple resources of Chinese schools. The Chinese School 2 has a Parent Association. Membership in the Parent Association is automatically approved for parents of all students at School 2. Since parents of the students vary significantly in their education discipline and career positions,³ they are able to apply their expertise and provide various kinds of community services. For example, they frequently hold lectures or forums in School 2. Their lectures cover a wide range of topics, including teaching people how to fill out forms for tax returns, educating children in the United States, and medical care consulting. Parents generously share their professional skills with schools and provide volunteer services.

Parents have been so highly involved in the Chinese schools that their service contributes to almost all aspects of Chinese schools, including administration, teaching, and community service. Parents of the students are the main group of school employees, though their work is almost entirely on

a volunteer basis or for modest pay. One reason for this is that there is nowhere from which to officially recruit teachers or staff because Chinese-language teacher training does not exist in Arizona. Arizona teacher certificate programs do not provide any teachers for weekend Chinese schools. Accordingly, Chinese schools have to completely depend on the Chinese community for teachers and administrators. It is also notable that the Chinese school administrators tend to recruit teachers from among parents rather than from among non-parent members of the Chinese community or Chinese international students at the university level. Compared with local Korean schools, which also recruit teachers from Korean international students at local universities or colleges, it has become common for Chinese schools to recruit teachers from Chinese parents because they believe parents are reliable, easily accessible, and, more importantly, very affordable.

Again, there is a big overlap between parents and school employees. Many school employees are also parents of the students. It is impressive that parents help in school libraries, develop classes, give lectures, and do administration tasks. Chinese schools also make great efforts to involve parents in other ways. For example, there are many classes designed particularly for parents, such as adult choir and adult dance. Although these classes are open to the public, the majority of students in these classes are parents (CCSA Year Book, 2003). These classes bring together parents who are geographically distributed, and they provide a group parents would like to identify with. Parents are glad to use this opportunity to discuss how to educate their children in the English-speaking context. It is not uncommon to see parents enjoy such classes while their children are taking Chinese or math class at the same time in the same school. The classes also provide a window through which parents become active community members and engage in major community cultural events. When it is time for big Chinese holidays such as the Moon Festival Party, the Spring Festival celebration, and Chinese Week, parents from the adult choir and adult dance classes actively perform on the stage.

Challenges

On the one hand, Chinese schools have depended largely on parents in terms of the financial standing, human resources, and form of written and oral Chinese taught in the schools. Parents of students play a crucial role in keeping the schools running successfully. How far Chinese schools reach the local community is largely determined by where parents are. However, Chinese schools fail to reach Chinese people other than parents in the community. The excessive dependence on parents creates several problems. First of all, Chinese-language schools that rely on parents suffer from teacher shortages, high turnover rates, and unqualified teachers. Because teaching in Chinese

heritage-language schools is perceived more as a volunteer-oriented position for parents rather than a strong committed profession, there are no widely agreed teacher recruitment criteria. Most of them, if not all, are not licensed teachers, and therefore have little experience teaching Chinese as a heritage language even if some of them did have experience in teaching Chinese to native speakers of Chinese in China. Many of them have full-time jobs apart from working in Chinese schools. They teach Chinese on weekends largely because they want to stay close to Chinese schools as the hub of the Chinese community, or do it just for recreation and socializing. Although Chinese school boards try to nurture their teachers and make them want to stay involved, turnover remains a problem. Inadequately prepared teacher groups contribute to the low quality of classroom instruction, which is dominated by repetitive drills and exercises coupled with memorization of texts. Teachers read texts aloud to students, and then students repeat after them, which is not an effective way to acquire language for communication. Teachers then help students go through exercises of repetition. Learning is focused on controlled writing and pronunciation exercises, since most students come from Chinese families and have already had rudimentary levels of oral proficiency in Chinese. Essentially, teachers in Chinese schools teach heritage-language learners according to the pedagogical methods used while they were growing up in their Chinese-speaking countries. The limited selection of textbooks makes the situation even more difficult for teachers. In schools where the simplified Chinese writing system is taught, even if they use the textbook designed for overseas Chinese in North America (Jia & Fan, 2002), problems arise. Students growing up in the United States are baffled when they see a picture in a textbook depicting an ambulance that looks totally different from one in the United States. If the text talks about a 12-year-old girl's shopping experience in a Chinese city, heritage-language students may have difficulty relating to that experience, and they may feel alienated when exposed to such text content. The same thing happens to Chinese schools using Taiwanese textbooks to teach the traditional Chinese characters. Some schools choose textbooks teaching Chinese as a foreign language. This does not make things better, since it eliminates the difference between heritage-language learners, who are exposed to a limited community of the target language, and foreign-language learners, who are exposed to their native language community and thus excluded from the target language community (Kagan & Dillon, 2003). Taken together, these reasons help to explain why many Chinese heritage-language learners find difficulty in learning Chinese and even show resistance to Chinese schools.

Recommendations

Chinese-language schools have benefited greatly from their close connection with parents in the community. However, the resources available beyond the parents are underutilized. One available resource is the Chinese

international students in local universities, who would be able to help relieve the problem of teacher shortages faced by Chinese schools. Typically, Chinese international students represent the best of their nation's intellectual life, and they have very strong educational backgrounds. Most have obtained their bachelor's degrees from first-tier universities in China. They come to the United States either to pursue master's or doctoral study (Wang & Frank, 2002). Academically, these students, especially those with previous teaching experience, are better prepared for Chinese teaching. The group of Chinese international students in education, psychology, and Asian Study Centers would help Chinese schools to improve their instruction and teaching methods. For example, in the metropolitan Phoenix area, Chinese international students at Arizona State University may be excellent teachers for local Chinese schools. However, most international students are not parents, and most do not have teaching experience with children, so they largely stay unconnected with local Chinese schools. The underlying theme is that Chinese schools tend to look internally for parents to recruit teachers. By doing so, the rich resources available beyond parents are left untapped.

Higher learning institutions are also potential resources to explore, particularly those institutions that conduct research relevant to heritage-language acquisition. For example, at Arizona State University, the Department of Languages and Literatures offers a Chinese program. ASU's Asian Study Center has done intensive research on Asian American communities. The College of Education is actively involved in heritage-language preservation in the United States. All of these resources have distinguished faculty doing research on Chinese language and culture. Some faculty are of Chinese origin. Therefore, it is possible for Chinese schools to ask for help and improve Chinese-language learning and teaching.

Conclusion

Chinese-language preservation is largely left to the Chinese communities, and particularly to Chinese schools, which makes it all the more important to explore every potential resource to keep Chinese schools successful. Proposition 203 has made bilingual education unwelcome in Arizona. Efforts by communities to maintain their heritage language have become more crucial since the chances of public school alternatives have been removed. The plan for Chinese to be offered as an Advanced Placement course starting in 2006 might improve Chinese-language teaching; however, it has nothing to do with teaching Chinese as a heritage language. Weekend Chinese schools still carry the mission to promote and preserve Chinese as a heritage language. These schools need to envision themselves as powerful institutions involved in the national heritage language movement, rather than as schools only serving parental communities or the Chinese community alone.

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Endnotes

¹ Simplified Chinese writing still keeps the written form of a large Chinese vocabulary, while it simplifies traditional characters and makes written Chinese easier to learn. Simplified Chinese writing originated in mainland China in the 1950s, and it is now popular in mainland China and Singapore. It has received increasing popularity in the rest of the world. It is expanding rapidly to those places long dominated by traditional Chinese writing, such as Hong Kong, Macao, and overseas Chinese communities outside of Southeast Asia. See the table for comparisons between traditional Chinese writing and simplified Chinese writing (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simplified_chinese_character).

Type of writing	Example 1		Example 2	
Traditional Chinese		雲		龍
Simplified Chinese	cloud	云	dragon	龙

² The six schools are shown in the following table.

Chinese Linguistic School of Phoenix	凤凰城中文学校
Chinese School of Chinese Evangelical Free Church	华人播道会中文学校
Contemporary Chinese School of Arizona	现代中文学校
Greater Phoenix Chinese Christian School	凤城华人基督教会中文学校
Phoenix Chinese School	
Tempe Chinese school	希望中文学校

Note that in this study, *Chinese schools* refer to those open to the public. In house tutoring centers, normally, a couple of families group their children together to learn Chinese, and they take turns hosting the tutoring. This type of private house tutoring center is not included in this study.

³ Parents in the community vary widely regarding their educational levels and disciplines. In the case of School 2, the majority of parent communities are recent immigrants from mainland China. Many of them originally came to United States for their graduate study. Thus, they are generally highly educated, though this needs further investigation. There might be other Chinese- language schools that have parental communities with relatively low levels of education. It is determined by many factors, such as immigration wave, community location, and so on.

