

The Interplay of Identity Construction and Motivational Development in Chinese Heritage Language Learning: Confrontation between Individual Agency and Hegemonic Social Discourse

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Manuscript received December 12, 2023; revised January 18, 2024; accepted February 3, 2024; published May 14, 2024

Abstract—This study explores the intricate relationship between identity construction and motivational development in Chinese Heritage Language (CHL) learners. Drawing on the narratives of three CHL learners in the UK, the research employs a post-structuralist perspective and the Heritage Language Identity Development Model (HLIDM) to analyze the dynamic interplay of personal histories, spatial contexts, and relational experiences in shaping learners' identities and motivations. The findings underscore the pivotal role of accepting one's Chinese identity in shaping motivations to learn CHL. However, this acceptance is not passive but emerges from active societal participation and the exercise of individual agency. The study also highlights the significant influence of societal hegemonic discourses, particularly those related to authenticity, which can impact learners' motivations negatively. The research concludes by emphasizing the need for a more inclusive understanding of Chinese identity and a challenge to dominant discourses on authenticity to support effective CHL learning.

Keywords—Chinese heritage language; second language acquisition, motivation and identity, identity development

I. INTRODUCTION

Recent studies [1–3] have consistently identified a robust association between motivation and identity in the context of Chinese Heritage Language (CHL) learning. This connection is particularly evident as Heritage Language (HL) learners often find their motivation to learn intimately tied to their sense of identity and societal expectations, as shaped by essentialist discourses [4]. In essence, these learners frequently feel a compulsion to learn heritage languages due to their racial or ethnic affiliations [5].

Historically, much of the research in this field has adopted an essentialist perspective, treating such identities as predetermined by socio-cultural factors [6]. However, contemporary research [2, 7] has shifted towards a post-structuralist framework, which views identity not as determined by essence or nature, but as a construct that is created and maintained through social interaction [3]. This perspective emphasizes that HL learners often exercise their agency in negotiating their identities against hegemonic discourses as they engage with society [8, 9]. This latter approach provides a more nuanced understanding, as it takes into account not only socio-cultural constructs but also the influence of personal experiences and social participation on identity formation.

In parallel, research on the development of language learning motivation has received considerable attention in

recent years, highlighting the contextual construction of motivation as a dynamic process rather than a static state [10–12]. However, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding the trajectories of heritage language learning motivation. More critically, the relationship between the motivational development and identity construction of CHL learners has not been thoroughly explored. Given the strong interconnection between these two aspects, one might find possible interaction of them. To examine this hypothesis and contribute to the existing research on the dynamic trajectory of heritage language learning motivation, this study will adopt a post-structuralist perspective and utilize the Heritage Language Identity Development Model (HLIDM) [13] to conduct a narrative analysis involving three CHL learners. The findings from this study will provide valuable insights and practical recommendations for sustaining and enhancing heritage language learning.

II. THE DYNAMICS OF CHL LEARNERS' IDENTITY AND MOTIVATION DEVELOPMENT

Numerous studies have underscored racial identity as a significant motivator for HL learning, often associated with the desire to preserve traditional culture and language [5, 14]. This perspective, and the ensuing personal identity construction, is undeniably influenced by Western society's essentialist discourse about Chinese individuals. Essentialism refers to the ascription of certain defining characteristics to all members of a group [15]. For CHL learners in the UK, this manifests in various ways, with one of the most influential being "the moral discourse on authenticity" [16]. This discourse emphasizes the necessity and responsibility of linguistically inheriting one's ethnic culture [17]. Consequently, CHL learners often feel a sense of obligation to learn Chinese due to their Chinese heritage identity.

However, the construction of an individual's identity is not solely influenced by these social essentialist hegemonies; it is also related to their social participation, or agency [18, 19]. Duff [20] supported this perspective, emphasizing that HL learners are not merely passive recipients of socially mandated positioning but also exercise agency in re-positioning their identities. This agency is internalized within individuals and manifests in their societal engagement [21]. For instance, many CHL learners in [4], born into a traditional Chinese family in the UK, initially embraced an essentialist discourse that identified them as authentically Chinese. However, based on their social

experiences, they later challenged this view and re-positioned themselves as British Chinese. Therefore, identity is dynamic, constantly reshaped through personal history.

From this perspective, one can infer that an evolving identity, shaped by the interaction between one's agency and social hegemonic discourses, could interact with the motivation to learn HL. Specifically, learners' motivations to learn HL involve not only preserving their heritage language and maintaining their cultural identity but also transforming the heritage language and recreating their identity [16]. The reorientation and self-construction of one's identity, in turn, guide CHL learning [13]. The source of these interactions is the contradictory identities of HL learners, the conflict between their ethnic identity and social identity. For instance, one participant in [13] initially positioned himself as an inauthentic CHL learner due to his accent. However, after actively exercising his agency to resist social discourse about authenticity, he re-positioned himself as British Chinese and recognized the legitimacy of having an accent. Such a reposition further led to an increase in his motivation in learning CHL. To further understand this complex interaction, we must first systematically analyze the dynamic development of identity constructs with the help of a theoretical framework.

III. HERITAGE LANGUAGE IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT MODEL (HLIDM)

Zhou and Liu's [13] Heritage Language Identity Development Model (HLIDM) was chosen as the theoretical framework for this study due to its comprehensive understanding of how the dynamic construction of HL learners' identities occurs through personal social participation, which would be applicable in further explaining changes in motivation. Specifically, it analyzes HL learners' identity development from three perspectives: "historicity," "spatiality," and "relationality". Unlike previous studies [22, 23], which primarily analyzed HL learners' identities in the present, HLIDM emphasizes that a person's identity construction is influenced by their personal historical experiences and will shape their future positioning (Historicity).

Additionally, we need to recognise that HL development of identity does not take place under a sole domain, but in both formal (e.g. school, workplace) and informal venues (e.g., home, community) [3]. While some studies highlight the importance of family support at home [4], others focus on the construction of HL learners' identity in the classroom or workplace [8, 22]. Instead of analyzing each context individually, it is crucial to recognize that the construction of a person's identity in different contexts interacts and must be analyzed collectively (Spatiality).

Furthermore, the power dynamics of everyday interactions, particularly experiences with various interlocutors, also contribute to identity development [24]. For HL learners, having control over their own learning and feeling empowered is crucial, as encountering disempowerment can lead to negative outcomes [5]. Just like the earlier mentioned confrontation over the power of social essentialist discourse, power imbalances also manifest in everyday interactions. A typical example is that CHL learners often avoid speaking Chinese when interacting with native Chinese speakers

because they fear a loss of their "authenticity" [13]. "Relationality" refers to the relationship, often related to power, that exists in everyday conversations with different interlocutors. Through the lens of spatiality, relationality, and historicity, we can observe the interaction of structure (social construction) and agency (individual social participation), as illustrated in Fig. 1.

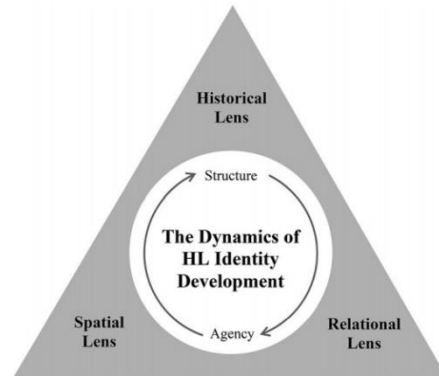


Fig. 1. Heritage Language Identity Development Model (HLIDM) [13].

A systematic analysis of one's identity constructs allows us to study the trajectory of their motivations in this process. Therefore, based on HLIDM, this study aims to address the scarcity of research on the development of identity dynamics and its role in the development of CHL motivation. Consequently, we proposed the following research questions:

1. How do CHL learners perceive their Chinese identity?
2. How do CHL learners' motivations develop dynamically according to their Chinese identity construction trajectories?

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Participants and Context

Many researchers define HL Learners as individuals who learn a language native to their family but different from English [25, 26]. However, HL learners can also exercise their agency in determining if they are HL learners of that language [27]. This definition, acknowledging the individual's key role in identity construction is also recognized and reflected in this study. Using this definition, we publicized posters in several local Chinese communities, eventually identifying three suitable candidates: Lydia, Edward, and Justin (pseudonyms, aged 21, 18, 25 respectively). To obtain more valuable information, we initially screened the participants' backgrounds to ensure diverse life trajectories. This approach allowed us to study the complex flow of identity dynamics and motivational development trajectories in greater depth. All participants grew up in Chinese families in the UK and speak both English and Chinese, albeit with varying proficiency levels.

B. Research Methods

Narrative analysis was chosen as the research method for this study because it enables the "construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories" [28]. This approach allows us to analyze the interactions between structure and agency in detail, particularly how individuals resist identity norms produced by hegemonic social essentialist discourses. Moreover, the need for a holistic

analysis not limited to a specific context, as required by the historical, spatial, and relational perspectives, is best met by narrative analysis.

Our data collection approach involves three separate semi-structured interviews with each participant. To obtain detailed information, each interview will last between one to one and a half hours. For ensuring objectivity in the data, I will suppress my tendency to let interviewees elaborate on their own life histories as much as possible. The first interview aims to provide a general overview of the participants' lives and HL learning. The subsequent interviews will delve deeper, with questions based on information from the first interview. During the interviews, we will summarize and clarify the participants' responses, asking for confirmation or amendments as needed, thus enhancing the credibility of the data collected.

The interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed using narrative writing, integrating fragmented narratives into complete life histories chronologically [29]. The data will then undergo thematic analysis using Nvivo 11 for multiple rounds of coding. This process will categorize the data into key themes such as 'identity reconstruction' and 'social engagement'. Notably, these themes were not pre-set by me, but were based on the content of the conversations as well as the HLIDM analysis. Finally, we will conduct a cross-case analysis to identify commonalities and specificities across participants [30].

V. FINDINGS

A. Lydia: From "Complete Acceptance" to "Challenge Reflectively"

In contrast to many Chinese families, Lydia's parents did not expressly insist on her learning Chinese. However, her upbringing in a predominantly Chinese community led her to naturally embrace Chinese culture and CHL. By primary school, she had developed basic conversational skills in Chinese and a keen interest in Chinese calligraphy. This interest, highly praised within her community and tied to social discourses on 'authenticity', led her to internalize these discourses. Consequently, she enrolled in CHL classes and took the A-level exam in Chinese in response to this encouragement.

"I love Chinese calligraphy.... I believe it's my duty to pass on the language, as I am technically Chinese. It's a shame to lose one's own traditional language." (Lydia, first interview)

We can see that she has a soft spot for Chinese culture and at the same time is accepting of her Chinese identity, reflected in her interpretation of CHL as 'one's own language'. This acceptance of her Chinese identity certainly served as an incentive for her to study CHL. However, we must recognise that this is blind identification under the influence of socially hegemonic discourses and promotes 'linguistic privilege', which implies potential exclusion or discrimination based on language proficiency [31]. While this notion bolstered her CHL learning by empowering her, it could disadvantage learners with lower CHL proficiency. Moreover, this motivation could backfire when she encounters Chinese learners with higher proficiency.

Upon entering university, her attitude towards her CHL studies became negative and her motivation plummeted. Such a shift was largely due to her struggle to fit in with native Chinese international students and her realization that her Chinese was not 'authentic'.

"Not only do they speak fast, they also use a lot of slang. It's hard for me to understand or join in their discussions..... I realized that I have accents." (Lydia, first interview)

The very thing she internalized to motivate her CHL learning now became a hindrance. To avoid revealing this perceived inauthenticity, she refrained from speaking Chinese or socializing with native Chinese speakers. This power imbalance led her to avoid CHL learning and attempt to conceal this aspect of her identity.

A turning point occurred in her sophomore year when she was invited to participate in local Chinese New Year events. She was asked to demonstrate her Chinese calligraphy writing alongside many Chinese international students. Her proficiency in English enabled her to handle many issues that Chinese international students found challenging.

"I feel more confident, you know, that I can better communicate with local people to explain what we are doing (Chinese New Year Events).....and also teach them (Chinese international students) some English." (Lydia, second interview)

Regaining power through her English proficiency allowed her to revive her motivation to study CHL and actively exercise her agency, reflecting on hegemonic discourses about authenticity. She reconstructed her identity, recognizing her unique value as a British Chinese.

"It is impossible for us to speak 'authentic' Chinese as we are born in the UK..... The point is to pass on the culture and language, not about how authentic we are..... We are unique, and valuable in our own way." (Lydia, third interview)

We can see a gradual clarification of her position on her Chinese identity, and the transformations of her attitude to CHL. She no longer demands to be authentically Chinese and recognises her uniqueness, which helped her to overcome the domination of the hegemonic discourse.

B. Edward: From "Determined Resistant" to "Gradually Embrace"

Edward was raised in a more traditional Chinese family where learning Chinese was mandatory. From the age of six, he attended two-hour Chinese lessons every Sunday at a local Chinese school for two years. Instead of fostering a sense of belonging to Chinese culture and CHL identity, this family-imposed obligation proved counterproductive, particularly in motivating him to learn CHL. He described this experience as follows:

"It's quite stressful because I have school work to do..... When all my friends can have fun at weekends, I still have to attend extra lessons." (Edward, first interview)

Unlike Lydia's complete acceptance, he evidently resisted such discourse, which is a demonstration of an individual's active agency in shaping their identity. Specifically, it's a pushback against the moral discourse on authenticity. At the same time we can realise that this exercise of agency is not always beneficial to CHL learning. In Edward's case, he didn't view learning Chinese as a duty, or even as meaningful, due to his aversion to the additional pressure. We can also observe linguistic privilege here, which only intensified his negative feelings towards CHL and being Chinese, leading him to identify as British.

"My parents were really disappointed. They often talked about how other children can speak good Chinese. But I can live perfectly well without learning Chinese. I am British as I was born and living in the UK. It doesn't help me with my studies or future career..... I don't see the point of all these." (Edward, second interview)

The shift occurred in high school when Edward befriended many British Chinese individuals like himself. At that time, videos of Asian comedians satirizing stereotypical depictions of Asians, particularly Chinese elders, were trending on streaming platforms. These videos became a popular conversation topic among both Chinese and local British people. This is when Edward began to gradually and spontaneously learn about Chinese culture and accept his Chinese heritage.

"Those videos are hilarious, especially for me, you know, having Chinese parents, that I can relate to them... I do want to learn more about it." (Edward, third interview)

His time with friends and his love of Chinese culture videos led him to want to learn about Chinese heritage, including CHL. In the process, he became increasingly accepting of his Chinese identity. When asked about his identity, he provided his own unique response.

"I don't think I am a real Chinese as I am raised in the UK... But certainly, I do feel a sense of belonging to the Chinese community... I guess I am British Chinese." (Edward, third interview)

In his second exercise of his agency, his attitude towards CHL shifted from distaste to fondness and overcame the shadow cast by the hegemonic discourse. In line with Lydia, this is based on the identity clarity that comes from deeper reflection on one's own identity construction after social engagement.

C. Justin: from "Frustratingly Confused" to "Positively Negotiate"

Unlike Edward and Lydia, Justin was brought up in a neighborhood with hardly any Chinese presence. His parents didn't insist on him attending CHL classes, although he understands and speaks basic Chinese since his parents converse in Chinese at home. As a result, he plays with native Britons in the community and in the classroom, and is also deeply influenced by mainstream British culture.

"I do feel that I am related to Chinese. But at most of the time, I feel more like a British." (Justin, first interview)

When he was in primary school, he noticed a book of Chinese mythology at home. He asked his parents to explain it to him and became very interested. When he excitedly shared it with his friends, it did not resonate with them. Instead, his friends seemed to have a bit of contempt for his Chinese identity. This dominant discourse from British society is so powerful that he felt frustrated and tried to hide his Chinese identity.

"My friends' attitude made me suppress my Chinese identity.....I chose to ignore the Chinese part of me to fit in the mainstream." (Justin, second interview)

His positioning of his identity is also hampered by hegemonic discourses which negatively impact his motivation to learn CH and CHL, just like what happen to Lydia and Edward. However Lydia and Edward are subjected to essentialist discourses about China; he is subjected to the cultural repression of ethnic minorities by mainstream British society.

Justin's real introduction to CHL learning came at university when he saw an advertisement for a part-time teaching assistant role at a local Chinese language school. The advert mentioned that the students were almost all CHL learners born in the UK like him, which piqued his interest. However, it was not until he visited the school that he realized almost all the teachers and teaching assistants were native Chinese speakers. He felt embarrassed about speaking unauthentic Chinese and chose to remain silent, which again shown the negative influence of essentialist discourses on authenticity.

"It's difficult for me to speak Chinese in front of them(native Chinese). It's just simply too embarrassing." (Justin, second interview)

Similar to Lydia and Edward, he was caught in this discourse of authenticity and 'linguistic privilege', which led him to avoid practicing Chinese. However, he soon realized that his unique identity as a British Chinese and his proficiency in English were very helpful in managing classrooms. He could understand what the students were saying, which made them feel closer to him. Additionally, he was able to translate the teacher's words into English at the right time to help the students better understand the class. Through this experience, he gained a great deal of self-confidence and began to confront his identity.

"I feel for the first time that I am not alone....I can relate to my students, as they are just like me..... We all have accents, but that's totally fine, as we are British Chinese." (Justin, third interview)

After that, he began to take CHL learning seriously and considered it a part of himself. Similar to Edward, he overcame the social essentialist discourse through his own hard work of negotiation, embracing his Chinese heritage and

recognizing his identity as a Briton at the same time.

VI. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a nuanced understanding of the dynamic interplay between identity construction and motivational development in CHL learners. The narratives of Lydia, Edward, and Justin illustrate how their identities and motivations to learn CHL are not static but evolve over time, influenced by their personal histories, spatial contexts, and relational experiences.

Our findings underscore that the acceptance of one's Chinese identity by CHL learners significantly influences their motivations to learn. This aligns with [5] that shifts in heritage language learning motivations are driven by changes in an individual's connection to the Chinese community. However, we propose that this connection primarily serves as an external trigger, facilitating the acceptance or rejection of one's Chinese identity. For instance, Lydia's appreciation for Chinese calligraphy, Edward's enjoyment of videos related to Chinese culture, and Justin's interest in Chinese myths all contributed to strengthening their ties with Chinese communities, ultimately leading to their acceptance of their Chinese identity. This focus on identity is rooted in the robust correlation between heritage language learning motivation and identity established in prior research [4, 14, 16]. Thus, the acceptance of one's Chinese identity emerges as a pivotal factor shaping the motivations of CHL learners.

Notably, this acceptance of Chinese identity is not a passive absorption, but a clear positioning that emerges after adequate societal participation and active exercise of agency. This perspective aligns with the post-structuralist view of identity as a dynamic construct shaped by social interactions [3]. Without this active engagement, the acceptance of Chinese identity may falter when confronted with reality, potentially negatively impacting motivations to learn CHL. For instance, Lydia, who had been learning CHL from an early age and had achieved a high level of proficiency, initially identified herself as Chinese. This led to frustration in her interactions with native Chinese speakers due to perceived inauthenticity. However, upon realizing that her upbringing as a Chinese individual in the UK justified her non-native Chinese speech, she regained her motivation to learn CHL. This transformation echoes the findings of [20], who emphasized that heritage language learners are not merely passive recipients of socially mandated positioning but also exercise agency in re-positioning their identities. Therefore, the active negotiation of one's Chinese identity, informed by personal experiences and societal participation, plays a pivotal role in sustaining and enhancing the motivation to learn CHL.

However, while emphasizing individual agency, it is essential to consider the substantial influence of societal hegemonic discourses. In the context of CHL studies, it is particularly crucial to pay attention to moral discourses about authenticity. This notion aligns with the findings of He [16], who highlighted the role of authenticity discourses in shaping heritage language learners' identities and motivations. Such discourses often impose a sense of "linguistic privilege", which can lead to feelings of inadequacy among learners who perceive their language skills as not "authentic" enough [31]. All participants in this study experienced a decline in their

motivation to learn CHL due to such discourses: Lydia and Justin avoided speaking Chinese due to their fear of being perceived as "inauthentic"; Edward developed a disenchantment with CHL. Therefore, understanding and addressing the impact of societal discourses on learners' identities and motivations is a crucial aspect of promoting effective CHL learning.

VII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has shed light on the intricate interplay between identity construction and motivational development in Chinese Heritage Language learners. The narratives of Lydia, Edward, and Justin have underscored the dynamic nature of identity and motivation, demonstrating how these constructs evolve over time, shaped by personal histories, spatial contexts, and relational experiences. The findings have emphasized the importance of accepting one's Chinese identity as a significant motivator for CHL learning, and the role of active agency in negotiating this identity amidst societal discourses.

However, it is also crucial to acknowledge the influence of societal hegemonic discourses, particularly those related to authenticity, which can significantly impact learners' motivations. The study has shown that these discourses can lead to feelings of inadequacy and a decline in motivation to learn CHL. Therefore, it is essential to foster a more inclusive understanding of Chinese identity and to challenge dominant discourses on authenticity to support effective CHL learning. Such a view can offer valuable insights for educators, policy-makers, and researchers in the field. Future research could explore how specifically CHL learners can be helped to overcome socially hegemonic discourses and shape accurate and clear identity constructs.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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