

**SINO-CANADIAN PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF  
THEIR CHILDREN'S CHINESE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT**

by

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative study was conducted in a Northwestern Ontario urban community where the population of Sino-Canadian people is approximately 300 members. The purpose of the study was to describe Sino-Canadian parents' perceptions of Chinese language maintenance, factors which influence their children's Chinese literacy development, and the strategies they used to maintain their children's family literacy. Data were collected from interviews with six Chinese parents who had school aged children. Three themes emerged from the analysis of the data: general perceptions of language maintenance, family literacy practices, and concerns and issues. The children, parents, and the literacy and language environment of children all play an important role in achieving Chinese language maintenance. Family literacy is a vehicle for promoting Chinese language and culture.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Overview of the Study**

Chinese immigrant children live their lives within the intersecting worlds of family, community, and school. When these children come to Canadian schools with English as the dominant language, they are faced with the potential loss of mother tongue and culture. The purpose of the study was to describe Chinese Canadian parents' perceptions of Chinese language maintenance, the factors which influence their children's Chinese literacy development and the strategies they used to maintain their children's family literacy. The design of the study was qualitative and the primary methodology was the general interview approach. The setting was a Northwestern Ontario urban community.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions guided the research:

1. What are parents' perceptions of Chinese language maintenance?
2. What are parental perceptions of factors which influence children's Chinese literacy development?
3. What strategies do the parents use to maintain their children's Chinese literacy?

### **Rationale**

The relationship between family and children's Chinese literacy development was a central focus of this study. This study was important today because of (1) the increasing number of Chinese families residing in Canada; (2) the ideology of multiculturalism in Canadian society and education; (3) the potential conflict of language choices for



immigrant children; and (4) the paucity of qualitative studies which investigate the influence of family literacy on the literacy of immigrant children.

While there was wide acknowledgement that first language [L1] literacy ability had a positive effect on second language [L2] literacy development as well as academic achievement, little research had been done either on the Chinese literacy development of Chinese Canadian children or on the family's influence on the children's Chinese literacy development. Moreover, there was little research on this subject in which interviewing was the primary method. One useful study which incorporated interviews with parents was Butcher (1995) who found that parents' lack of knowledge of the importance of bilingualism contributed to children's loss of their mother tongue. As well, children found it more difficult to learn Chinese script than English.

In the community in which I was conducting research, there were few Chinese students, so there was no Chinese heritage language program offered by either the school board or the Chinese community. Thus most Chinese literacy activities took place in the family. The results from this study provided insights into the sociocultural environments of first language literacy development and language maintenance in Chinese immigrant families within a broader community in which the dominant language is English.

### **Personal Ground**

Today's Canada is a rich mosaic of many races and cultures. This multicultural "mosaic" prompted me to take a graduate degree in education in Canada.

In my meetings with Chinese-Canadian families, I have found that the children have little interest in Chinese language and culture. Language loss is a concern where the

dominant language is different from the mother tongue (Butcher, 1995). As a Chinese student, I was interested in exploring the theme of language maintenance.

Recently, my husband, a secondary school teacher of Chinese in China, and I voluntarily organized a Sunday Chinese class in a Northwestern Ontario city, which had a population of 300 Chinese. The class consisted of 15 Chinese students of elementary school age.

### **Limitations**

One limitation was the small size of the sample. The findings were not generalizable, but may be transferable. A second limitation was that parent participants were all well educated intellectuals. They attached great importance to their children's education. Their perceptions as well as their experiences with their children might represent only families with higher education backgrounds.

A third limitation was that participants in this study were volunteers. It is possible that, given the nature of the study, those who chose to participate were generally more supportive of the goal of maintaining Chinese language and culture in the next generation. Thus, the results might not be representative of the Chinese community as a whole.

### **Significance**

First, this study provided insights into parents' perceptions of the Chinese language and literacy experiences of Chinese/English bilingual children and the influence of their families on their literacy development. Second, the study provided information on ways in which parents might promote language maintenance in their communities, particularly where the populations are small. Third, it provided useful information to

educators who teach immigrant Chinese children to enable them to better understand and address the needs of Sino-Canadian parents and children.

The first chapter presented the research questions, rationale, personal ground, limitations and significance. The review of literature is examined in Chapter Two. Research methodologies are described in Chapter Three. Presentation and interpretation of findings are presented in Chapter Four. Conclusions, implications, and recommendations for practice and research are identified in Chapter Five.

## CHAPTER 2

### Review of the Literature

Three strands of research contribute to our understanding of the Chinese literacy development of Sino-Canadian children. The first section presents theories of the relationship among culture, language and identity; the second discusses the sociocultural perspectives on first and second language acquisition and identity development; the third reviews research on language and literacy in families.

### Language, Literacy and Culture

There is a consensus among scholars that culture is a complex entity which comprises a set of symbolic systems, including knowledge, norms, values, beliefs, language, art and customs, as well as habits and skills learned by individuals as members of a given society. Linton (1945) defines culture as “a configuration of learned behaviors and results of behavior whose component elements are shared and transmitted by the members of a particular society” (p. 32). Bruner (1973) defines culture as being a system of techniques for giving shape and power to human capacities; the values, tools and ways of knowing of culture equip members of a society with amplification systems. Kramsch (2000) emphasizes that culture is embedded in members of discourse communities. She defines culture as

membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and common imaging. Even when they have left that community, its members may retain, wherever they are, a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and acting. These standards are what is generally called their “culture.” (p. 10)

Literacy as a way of living is part of a culture. Language itself is an individual cognitive as well as a cultural phenomenon: it arises in the life of an individual through

ongoing exchanges of meanings with others (Halliday, 1978, p. 1). The uses of language (e.g. ways of speaking and writing, choices of words) are culturally encoded. Kramsch (2000) notes that people identify themselves as members of a society (family, neighborhood, professional or ethnic affiliation) and acquire common ways of viewing the world through their interactions with other members of the same group. These common attitudes, beliefs, and values are reflected in the way members of the group use language. Although there is no one-to-one relationship between anyone's language and his or her cultural identity, language is the most sensitive indicator of the relationship between an individual and a given social group. Language is an integral part of oneself – it permeates one's very thinking and way of viewing the world. It is also the arena where political and cultural allegiances and loyalties are debated. Kramsch (2000) explains further:

In addition to the notion of **speech community** composed of people who use the same linguistic code, we can speak of **discourse communities** to refer to the common ways in which members of a social group use language to meet their social needs. (pp. 6-7)

She contends that language is not a culture-free code, distinct from the way people think and behave, but rather, it plays a major role in the perpetuation of culture.

Wagner (1991) notes that shaped by different social and cultural norms, literacy acts – their functions, meanings, and methods of transmission – vary from one cultural group to another. Therefore, becoming literate is a matter of becoming enculturated in one's socio-cultural worlds; literacy is seen as “a social and cultural continuity, the means by which the family as individuals conduct their own lives and construct their lives in the community and the society” (Fishman, 1988, p. 143).

In general, language and literacy are inseparable from their culture and socio-

cultural environment in which they are embedded.

### **Sociocultural Perspectives on First and Second Language Acquisition and Identity Development**

Understanding children's language development is essential for examining their literacy learning since language is the foundation of literacy learning (Halliday, 1993). The children in this study have not only learned their native language but also English as their second language. A review of the key assumptions in sociocultural perspectives on language acquisition is necessary to develop the theoretical framework for the study.

#### **First language acquisition**

Shortly after birth, children acquire their native language by being a member of a language community, in which they interact with people around them in daily life (Bruner, 1983). Lenneberg (1967) articulated his influential theory concerning the "critical period for language acquisition." The theory postulates that the normal child is maximally ready to acquire language between the ages of 2 and 12 years due to biological maturational processes that regulate the onset and timing of language acquisition. The theory explains that the bulk of language is acquired by age four, and after that time further refinements consist mainly of additions to the lexicon and stylistic improvements in the use of grammar. Lenneberg's theory, however, does not account for other factors which influence language acquisition and development such as the role of adults and the role of culture (McLean & Snyder, 1978; Bruner, 1986; Gee, 1990). Other researchers also view the preschool years as the critical period of language acquisition (Owens, 1988; Cole & Cole, 1989); during this language acquisition process, children,

however, are active participants in language use through the help of adults (McLean & Snyder, 1978).

When children are learning language through social interaction with people close to them who are mature language users, they not only acquire the language but also the culture (Bruner, 1986; Gee, 1990). Each culture has its own conventional way of expressing ideas with words. When children learn to use the language, they learn to use it in certain ways. Gee (1990) maintains that “through language, children acquire cultural identity, which means certain ways of using the language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting” (p. 132).

Although the question of whether ancestral language acquisition plays a role in ethnic identity formation has not been ignored by researchers, there has been little work to test the hypothesis that children acquiring an ancestral language have ethnic identification and evaluations that differ from those of their peers growing up without acquiring the ancestral ethnic language (Imbens-Bailey, 1996; Tong, 1996). Imbens-Bailey (1996) conducted research on 44 children of Armenian descent living in the United States to investigate whether children with different knowledge of their ancestral language differ in their ethnic affinity and attitudes. He found that “children who do not speak their ancestral language have relatively fewer positive things to say of their bicultural environment. . . . On average, approximately 25% of children’s evaluative responses were characterized as negative regardless of linguistic background” (pp. 435-436). Further, Imbens-Bailey states:

Rather than make relatively more negative evaluations about their bicultural experiences, monolingual children appear to demonstrate relatively greater neutrality when compared to bilingual children, tending not to unanimously evaluate their experiences in an overtly positive or negative manner. (p. 436)

Nevertheless, his finding suggests that knowledge of an ancestral language alongside English may help sustain personal ties to an ethnic community.

In order to explore and analyze the relationships between the levels of first language and social adaptation of new Chinese immigrant students, Tong (1996) conducted research with 190 respondents who were newly arrived adolescent Chinese immigrants living in a large metropolitan area. He found a “close association with their native culture and language was helpful because it encouraged a sense of security which provided some respondents with the confidence to explore the main culture” (p. 538). The Chinese language represented a way of affirming the respondents’ identity while adapting to the majority culture. Tong argues that children who understand their own background and culture are more likely to have the self-esteem to learn a second language and culture. Adults whose knowledge and wisdom are valued can support their children in school and elsewhere, and can be helped by their children without having their dignity or their parental role threatened. Tong’s findings also suggest that when language, or certain aspects of language are used as a social marker, children will recognize these markers as part of their self-image and thus as part of their own social, cultural or ethnic identity.

### **Second language acquisition**

Second language acquisition is more complex than first language acquisition. It involves not only the acquisition of a second language besides one’s native language, but also a new cultural identity. Cummins’ Interdependence Hypothesis (Cummins, 1980, 1981) and the relationship between second language acquisition and cultural identity development are discussed in this part.



**The complexity of second language learning.** Research findings suggest that the English language skills young minority students need in order to participate effectively in school are considerably more complex than previously assumed (Wong Fillmore, 1982; Cummins, 1986, 1994). Wong (1982) notes that children need to develop interpersonal communication skills in order to participate fully in school learning. This process takes approximately two years to develop. She also suggests that it takes approximately five to seven years for children to develop cognitive/academic skills in English. Cummins (1986, 1994) contends that the interactions between the language learners and their peers and teachers are critical for the development of language as well as academic skills.

Cummins (2000) points out that when children continue to develop their abilities in two or more languages throughout their primary school years, they gain a deeper understanding of language and how to use it effectively. They have more practice in processing language, especially when they develop literacy in both and are able to compare and contrast the ways in which their two languages function. Furthermore, Cummins (2000) claims that the level of development of children's mother tongue is a strong predictor of their second language development. Children who come to school with a solid foundation in their mother tongue develop stronger literacy abilities in the school language. Children's knowledge and skills transfer across languages from the mother tongue to the school language. From the point of view of children's development of concepts and thinking skills, the two languages are interdependent.

The idea of interdependence in first and second language development was articulated by Cummins in his early work (1978, 1979). To explain the contradictory findings of many studies on bilingual development, Cummins (1978, 1979) proposed a

set of two hypotheses. The first, the Threshold Hypothesis posits that there is a minimum level of linguistic competence in the mother tongue [L1], which a child must attain to avoid cognitive disadvantages. Thus, if a child's competence in L1 is low, the competence level in a second language [L2] also tends to be low. If, however, the competence in L1 is high, a similar high level in L2 will be predicted. The second hypothesis, the Interdependence Hypothesis, assumes that if the outside environment provides sufficient stimulus for maintenance of L1, then intensive exposure to L2 in school leads to rapid bilingual development with no detrimental effects on L1. In cases where L1 is not sufficiently developed outside school, high exposure to L2 in school will hamper the continued development of L1 and will not stimulate successful bilingualism. However, the second hypothesis only predicts transfer of skills from L1 to L2. In subsequent papers, Cummins (1980, 1981) elaborated the Interdependence Hypothesis and concluded that a reciprocal relationship was involved. Cummins (1981) formulated the hypothesis as follows:

To the extent that instruction in a certain language is effective in promoting proficiency in that language, transfer of this proficiency to another language will occur, provided there is adequate exposure to that other language (either in the school or environment) and adequate motivation to learn that language. (p. 29)

In this form, the hypothesis not only predicts transfer from L1 to L2, but also from L2 to L1, unless exposure and motivation are negative. In order to be able to explain the actual processes that lead to interdependence between language skills, Cummins (1980) also made a distinction between basic interpersonal communicative language skills and cognitive/academic language skills. The former are skills closely related to communicative competence; the latter are general cognitive or academic skills, such as linguistic skills beyond surface level problem-solving skills and literacy skills.

Verhoeven (1994) explains that the Interdependence Hypothesis would predict that in a bilingual program, reading instruction in one language not only leads to literacy skills in that language, but also to a deeper conceptual and linguistic proficiency, which is strongly related to literacy and general academic skills in the other language. Furthermore, Verhoeven (1994) found that although surface aspects such as orthography or fluency develop separately, an underlying cognitive/academic proficiency is common across languages. This common underlying proficiency facilitates the transfer of cognitive/academic, literacy-related skills across languages.

A number of researchers have attempted to find empirical evidence to support Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis. One study was set up by the South Educational Development Laboratory in Austin, Texas. (See Mace-Matluck, Hoover, & Calfee, 1984) In this study, regression analysis was used to examine how such variables as length of residence in the United States, amount of reading instruction received, and level of L1 academic proficiency influenced the oral and written proficiency in English of Chinese students in Seattle. Chinese orthography is different from English, which is logographic with each character representing a syllable. However, the researchers found a consistent beneficial effect of bilingual instruction and L1 instruction on the development of English literacy skills, and the students tended to perform relatively well in English academic skills. These results suggest that transfer of underlying cognitive skills occurred between the two languages, despite strong surface structure dissimilarities between Chinese and English.

Likewise, Ramirez, Yuen, and Ramey's (1991) large-scale five-year longitudinal study of Latino students in the United States found that students in a late-exit bilingual

program, with at least 40% of the instruction in Spanish throughout elementary school, showed better academic proficiency levels in English than comparable students in English immersion or early-exit bilingual programs.

**Second language acquisition and cultural identity.** According to Ellis (1989), to acquire a second language means learning an additional language after the mother tongue is learned, while living in the community of the target (new) language. It is a process for acquiring a new identity which may conflict with one's initial cultural identity. Gee (1990) proposes that second language learners can choose their roles in the target language community. One choice is to acquire the language for only limited tasks in a foreign setting, while accepting one's status as an outsider. Another choice for learners is to acquire enough of the second language to be able to use it fluently, in order to be accepted as a member of the second language group and to communicate well enough to get one's needs met. In the latter case, second language learning is a means of socialization into the mainstream society.

Some studies suggest that the processes which bring cultural identity into being start at an early age and that by the age of 6, children have developed some type of cultural identity (Aboud & Skerry, 1984; Auerbach, 1989). Aboud and Skerry (1984) propose a three-stage model of development of ethnic attitudes. In the first stage, children learn to identify and evaluate themselves by comparison with other individuals who are different from them. Then, they perceive themselves as group members and perceive others as members of other groups. At the third stage they accentuate within-group similarities and between-group differences and become capable of focusing on themselves and others as individuals as well as group members.

Hamers and Blanc (1989) maintain that “cultural identity is a dynamic mechanism developed by the child and it can be modified by social and psychological events throughout the individual’s life” (p. 121). They note that a bilingual child does not develop two cultural identities but integrates both of his/her cultures into one unique identity. Likewise, Aoki (1993) contends that “Canadian multiculturalism is a polyphony of lines of movement that grow in the abundance of middle” (p. 94). This allows the minority groups to develop a unique language and cultural identity.

### **Loss of mother tongue: Sociocultural perspective**

Mother tongue loss in minority groups is becoming common. Wong Fillmore (1991) found the inability of immigrants to maintain their home as an intact domain for the use of their first language has often been decisive in language shift. According to Wong Fillmore (1991), communication between parents and children may become strained and limited as children develop fluency in a second language and begin to lose competence in their first language while parents are still struggling to learn the second language. As the means of communication are lost, parents are less able to “socialize their children in the values, beliefs, and practices that are important to the family and community” (p. 6), potentially leading to a situation in which closeness, family unity, and the traditional teachings are lost.

Hamers and Blanc (1989) explore diverse factors which influence the language and literacy development of bilingual children. They found that in the language development of children, children’s social networks will usually reflect the societal values of the language and transmit them to children. They indicate that “the social representation of language comprises shared meanings, social scripts, and the

internalization of social values, which plays an essential role in the development of cultural identity” (p. 71). The social network around children is part of a larger social structure. It mediates between them and the culture and transmits to the children not only knowledge about the social structure, but also the value system which determines the status and relevance of the language. Hamers and Blanc (1989) also found that the more one perceives one’s own group in a favourable light, the more attitudes towards other groups tend to be favourable:

The child will develop shared representations of the languages which will include the status, values and attitudes transmitted by his [*sic*] social network; he [*sic*] will thus more or less valorize his [*sic*] own mother tongue(s) relatively to the other languages around him [*sic*]. (p. 76)

Therefore, if children from the minority group acquire a mother tongue to which negative value is attached by their socializers, they will therefore internalize these values and develop relatively negative attitudes towards their own language. The development of language and hence of bilinguality is part of the socialization process through which children become members of a given social group. As Hamers and Blanc (1989) indicate “[s]ocialization is a complex set of learning processes by which the child learns to become a member of his [*sic*] group and through which he [*sic*] builds social representation” (p. 72).

Cummins (2002) states: “[t]he extent and rapidity of language loss will vary according to the concentration of families from a particular linguistic group in the school and neighborhood” (p. 98). For historical reasons, English and French are the dominant languages in Canada. They have official status and are the primary languages used and taught in Canadian schools. Therefore, for minority children, starting school represents a major change in their lives, and the children have to adapt to a new network of

relationships and to extend their knowledge of the world beyond that of the family. Cummins (2002) claims that children can lose their ability to communicate in their mother tongue within two to three years of starting school if their mother tongue is not used extensively in the community outside the school. Cummins also argues that they may retain receptive (understanding) skills in their ancestral language, but they will use the majority language in speaking with their peers and siblings and in responding to their parents.

To reduce the extent of home language loss, Cummins (2002) recommends that parents should establish a strong home language policy and provide ample opportunities for children to expand the functions for which they use the mother tongue (e.g. reading and writing) and the contexts in which they can use it (e.g. community mother tongue day care or play groups, visits to the country of origin, etc.). Cummins contends that children's cultural and linguistic experience in the home is the foundation of their future learning and that we must build on that foundation rather than undermine it.

### **Research on immigrant Chinese children and their families**

While many children of other racial minorities are traditionally viewed as lower academic achievers, Chinese immigrant children have been traditionally known as high academic achievers in both Canada and the United States (Chen, 1996; Schneider & Lee, 1990). Heath (1990) suggests that Chinese parents expect their children to do well in school and enter fields which will ensure their future employment. Gibson and Ogbu (1991) found that Chinese immigrants perceive "education as the single significant avenue to status mobility in the new land" (p. 91). The parents perceived education as the pathway to their family's and children's long-range goal of employment, good wages,

and other benefits, and were willing to make sacrifices to work towards these goals for their children. The children then work hard in school in order to succeed academically. If they can obtain good positions and earn more money, they can repay their parents by supporting them in their old age. This is the way for parents as well as children to fulfill their family obligations.

However, Chinese immigrant families and their children experience culture shock in their experiences in a new country as do other immigrant families and children. In the case of Chinese-American families, Yao (1985) claims that the Asian parent-child relationship has changed because of Western influence. Yao (1985) found that Chinese-American parents affirm their authority less as they adopt American methods of child rearing. Yao also points out that immigrant children can adapt to an English-speaking environment much faster than their parents can. When English becomes the children's primary conversational language, parents have difficulty communicating with them in their native tongue. The bilingual proficiency of parents and children differs because their primary languages are not the same. Subsequently, poor communication between parents and their children frequently leads to learning and behavioural problems in schools (Yao, 1985).

### **Language and Literacy in Families**

Pflaum (1986) points out that the difference between learning language and learning literacy is that to practise language, children need only to engage in talk with family and friends or by themselves; to practise literacy requires more adult intervention and, at the very least, the provision of literacy materials. The role of family activity is crucial for children's learning and development. Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, and



Hemphill (1991) conclude from their research that families are most effective in influencing children's literacy and language achievement when they function as educating agents.

### **Family literacy activities as a form of cultural transmission**

Literacy activities are embedded in the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which they occur. Different communities practise different literacies (Heath, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981). Schieffelin and Cochran-Smith (1984) used an ethnographic perspective to study literacy uses in three different communities: a "group of educated parents and their preschool-aged children from a Philadelphia suburb, a family from a traditionally nonliterate society in Papua New Guinea, and a number of Chinese families who left Vietnam and recently settled in Philadelphia" (p. 4). Schieffelin and Cochran-Smith found that the three groups had very different types of literacy and placed different values on them. The children in the Philadelphia suburb used print in their everyday social transactions with peers and adults to acquire information, solve problems, and acquire knowledge. Children were read to frequently and were encouraged to look at books independently. In the Sino-Vietnamese families, on the other hand, the families viewed the acquisition of English literacy as a priority, but the daily activities of preschool children were not organized around books or a general interest in print. Although the parents were literate in Chinese, they did not read to their children in Chinese, and their children made little progress in acquiring Chinese literacy. Even greater literacy differences were found in the family from Papua New Guinea. These children, from a traditionally nonliterate society, had oral traditions that were developed through interaction with their peers, as well as with family members. Parents did not

focus on extending their children's abilities to acquire information and analyze it or to use language for problem-solving purposes. Schieffelin and Cochran-Smith's investigation demonstrates the importance of families and communities in shaping the ways in which children learn to use literacy in home and school settings.

In each of the communities studied by Shieffeilin and Cochran-Smith, the content and style of literacy practices are unique. Rich varieties of literacy are used in different communities to transmit and maintain the social and cultural traditions of the different groups. Morrow and Paratore (1993) state:

Family literacy must be studied from the widest possible perspective by respecting cultures, for instance, in which no books exist but in which storytelling is a common practice, as well as by reporting on cultures within which print is a dominant medium. (p. 198)

Auerbach (1989) describes an approach to teaching literacy within the context of the family and in ways that are meaningful to family members. He contends that the cultural and social practices of a family are key considerations in the development of family literacy programs. Auerbach's sociocontextual model is congruent with the contextual teaching and learning approach to knowledge development. This approach is based on the proposition that students learn best when the learning is meaningful to them and situated in the context of their social environments. This model acknowledges that there are family-relevant, as well as school-relevant, ways of bringing literacy into the home. It acknowledges the positive contributions of family members and takes into account the influence that cultural values and practices have on literacy development.

In their research on multiculturalism in Samoan American Families, Duranti and Ochs (1996) raise the idea of syncretic literacy: an intermingling or merging of culturally

diverse traditions which informs and organizes literacy activities. According to Duranti and Ochs,

[s]yncretic literacy is not necessarily restricted to a blending of historically of any culturally diverse values, beliefs, emotions, practices, identities, institutions, tools, and other material resources into the organization of literacy activities.  
(p. 9)

Duranti and Ochs identify common misconceptions about immigrant communities in the United States and elsewhere. They found that in a multilingual, multicultural family setting

- (a) Language (in the sense of the specific code used at any particular time in an interaction) is not always a good predictor of the cultural orientation or interpretive frame that is being activated by the participants.
- (b) Members of multicultural communities can be in more than one culture at a time. Although it may be useful to treat cultures as coherent and separate, and although in some cases members of multicultural communities do draw boundaries between what they consider traditional and what they consider new, more typically, cultural threads from diverse sources are interwoven into a single interactional fabric. (pp. 10-11)

Crowther and Tett (1998) suggest that although all literacies are not equally valued in our society, there are ways in which all parents make literacy contributions. Awareness of these contributions can occur when parents engage in literacy experiences that have meaningful application in their lives.

After reviewing research from varied international contexts, Taylor (1995) identified the following recurrent shared home literacy activities:

- 1) family activities promoting togetherness
- 2) family use of the public libraries
- 3) parental modeling of reading
- 4) practical reading at home
- 5) shared reading by family members
- 6) parental support of school
- 7) verbal interaction in the home
- 8) family television use (or media use)
- 9) writing activities in the home (pp. 194, 197)

He also found that home literacy activities centre on certain themes that characterize the literacy interests and functional uses of literacy in the home. These themes include collective identity, global knowledge, intellectual development, news and political issues, occupational reading, aesthetic appreciation, leisure reading, creativity, and children's reading.

### **Home environment and literacy development**

Home environment influences on literacy learning and development have received widespread attention in literacy research. The number of children in the family, spacing between children, birth order, the number of books in the family, socio-economic status, and the educational level of parents are important factors that influence children's literacy development (McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 1982; Spreadbury, 1994; Teale, 1986).

McGillicuddy-DeLisi's (1982) study of family environment and parental beliefs indicates that the number of children in the family and the order of the child in the family affect the home literacy practices of the children. For example, parents of an only child believed more strongly that direct instruction from adults is a process through which the child learns concepts than did parents of more than one child. In families with more than one child, parents provided less direct instruction to the second-born than to the first-born. Parents with fewer children spent more time with children around home literacy activities than did parents with more children.

Spreadbury (1994) suggests that there are four factors that constitute a positive home literacy environment:

- a) availability and range of printed materials in the environment; b) reading being "done" in the environment; c) an environment facilitating contact with paper and pencil (reading and writing); d) responses by others such as encouragement, providing feedback, and helping in the environment. (p. 18)

Teale and Sulzby (1989) emphasize that exposure to print in the home environment and community and use of language in real life settings are important pathways through which children acquire literacy. Taylor (1983) contends that print is the medium through which children learn to master their surroundings.

**Children's literature.** During the past few years, researchers have found that integration of language and content is done best through the use of children's literature (Diamond & Moore, 1995; Cullinan & Galda, 1994; Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 1999). Literature is the main vehicle to pass on culture and wisdom from generation to generation. Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson (1999) explain:

Literature helps young people to gain an appreciation of the universality of human needs across history, which makes it possible for them to understand that all humans are, to some degree, alike. The best children's books offer readers enjoyment as well as memorable characters and situations and valuable insights into the human condition. (p. 45)

The literature from children's home cultures may resonate with their lived experience. Children from a particular ethnic group may develop an affinity to characters in literature. In addition, through experiencing and contemplating others' lives, they may reflect on their own lives. Moreover, the difficulties and frustrations the protagonists encounter may have significance to young readers, who suffer, cry, struggle or laugh with the protagonist. Hazard (1967) describes children's books from diverse cultures in the following way:

They describe their native land lovingly, but they also describe a faraway land where unknown brothers live. They understand the essential quality of their own race. But each of them is a messenger that goes beyond mountains and rivers, beyond the seas, to the very ends of the world in search of new friendships. Every country gives and every country receives --- innumerable are the exchanges --- and so it comes about that in our first impressionable years the universal republic of childhood is born. (p. 86)

If children never see themselves in books, then their absence subtly tells them “You are not important enough to appear in books” (Cullinan & Galda, 1994, p. 59). Stereotyped images of an ethnic group are harmful not only to the children of that group but to others who get a distorted view of the culture (Cullinan & Galda, 1994). As children grow and learn academically, they are striving to understand themselves and how they fit into their classrooms, community and world. One way students can develop a positive self-image is through knowledge of their culture and their history. According to Cushner, McClelland, and Safford (1999), “culture is a secret” (p. 34):

Learning about culture is made more difficult because most people generally know very little about themselves. Few people receive training about how to be a member of a culture; they learn through experience, through observing others, through trial and error, and through continuous reinforcement. (p. 35)

Moreover, students’ attitudes, values and beliefs are influenced by children’s literature, which has the power to develop positive self-concepts and feeling of pride and confidence in members of a given group (Diamond & Moore, 1995). Post-structuralist theories suggest that it is through the language of these competing discourses that people are positioned as subjects in the world. It is in the language of these discourses that meaning is created and personal identity is constructed in the mind of the individual person (Cherland, 2002).

**Media and literacy.** Dyson (1997) points out that media are an important part of children’s lives inside and outside classrooms. Media, including television, videos, and computers, are more than just a means of entertainment. They can be an important vehicle for literacy learning. Greenfield (1984) describes three functions of media in children’s intellectual development: linguistically, they provide a language environment with visual images; cognitively, media convey two types of knowledge: (a) information

about dynamic processes of action and transformation, and (b) information about space. Socioculturally, media narratives create a particular culture which becomes the children's agent of socialization.

Lemish and Rice (1986) have argued that parents can use television as "talking picture books" that, like hard-copy books, serve as a scaffold upon which to build linguistic structures that facilitate language acquisition.

Also media is a "pedagogy of pleasure and meaning" closely associated with cross-cultural literacy and living (Giroux & Simon, 1989, p. 1). Kelly (1997) notes that through the "lived engagement of media and meaning," the families and their children's "desires, dreams, identities, and social relations are shaped" (pp. 70-71). In this sense, media engagement is a form of within-family social capital that shapes the families' literacy living. In other words, media as a form of knowledge and literacy perform a significant social function in the families' cultural adjustment in a society.

### **The role of parents in children's literacy learning**

From a Vygotskian perspective, adult instruction plays a major role in child development. Vygotsky (1986) contends that the child's concepts of words are formed in the process of learning in collaboration with adults. Richardson (1995) believes that parents' attitudes towards literacy and the amount of time and the quality of the time they spend interacting with children are crucial to foster children's literacy learning .

Parent-child oral interaction is an important part of home literacy activities. Oral communication between parents and children has a decisive role in children's oral language development. Blount (1982) explains that parents interact with their children in regular and systematic ways through speech throughout their development age span.

First, children acquire most of their vocabulary through oral exchanges with parents. Second, parental speech facilitates children's perception of speech and consequently their comprehension of it. Third, it facilitates children's communicative competence.

Parents play a major role in the formation of children's conceptions of print and its uses through storybook reading. Children's reading performance correlates with "the amount of reading done by their parents, the quality of parents' material and the value placed on reading by parents" (Hess, Holloway, Price, & Dickson, 1982, p. 93). Morrow and Paratore (1993) claim: "[s]uch practices in the home as shared reading, reading aloud, making a variety of print materials available, and promoting positive attitudes toward literacy have been found to have a significant impact on children's literacy learning" (p. 197).

Children can learn many things from reading such as vocabulary, rhyme, and structures of stories. Dickinson (1994) argues that the value of reading to children has been recognized on two levels. First, book reading is a social activity between parents and children at home. The attention to interaction during reading has led to recognition of the potential cognitive and linguistic richness of talk between parents and children during book reading; Second, reading is children's personal solitary exploration.

Though the above review is based on literacy values of Eurocentric, middle-class families, the assistance that adults provide their children's language learning at home is similar to the literacy practices of urban, middle-class in contemporary China (Li, 1996; Lu, 1998; Xu, 1998). Adult-child oral communication and story telling are commonly practised in Chinese families. In addition, according to Rawski (1979), one of the duties of parents in Confucian cultural tradition is to support their children's education to build up their personal strengths and to help them gain status in the society.



They also notes that the family is responsible for the children's education in two ways. One is direct teaching, offered to young children before school age, which usually includes word recognition and poetry reading. The other is to provide the best school education the family can afford to the children and support their schooling.

**Parents in bilingual families.** Helping a child become biliterate is very much like helping a child become literate with a few complications (Harding & Riley, 1999). Parents' intuitive knowledge or lack of knowledge of bilingualism may result in children's loss of their mother tongue (Butcher, 1995). Aldridge and Waddon (1995) conducted a survey of 200 parents attending baby and child clinics in North Wales. They found "that parents know less about language development than they know about other areas of child development" (p. 203). They also found "that some parents, while aware of their role in language development, need more information on just how crucial their role in language development can be. And surprisingly, parents who are themselves bilingual show no greater awareness of child language issues than those who are monolingual" (pp. 217-218).

In her investigation of the L1 literacy skills of Chinese children in Brisbane, Australia, Butcher (1995) found that most parents didn't encourage their children to continue learning Chinese upon their arrival in Australia because they believed that it would slow down their English learning process. "Parents are not easily convinced that continuing to read in a language written so differently from English could help the learning of English and that continuing to write in Chinese would help writing skills in English" (p. 59).

Harding and Riley (1999) explain the importance of parents' attitudes in language and culture maintenance:

the parents' attitudes towards their own language are perhaps more important than the objective situation of that language in the foreign society. Parents cannot hope to educate their children without revealing to them their attitudes towards their own families and parents, and their country and community of origin. And in those cases where the parents want to forget about such things, the child is almost certain, sooner or later, to want to know why. (pp. 74-76)

They suggest that parents read to their child every day and let the child follow the text while they read, particularly at the time when s/he starts learning to read the other language at school. From the moment a child can read by him/herself in two languages, the parents should not exercise control over their children's choice of books: "The child's own curiosity and interests have become motivating enough for her [*sic*] to steer her [*sic*] own language development" (p. 135).

The loss of language and culture is a critical issue in today's multicultural society. It was noted that much of the literature on ethnic language and culture maintenance has shed light on the positive influence of L1 literacy development on L2 literacy development. In bilingual, as in monolingual situations, the children, parents, and the literate and language environment of children all play an important role in achieving literacy. Moreover, family literacy is a vehicle for improving the relationships between language minority families and schools by situating learning experiences in the context of families. As the field of family literacy develops, it has the potential to play an important role in reshaping the education of minority language children, a difficult yet critical challenge.

The following chapter describes the research design and methodology for data collection, interpretation and analysis.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Research Design and Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to describe six Chinese Canadian parents' perceptions of Chinese language maintenance, the factors which influenced their children's Chinese literacy development, and the strategies they used to maintain their children's family literacy. The design of the study was qualitative (Patton, 2002). Participants were interviewed with a general interview guide (Patton, 2002). Bogdan and Biklen's (1998) model of constant comparative data analysis were used as strategic and conceptual guides.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are parents' perceptions of Chinese language maintenance?
2. What are parental perceptions of factors which influence children's Chinese literacy development?
3. What strategies do parents use to maintain their children's Chinese literacy?

### **Design**

The design of this study was qualitative. Patton (2002) explains that qualitative study enables researchers to "focus on what people experience and how they interpret the world (in which case one can use interviews without actually experiencing the phenomenon oneself)" (p. 70).

### **Timeframe**

Data collection took place from March to April, 2003.

**Setting**

The setting of the study was a Northwestern Ontario urban community where the population of Sino-Canadian people is approximately 300 members.

**Sample**

Six Chinese parents, five fathers and one mother, whose children were enrolled in elementary school were the sample for this study. Four of the respondents were faculty members at the regional university, one was a businessman, and one was a housewife. The children of two families were born in Canada. The other children were born in China and had acquired Chinese before their families immigrated to Canada. Chinese was the first language of the participants while English or French was the dominant language used by their children in school. Respondents were selected through personal contact with the parents whose children attended the Chinese class I started recently.

**Methodology**

The primary method for data collection was the interview. The researcher kept a research log throughout the data collection and analysis phases of the study. The qualitative design enabled the respondents to articulate personal reflections and meanings in their responses to a general interview guide.

Patton (2002) describes the strengths of the general interview guide in the following way:

The interview guide provides topics or subject areas within which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style but with the focus on a particular subject that has been predetermined. (p. 343)

The instrument (Appendix A) posed open-ended questions, accompanied by probes to elicit greater description in responses. The interviews were conducted in English.

The interviews were held in a place mutually agreeable to participants and interviewer. Each interview took approximately sixty minutes, and all interviews were audiotaped, and later transcribed.

### **Research Process**

#### **Entry**

As noted above, respondents were selected through personal contact with the parents whose children attended the Chinese class I started recently. I gave each family a letter which described the study and expectations for their participation. Those interested in participating were invited to contact the researcher. The first six parents to respond were selected as a sample. I met with these parents individually to explain the purpose of the study as well as ethics considerations. Each was invited to sign the informed consent forms (Appendix B). In the meanwhile, each respondent was asked to provide demographic information (See Appendix C), which included, for example, the date of their arrival in Canada, the number of children, children's grade levels and schooling in China and/or Canada.

#### **Data collection**

The sites for the audiotape interviews were arranged at the convenience of the participants. Three interviews took place in the participants' private offices. Two were conducted in a quiet seminar room at the university which provided privacy without interruptions. One interview was done in the participant's home.

For each interview, the researcher again described the purpose of the study and also explained that the interview would take approximately one hour and would be audiotaped.

A process log was kept during the research process to record field notes, the process of decision making, and ongoing theoretical reflections. The process log served as both a record of events as well as a device to facilitate decision-making as the work progressed. The data from interviews were collected for about a two- month period. This period provided the necessary time to transcribe the interviews, check for accuracy and identify areas for clarification. To ensure a high degree of accuracy, the tapes were reviewed three times and compared to the typed transcription. Necessary corrections were made as part of this process. Four copies of each interview were made and computer disks with backup saved.

### **Data analysis**

The constant comparative method was used to analyze the data to determine patterns and themes. Glaser and Strauss (1967, cited in Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) describe the constant comparative method: “a research design for multi-data sources, which is like analytic induction in that the formal analysis begins early in the study and is nearly completed by the end of data collection” (p. 66).

Data analysis began with data collection and continued through the study. As each interview was transcribed, it was coded. Content analysis involved identifying codes, categories and themes that emerged from the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Codes were combined to form categories, then themes. Figure 3.1 displays the themes and categories and provides an example of each code.

## **Ethical Considerations**

### **Informed consent**

The purpose of the study and ethical considerations were explained to parents at the initial meeting. They were advised of the following considerations related to informed consent: risks/benefits, anonymity and confidentiality, right to withdraw, storage of data, and dissemination of results. They were then invited to participate and asked to sign a letter of informed consent (See Appendix B).

In summary, this chapter described the design of the study, methodology for data collection, and data analysis. The next chapter presents the findings and discusses the interpretation.

THEMES	CATEGORIES	CODES	EXAMPLES
<b>General Perceptions of Language Maintenance</b>	<b>Values and Benefits</b>	Maintaining culture and developing identity	"If we lose our language, how can we keep our culture?"(Li)
		Maintaining communication Within family	"I can imagine how sad they will be if they find they can not communication with their granddaughter because of the language barrier." (Sue)
		Benefits of learning languages	"The more language one learns, the more flexibly and easily s/he can process languages." (Liang)
		Job/career potential	"If she wants to pursue her career in China, knowing Chinese will be her advantage." (Sue)
	<b>Factors Influencing Language Maintenance</b>	Child's age	"I found that the most critical period for child's language development was from age zero to age six." (Tan)
		Position among siblings	"As our second son was born, it seemed our enthusiasm of keeping his Chinese had lessened compared with what we once had on his brother." (Zhou)
		Interest	"David shows great interest in Chinese history stories and science fictions." (Li)
		Parents' attitudes and involvement	"Parents' attitudes towards something may have great influence on their children." (Liang)
		School environment	"I have to admit that children more easily adapt to the school environment." (Zhou)
	<b>Family Literacy Practices</b>	<b>Tutoring in Mother Tongue</b>	Enforcing Communication in Chinese in the Home
Reciting Tang Poetry			"David's grandparents had taught him lots of Tang Poems when he was very small." (Li)
Teaching Pinyin			"We bought books and tapes relevant to Pinyin and taught her by ourselves." (Tan)
Storybook time			"Almost every night, we would read something together." (Tan)
Teaching reading and writing skills			"We bought from China some charts with Chinese characters and taught her to recognize and memorize." (Wang)
Using media to assist learning			"I found the best way to teach Chinese to children living abroad is to let them watch Chinese video-tapes, VCD or DVD." (Tan)
<b>Combining School and Family Literacy Practices</b>		Using Chinese to support children's completion of schoolwork	"Sometime I tried using Chinese to explain, which he found more easily to understand." (Liang)
		Using English to support children's Chinese learning	"I had tried asked her to repeat the story in Chinese." (Sue)
<b>Concerns and Issues</b>	<b>Lack of Resources</b>		"I haven't found any Chinese children's books." (Sue)
	<b>Lack of Community Support</b>		"Personally, I had doubts on the function of the Chinese Association here." (Liang)

Figure 3.1 Categories and themes.



## CHAPTER 4

### Research Findings and Interpretation

This chapter describes the findings of the study which investigated the parents' perceptions of their children's Chinese literacy development and the roles family played in the language maintenance. Three major themes emerging from the analysis of the various data sources: general perceptions of language maintenance; family literacy practices; and concerns and issues.

In order to convey the relationship between researcher and participants, as well as providing data that would be lacking in the transcripts, brief descriptions of each family are included in the first section. The second section describes the themes. The final section sets forth an interpretation of findings.

#### Profiles of Families

Six respondents were interviewed representing a sample of Sino-Canadian families. All respondents had one or two children attending elementary schools. Below is a brief profile of each family. Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants.

##### **Liang's family**

Liang is a professor who has been teaching at the university for seven years. Liang has two sons. The elder son, Jason, is fourteen years old, and the younger one, Tim, is eight. Both Jason and Tim were born in Canada, and have never been to China. Liang's mother visited and stayed with her son's family for over two years.

Tim and Jason speak English to their parents in most situations; they speak Chinese to their grandmother who does not speak English. Jason had been sent to a

bilingual (Chinese and English) kindergarten, and later studied Chinese in a Sunday school for four years. Jason is capable of reading and writing in Chinese. Tim did not attend any Chinese school until recently when he attended my Chinese class every Sunday.

Liang and his wife taught their children Chinese at home, using textbooks bought in China. They also supervised their children with the homework assigned in the Chinese class.

### **Wang's family**

Wang is a university professor. Wang has a five-year-old daughter, Carol, who was born in Canada. When she was two years old, she returned to China and stayed with her grandparents for almost one year.

Last year, Wang's mother-in-law came from China for a visit. She helped the family with the household and also took the responsibility for caring for Carol and teaching her Chinese. Every Sunday, Carol attended the Chinese class accompanied by her grandmother.

Carol continues to speak Chinese to her parents and grandmother at home even though she is in an English public school.

### **Tan's family**

Tan is a business man. He immigrated to Canada in 2000 when his daughter, Liz, was three years old. Tan's family moved from Toronto to this city because his wife was admitted to an accounting certificate program offered by the local university.

Liz attended Junior Kindergarten for one year in Toronto. She had just started Grade One when her family moved to this city. Liz speaks Chinese to her parents at

home. Her father teaches her Chinese and uses the textbooks he ordered from China. Liz has completed Grade Three Reading with Chinese textbooks.

In addition, Tan often takes Liz with him to visit the family when he makes business trips to China.

### **Sue's family**

Sue is from Taiwan. She is a housewife. Her family lived in Vancouver before her husband got a teaching position at the university. Kate is Sue's daughter from a previous marriage. She is in Grade Three. Sue requires Kate to speak Chinese to her at home, although her husband speaks only English.

Kate studied Chinese in a Chinese school in Vancouver for two years. Before leaving Vancouver, Sue purchased the Grade Three Chinese textbook and workbook from the Chinese school, hoping to continue to teach Kate Chinese at home by herself. Sue was very pleased to learn that a Chinese school was available in this city. Every Sunday, Sue sent Kate to school to study Chinese.

### **Li's family**

Li is a university professor. Li has an eleven-year-old son, David. David was five years old when he first came to Canada. He had finished his kindergarten in China, but he attended kindergarten in Quebec city. David lived in Montreal with his mother for one year, where he attended a Chinese school to take math and Chinese classes each Sunday.

Li and his wife speak Chinese in the home. Last year, Li's family went back to China for the summer vacation. During their stay in China, David was sent to a summer school to learn math and drawing. His Chinese improved quickly as a result of the trip.

**Zhou's family**

Zhou had been a chemistry teacher in China before he came to Canada in 1993 to pursue his Master's and PhD degrees. He has been teaching at the university since the completion of his PhD.

Zhou has two sons. His first son, Andrew, is ten years old and in Grade Five. He was born in China, and came to Canada with his family when he was two. After the family arrived in Canada, Zhou's parents-in-law took turns to visit and take care of Andrew, and, later, Andrew's younger brother, Peter. Peter is four years old.

Andrew attended a Sunday Chinese school for three hours each week when his family lived in Kingston, Ontario. Zhou and his wife spoke both English and Chinese at home after Andrew began public English school. However, Andrew continues to speak Chinese to his grandparents. Andrew's grandparents supervise Andrew's Chinese homework. Each summer, Andrew's parents assign him Chinese copying homework, in an attempt to improve his handwriting.

Peter speaks mainly Chinese at home. He is going to attend Junior Kindergarten in the coming September.

**Findings**

Three themes emerged from the analysis of the data: general perceptions of language maintenance; family literacy practices; concerns and issues. Each is discussed below.

## General perceptions of language maintenance

The six respondents all spoke favourably about Chinese language learning and maintenance. Parents commented on two aspects of language maintenance: values and benefits, and factors that might affect language maintenance.

**Values and benefits.** Parents indicated four values and benefits of language maintenance. These included: maintaining culture and developing identity; maintaining communication within the family; benefits of learning several languages; and job/career potential.

*Maintaining culture and developing identity.* Four parents considered it an obligation for their children to learn Chinese because they were the descendents of Chinese. They believed language symbolized the primary characteristic of one's identity and culture. Liang commented:

As the descendents of Chinese, they should know something about the language and culture of their nation. They should at least be able to speak and understand Chinese. (Interview 1, Liang)

Li expressed a similar opinion:

As a Chinese, no matter where we are, we have the responsibility to maintain our culture. If we lose our language, how can we keep our culture? For this reason, I hope my son can keep studying Chinese. (Interview 6, Li)

Tan was very proud of China's history, culture and its language. He commented:

Our ancestors created marvelous and unique culture and language. As descendents, we have to preserve such treasures. It will be very sad to see Liz not speak Chinese. I love Chinese culture and history so much that I won't let my daughter forget it. Although now, she is too young to understand why I insist on her Chinese learning, she will realize the importance of learning Chinese eventually. (Interview 3, Tan)

Several parents said that they believed Chinese language learning would help their children build and maintain their identity as Chinese. When one child, Kate, asked

her mother why she had to learn Chinese, Sue explained her answer in the following way:

Kate often asks me why I force her to speak Chinese and learn Chinese while parents of her classmates did not. I told her because she was Chinese and her grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins lived in Taiwan. They would not like her if she couldn't talk to them in Chinese. Now she has got used to speaking Chinese to me. (Interview 4, Sue)

For Tan's and Wang's families, maintaining the language and culture meant that not only would it help their children to establish identity with the Chinese culture, but it would also help them to build their identity within both the Chinese and Canadian cultures. They commented that when the children attended Canadian schools, the school/English culture had a strong influence on them, and the children developed an identity within it. Wang recalled his daughter's birthday party:

When Carol's five-year-old birthday was coming, she required us to give her a western birthday party just like that of her friends. Her mother and I decided to prepare a bi-cultural birthday party for her. She invited her good friends to her party. We invited our family close friends. She made wishes in front of her birthday cake and blew off the candles. Also we made noodle for her and said words of congratulation in Chinese, which is the Chinese tradition for the birthday. She really enjoyed her Canadian-Chinese birthday party. (Interview 2, Wang)

Parents did not want their children to maintain a single identity as Chinese, instead, they wanted their children to develop a unique identity which combined the advantages of Western and Eastern cultures. Tan explained:

I don't care whether my daughter thinks she is Chinese or Canadian. As parents, we make necessary accommodations in order to help her adapt to the new environment easily. We hope that her recognition of her identity can be influenced by two cultures. (Interview 3, Tan)

*Maintaining communication within the family.* The traditional Chinese family includes family members of different generations. Four respondents indicated that they continued the extended family tradition by maintaining their children's Chinese learning.

Parents wanted their children to be able to communicate with their grandparents and other family relatives living in China. According to three families, it would be particularly sad for the grandparents when they discovered that their grandchildren were unable to communicate with them in Chinese. Sue, for example, wanted to preserve the the fabric of the family:

Our family is very close. My parents love Kate very much. I can imagine how sad they will be if they find they cannot communicate with their granddaughter because of the language barrier. I won't break my parents' heart. So this is another important reason that I insist on speaking Chinese to Kate. (Interview 4, Sue)

Tan also considered that maintaining the language was to keep the family united:

Before we left China, my parents exhorted my wife and me to continue teaching Liz Chinese. They don't want to see their granddaughter not speak Chinese when she visits them. (Interview 3, Tan)

In addition, there was strong inter-generational support within family units.

Grandparents, in particular, came to live with the family for long periods of time. They also assumed responsibility for child care and supervised the children's study of Chinese. Grandparents who lived in China maintained close relationships with their children and grandchildren. They mailed children's books and study materials, and wrote letters to encourage their grandchildren's Chinese study. Other family members were also actively involved in the children's study and life as well. Li's comments below attest to the support offered by his family members:

After we came to Canada, our family is still very close. When we found David did not like Chinese writing, we discussed this with his grandparents, aunts and uncles and asked if they could help him. They kept writing letters to him. Although it did not seem to work well, we were very thankful for our family's support. (Interview 5, Li)

The ties among extended family members were very strong and served to hold the

family together. Even when extended family members lived great geographical distance apart, they supported each other.

*Benefits of learning several languages.* All the parents in this study noted the benefits of learning several languages. For example, Liang's son, Tim, is in a French-immersion school and does well in school. Liang expressed his opinion about the benefits:

As far as I am concerned, learning two or three, even four languages in the childhood has no harm to children's language and intelligence development; on the contrary, it is beneficial. The more language one learns, the more flexibly and easily s/he can process languages. (Interview 1, Liang)

Tan shared a similar point of view,

I believe that children have more capacity in their brain to learn foreign languages than parents do. So I support the idea of learning more than one language in the early ages. (Interview 3, Tan)

Li recalled that his son, David, had to learn two foreign languages, English and French, when the family lived in Quebec,

Upon his arrival, David was encountered with two foreign languages, English and French. We sent him to an English JK, although he had finished kindergarten in China. At the beginning, I often went to his school and asked his teacher to make sure he had no problem with the communication. His teacher said that he did very well and had already made some friends. Later, we sent him to a French elementary school. Now he can speak Chinese, English and French. Based on his experience, I find learning more than one language is beneficial to child's language development. (Interview 5, Li)

Parents did not worry about their children's early acquisition of English. They believed that English would be easier for their children to learn once they started school. In fact, five parents commented that their children had little difficulty learning a second language. Tan commented on her daughter's experience:

Children more easily adapt to a new language environment than adults do. I was very surprised when Liz's teacher told me that Liz had made two friends in



her first day at school. I believe that children have their own ways to learn a foreign language, different from adults, and smarter than adults. (Interview 3, Tan)

*Job/career potential.* Three respondents believed that with the strengthening of China's economy, their children would have more opportunities for their future careers if they were bilingual. Liang noted:

Now China is becoming more and more powerful in terms of economical growth, and there will be more opportunities to do business with China. If my children know both Chinese and English, then they will have more advantages than people who don't speak Chinese. (Interview 1, Liang)

Tan had the same optimistic feeling towards the future of China. He said:

I believe Chinese, like English, will be the most popular language in the world when my child grows up. So if she masters these two languages, she will be more successful in her future career and life. (Interview 3, Tan)

Kate dreams of becoming a veterinarian. Her mother encouraged her to learn Chinese to pursue her dream:

Mainland China has such a big market. If she wants to pursue her career in China, knowing Chinese will be her advantage. Her dream is to be a veterinarian. Most of her customers might be Chinese. Then she can learn more thoroughly about her patients through the conversation in Chinese. Moreover, she can help those customers whose English are not good. (Interview 4, Sue)

Thus parents encouraged their children to learn Chinese because they foresaw the potential of bilingualism to increase job opportunities through communication with people of two different language and cultures.

**Factors influencing language maintenance.** In discussion of language maintenance, parents mentioned five factors which influence language maintenance: child's age, his/her position among siblings, interest, parents' attitudes and involvement, and school environment.

*Child's age.* Parents perceived that the age of a child when s/he was learning

Chinese to be an important influence in the development of proficiency. They noted that it was advantageous for the child to be immersed in his/her first language in the home in his/her pre-school years. For example, Tan, Liang and Sue explained:

Experiencing and observing the growth of my daughter, I found that the most critical period for a child's language development was from age zero to age six. I began to talk to my daughter even when she was in her mother's womb, and I kept talking to her very often after she was born. I thought that she could understand me even though she was unable to speak. Later on, her oracy ability has developed tremendously fast since she began to talk. I believe it will be twice more difficult to teach children Chinese after age six than before six. (Interview 3, Tan)

Parents have to communicate with children very often and urge them to speak Chinese when they are very young. If children have formed the habit of speaking Chinese in the home before they started school, they would not feel it very tough to continue speaking Chinese with the families. If parents miss the chance of speaking and teaching Chinese to their children in their very early ages, it will be almost impossible to expect their children to speak Chinese later in their life. (Interview 1, Liang)

According to my experience, parents should force their children to learn Chinese as early as possible. There is no way to count on children's initiative in learning Chinese as they grow up. (Interview 4, Sue)

Wang felt fortunate that he and his family had always spoken Chinese to Carol from the time she was born:

Carol started learning Chinese very early, which I think was very important for her Chinese maintenance. Also, I believe this will make her future Chinese learning much easier. (Interview 2, Wang)

*Position among siblings.* In this study, Liang's and Zhou's families had two children and the other four families had only one child. Both Liang and Zhou recalled that they spent considerable time and effort in teaching their first child Chinese.

Liang commented:

My wife and I had tried many ways to maintain our first son's Chinese literacy ability. We sent him to a Chinese kindergarten and later a Chinese Sunday school. We bought him lots of Chinese comic books and cassettes from China. We read

stories to him everyday. And later we assigned him Chinese homework. We had a high expectation for his Chinese literacy ability and wished him to be fluent in both Chinese and English. (Interview 1, Liang)

In contrast, when a second child was born, Liang and Zhou reported that they did not have the same expectation for their younger child as for the elder one. Zhou noted that emphasis on his second child's Chinese learning was more informal and less frequent:

As our second son was born, it seemed our enthusiasm of keeping his Chinese had lessened compared with what we once had on his brother. We still spoke Chinese at home before he began JK, but we did not persist on his Chinese maintenance when he gradually preferred English to Chinese. On the other hand, we did not hold as high an expectation as we did on his brother concerning the Chinese maintenance. Now, our first son can speak Chinese fluently, but the younger one can only understand and speak not very much Chinese. (Interview 6, Zhou)

Tan mentioned that if he had a second child, the experience with his first child's learning and growing would make it easier for him to teach another child:

We had no experience with children before our daughter was born. We had read many books relevant to early child education to get some knowledge about children. Educating a child is an interesting and rewarding experience. We learned many lessons and accumulated experience along with her growth. The knowledge and experience gained from our first child will make it easier for us to bring up another child because we don't need to experience trial-and-errors again. (Interview 3, Tan)

*Interest.* Several parents explained that a child's interest was a factor in language maintenance. For example, Tan said:

I had taught her to write when she began to learn reading, but she had little interest in it. Not until she was five did she feel interested in writing letters to her grandparents. At the beginning, she could only write a few words. She came to me for help when she needed to write a new word. Then I thought it might be the opportunity to teach her writing. So I said to her, "if you want to write letters to your grandparents, you have to practise writing every day to accumulate vocabulary." From then on, she liked to copy words from textbooks. Now she does well and her handwriting is neat. (Interview 3, Tan)

Li mentioned that his son is very interested in reading Chinese books:

David shows great interest in Chinese history stories and science fictions. He loves reading by himself. He looks for the words in the dictionary when new words come up in the book. However, he doesn't like writing. We had tried different ways to arouse his interests in writing, for example, asking his grandparents and aunts to write him letters, but it did not work. (Interview 5, Li)

*Parents' attitudes and involvement.* Parents' attitudes and understanding of the importance of language maintenance influenced the children's language development.

Liang, for example, emphasized the role of parents as models for their children:

Parents attitudes towards something may have great influence on their children, especially when children are very young. If parents pay less attention on the language maintenance, how can we expect their child to like his culture and language? (Interview 1, Liang)

Sue explained that parents' attitudes determined their child's Chinese development:

I don't see social environment as the biggest question for these children to learn Chinese. If parents are aware of the importance of language maintenance, it is not difficult for them to create a sound environment for their children to learn Chinese. However, if parents themselves don't have such awareness of maintaining language and culture, then how can they expect their children to learn Chinese? (Interview 4, Sue)

Tan shared a similar point of view:

According to my experience, I think how much the parents devote to their child's Chinese study, how good the child's Chinese will be. (Interview 3, Tan)

Li identified parental attitudes and motivation as a consideration in both language maintenance and language loss. He provided an example of language loss:

When we lived in Quebec City, we met with a Chinese family. At first, we doubted that the family might come from Guangdong, Hong Kong or Taiwan, because I spoke Chinese to their son, but he responded in English. Later I knew that they were from Mainland China. I think the parents' unawareness of retaining Chinese led to the loss of home language in their son. What these parents care about is to push their children to immerse into the mainstream culture and society quickly. In so doing, it will absolutely cause a negative effect on children's attitudes to the Chinese language. (Interview 5, Li)

*School environment.* Comparing their children's Chinese fluency before and after entering school, parents discovered that school had considerable influence on their children's Chinese language development. For example, Liang, Wang and Zhou recalled their children's experience:

Just a couple of months later after he went to JK, I found that he became reluctant to speak Chinese at home. (Interview 1, Liang)

She went to JK last year. During the first couple of days, she was not happy with school because she couldn't understand what teachers and other children said. About two months later, she became very interested in English and had a tendency of using English to express herself. (Interview 2, Wang)

Although we required him to speak Chinese at home, Andrew still preferred to speak English to us. Sometimes we asked him to repeat what had said in Chinese if he spoke English. But sometimes he just took advantage of our ignorance. (Interview 6, Zhou)

After they started school, children began to develop a preference for not only speaking English, but also reading English books. Sue recalled:

Kate likes English more than Chinese, because English is much easier for her. She likes reading, and her spelling is very good. She's not willing to read Chinese storybooks because she feels it difficult and time consuming to read. Sometimes she asks me to read to her. But for English books, she likes to read on her own. (Interview 4, Sue)

In addition, one parent reported that discipline was not easy to enforce after the child attended school. Sue felt the necessity to discipline the child when she was very young so the child would follow the rules and be easier to communicate as she grew up,

My husband often says if we don't discipline Kate when she is young, it will be very hard to make her listen to us, let alone asking her to learn Chinese as she grows into teenagehood. So for now I have to force her to learn even though she doesn't like it. (Interview 4, Sue)

Data revealed that in all these six families, Chinese was the dominant language spoken in the home before children attended school. Generally, children began to show a preference for English two or three months after they began attending kindergarten.

Although they had tried to maintain the language at home, the parents were convinced that schools had an inevitable effect on the language maintenance. Zhou commented:

Comparing the family influence with the school influence on the children, I have to admit that children more easily adapt to the school environment. They learn the school language quickly and gradually forget the home language. Children become doubt [*sic*] on the value of learning Chinese, since Chinese is not spoken in their schools. (Interview 6, Zhou)

Three parents indicated that children gradually lost their understanding of Chinese expressions and their motivation to speak Chinese. For example, two parents commented that their children found it easier to express their ideas in English:

Sometimes, I find that not because the child doesn't want to speak Chinese on purpose, but because he can not find the exact words in Chinese. It's much easier for him to express his idea in English than in Chinese. (Interview 6, Zhou)

Our elder son is willing to speak Chinese to us. The younger one, I can't say that he consciously refuses to speak Chinese. His mind is just full of English, and he just wants to express himself in English. We had tried to force him to speak Chinese in the home, but it didn't work. (Interview 1, Liang)

Liang tried to explain the factor which he thought led to his younger son's first language loss:

After he went school, every day, most of his time was spent with his teachers and playmates. He was totally immersed in an English-speaking environment, so no wonder his English improved quickly. Comparatively, Chinese was scarcely used in the community, except at home. Therefore, less Chinese input led him gradually unfamiliar with the Chinese expressions. He preferred to speak English to us because he was unable to find the suitable Chinese words to express his ideas. (Interview 1, Liang)

All the children lived in an English-speaking society and spent six hours each day at school. The only immersion in the Chinese language occurred before and after school and at bedtime when they interacted with their parents. Li commented as follows:

Any language will become difficult to learn if one does not have an environment which supports it. Here, the environment for English learning is rich and strong, while the Chinese one is relatively small and weak. This situation made home language learning more difficult. (Interview 5, Li)

The parents hoped that their children's daily schools would support and encourage Chinese language maintenance. If the schools did, then the children might appreciate the value of their mother tongue. Tan noted:

If the school is supportive to maintain children's home culture and language, I believe it will be easier for parents to speak and teach their children Chinese at home. Now the children cannot feel their home culture and language recognizable by their teachers and classmates. So no wonder that they question their culture and language, even refuse to speak the home language. (Interview 3, Tan)

### **Family literacy practices**

Parents in the study considered the home as the place where their children had opportunities to practise their mother tongue. All the parents in this study had begun to teach their children Chinese at home in the children's pre-school years. Five parents continued to tutor their children in Chinese literacy in different ways and encouraged their formal study of Chinese at the Chinese school. The parents mentioned that they found that a weekly formal Chinese class was not sufficient. They felt that it was necessary to supplement this study so that the children would make more progress in Chinese literacy. Sue was one of the parents who was strict with her daughter's Chinese learning,

Although Kate had attended Chinese class once a week in Vancouver, I did not think it was enough for her. Usually, the teacher would not give students much homework to do. However, I believe "practice makes perfect", so I assign her with additional Chinese homework. Also I request her to do half an hour Chinese reading everyday. (Interview 3, Sue)

The following section describes the strategies that families implemented at home to maintain and to improve their children's Chinese literacy: enforcing communication in Chinese in the home, tutoring in the mother tongue, and combining family and school literacy practices.

**Enforcing communication in Chinese in the home.** Before their children began school, Chinese was the only language spoken at home in all six families. Parents were concerned about their children's Chinese learning after they had discovered their children had begun to develop a preference for English over Chinese once they started school. Tan recalled:

As I found Liz tended to speak English at home two or three months after she went to kindergarten, I said to her, 'English is not allowed to use at home. Since you're a Chinese, you have to speak Chinese to me and your mum in the home.' And another reason that my wife and I are concerned is that since our English is not very good, we will feel difficult and uncomfortable to use English to help her with her study as well as discipline her. (Interview 3, Tan)

Four families in this study deliberately continued to communicate in Chinese in the home, and required their children to speak Chinese. For example, Li set a rule of speaking Chinese in his home,

We do not allow David to speak English at home. As well, we require him to speak Chinese with other Chinese children when they play together. (Interview 5, Li)

These parents perceived that by establishing a strict rule of speaking Chinese at home when their children were very young, the children would get accustomed to the rule and feel comfortable speaking Chinese even after they had started school. For example, Wang's family had successfully helped their daughter grow into a fluent bilingual:

We speak Chinese at home. Sometimes if Carol wants to use English, we try to make her speak Chinese. Then about half a year after she attended JK, she got used to speaking English at school and Chinese in the home. Sometimes we tell stories in English as she requests, but most of time we tell her Chinese stories. (Interview 2, Wang)

**Tutoring in the mother tongue.** All the families in this study used a number of strategies to support their children's Chinese learning in the home.

*Reciting Tang Poetry.* Tang Poetry has been widely used by parents and/or



grandparents to teach children to read and recite because it is simple in style and rhyme. Marsico (2001) explains that “these are not poems written expressly for children, emphasizing rhymes and light hearted verse, but they are poems written by literary giants from China’s history, making use of strong images and metaphor” (Paragraph 6). All the children in this study had been exposed to Tang Poetry. Sue vividly remembered how she taught her daughter to recite Tang Poetry,

Shortly after Kate was able to speak, I liked to read her Tang Poetry as I showered her. She had a good memory, and she could always complete the poem after I spoke out the first word of each line. She was able to recite many Tang poems at a very young age. (Interview 4, Sue)

In both Li’s and Zhou’s families, grandparents taught Tang Poetry to the children before the families moved to Canada. At that time the children had been able to recite many Tang poems. However, as the children grew up, the parents did not continue to teach poetry to children. Li expressed his opinion about the tradition of reading Poetry:

David’s grandparents had taught him lots of Tang Poems when he was very small. Although he did not know clearly about the meaning of the poems, he could recite many poems very fluently. After he came to Canada, his mother and I had no time to continue teaching poetry to him. On the other hand, I think ancient poems are far from the modern life. Especially for these children living abroad, poems do not have much practical meaning to them. (Interview 5, Li)

*Teaching Pinyin.* Chinese Pinyin is a kind of tool used for spelling Chinese characters. Pinyin is an alphabetic system based on the English alphabet. It includes Shengmu (consonants) and Yunmu (vowels). The structure of Chinese characters is complicated and includes pictographic characters, pictophonetic characters. The Chinese Pinyin system helps people to master the standard pronunciation of Chinese characters, and allows anyone to learn the Chinese language through phonetics rather than Chinese characters (See Appendix D). Knowledge of the Pinyin system is considered the most

basic literacy skill in Mainland China. Students are required to master it. Five children in this study had learned Pinyin. David learned it in China in kindergarten. His father was proud of his good mastery of Pinyin:

He does better at Pinyin than I do. We had placed the chart of Pinyin on the wall of his bedroom in an attempt to keep it in his memory. (Interview 5, Li)

Kate learned Pinyin when she studied in a Chinese school in Vancouver. The other three children learned Pinyin with the help of their parents. These parents bought teaching material on Pinyin from China and practised with their children at home,

We bought books and tapes relevant to Pinyin and taught her by ourselves. She learned quickly and now she can recognize new words with the help of Pinyin on her own. (Interview 4, Tan)

*Storybook time.* Book reading is a social activity between parents and children at home. All six families experienced a period when their children showed a great interest in stories. Each child involved in this study had his/her own bedroom with different types of books. When I interviewed Sue at her home, her daughter, Kate, enthusiastically showed me her bedroom. Her bookshelf was full of books, mostly English books with some Chinese storybooks. She was very proud to show me her Chinese storybooks. Although it was difficult for her to read the books all by herself, Kate still liked reading them because of their beautiful illustrations. Later, her mother informed me that the books were bought in Taiwan when they visited last year. Like Sue, most parents would buy storybooks or textbooks whenever they had the chance to visit China. Tan recalled that each time he returned to China, he would go to bookstores, searching for books for himself as well as for his daughter. When asked how he knew what kinds of books his daughter would like, he said,

I am a person with a childlike heart, so I have sort of intuition to distinguish good books children may like. Recently I bought a series of illustrated science comics. Liz liked them very much and almost everyday we read together before she went to bed. (Interview 3, Tan)

Parents believed that reading with their children was an effective way to get children involved in Chinese literacy learning. Tan recalled his reading experience with his daughter:

Almost every night, we would read something together. She could recognize some characters on the book. So each time, I read one page, then she read the next page. Personally, I think it a very good and efficient way to make children interested in reading. (Interview 3, Tan)

Some parents liked to point to the words when reading to their children in an attempt to give children an understanding of print. For example, Sue described how she read to her daughter:

When she was small, I often read to her. I liked to point to the words as I was reading, hoping it would give her some impression of how the words were written. (Interview 4, Sue)

Li had a similar experience with his son:

When David was very young, we encouraged him to read stories in the hope of arousing his interests in books. When we read together, sometimes I would point to the character and ask him of its meaning; and sometimes I would ask him to do the spelling. (Interview 5, Li)

All the parents in the study reported reading Chinese stories with their children. However, as the children got older and learned to read independently in English, they became dissatisfied with the stories read aloud to them by adults. Sue recalled the change in her daughter:

She used to like me to tell her Chinese stories, but now she prefers to read by herself since she thought she could read faster than I read to her. Of course I mean English books. She does not like reading Chinese because she reads very slowly. Sometimes I have to force her to do some Chinese reading. (Interview 4, Sue)

The time and effort spent on parent-child shared reading decreased, and parents began to encourage their children to read on their own. Li described the way that his family encouraged his son's independent reading:

Now we encourage him to read on his own and provide him with a dictionary. If he comes across the new word in his reading, he can look it up in the dictionary. We will help him if he still cannot get the meaning by the dictionary. (Interview 5, Li)

*Teaching reading and writing skills.* All the respondents reported that they taught their only child or elder child (Liang's and Zhou's families) basic Chinese literacy skills at home before children attended public schools. The parents' approach to helping their children learn basic skills was to arrange home learning activities so that the children could develop the desired skills. Textbooks for Chinese primary schools were the main teaching resources for families. Tan recalled:

When she was four, I began to teach her to read and recognize characters from the grade one Chinese textbook. Now she has finished the grade three textbook. She likes reading aloud. (Interview 3, Tan)

Wang had a similar experience:

We bought from China some charts with Chinese characters and taught her to recognize and memorize. Now she could recognize some words as we read to her stories. (Interview 2, Wang)

As the children grew older, parents began to assign copying characters from textbooks as homework. For example, Sue said:

I assign her Chinese homework every week. For example, I ask her to copy new words which appeared in the textbooks and make sentences with the new words. (Interview 4, Sue)

Compared to reading and copying words, parents did not pay much attention to writing because the children found it more difficult to write in Chinese than in English.

Sue commented:

Kate often complains when I ask her to do some Chinese writing. She likes to write in English, and keeps a diary. It is fun to her. However, she feels lost in Chinese characters. She can't even remember the words without looking at the book. (Interview 4, Sue)

Two parents tried some ways to encourage their children's writing, but they did not work. For example, Li noted:

We had intended to teach him to write and tried different ways, like asking his grandparents and aunts to write him letters, but he seemed uninterested in writing. Although he learned writing when he was in a Chinese school in Montreal, he made less progress, and now he has forgotten many words he had known before. (Interview 5, Li)

All the parents expected their children to be fluent in Chinese oracy. Some parents, such as Sue, Li, and Tan, also wanted their children to be able to read Chinese books and articles without any difficulty. However, few parents had high expectations for the writing ability of their children because the writing in Chinese was too demanding.

For example, Liang commented:

We used to be very strict with his writing. We tried some ways to encourage him to write, but it did not work very well. Later on, we realized that without a language use environment, it was hard to improve his writing ability. So now we just wish that he will not forget to speak Chinese and is able to read Chinese. In the future, if he himself wants to learn writing, he may take Chinese courses in the university. (Interview 1, Liang)

Tan noted that he had no high expectations for her daughter's writing ability because it was hard for him to teach her to write at home without a supportive formal Chinese learning environment:

I vividly remembered how I studied Chinese when I was young. So I can understand how difficult it is for my child to learn Chinese right now. I can teach her speaking and reading, but I am not confident to teach her writing because I am not good at writing myself. (Interview 3, Tan)

*Using media to assist learning.* The respondents reported that media, including television, videos, and computers, were more than just means of entertainment. All

families mentioned that media were indispensable in their children's experiences of learning Chinese. For example, Tan explained the influence of media on his daughter's first language learning.

According to my observation, I find the best way to teach Chinese to children living abroad is to let them watch Chinese video-tapes, VCD or DVD. On the one hand, these programs are of educational function; on the other hand, the subtitles give child the chance to learn Chinese. My daughter has learned many words from the subtitles. She likes to watch them again and again. So I think it is very helpful for children's language learning. (Interview 3, Tan)

Three parents relied on the media to support Chinese literacy practices in the home, especially before their children started school. Liang recalled:

When Tim was small, we bought him many story cassettes and video-tapes from China. He loved and watched them repeatedly. He was fond of the plots of those TV series and unconsciously he learned a lot of Chinese out of our surprise. (Interview 1, Liang)

Media were important vehicles not just for Chinese literacy learning, but also for learning English. Zhou reviewed his son's experience of learning English:

Andrew was two years old when he first came here. He liked watching TV very much, and he would spend most of the day in front of TV. We didn't realize that he could understand English until he was sent to JK and his teacher told us that he had no problem communicating with other children. We felt very surprised since we never spoke or taught English at home. All his English was learned through TV. (Interview 6, Zhou)

Liang's son had a similar experience of learning English before he attended school:

We did not speak English at all in the home before he started JK. The only way he could learn English was through watching TV and playing computer games. His English improved quickly after he entered JK. Now we do not need to worry about his English proficiency. (Interview 1, Liang)

Five families installed satellite transmission equipment so they could receive Chinese channels. Zhou emphasized the important role media played in his son's life:

Although Andrew likes watching English programs more than Chinese ones, sometimes he would sit with us watching Chinese TV series if we watched it. For him, television is a medium providing him the knowledge of his language and culture. (Interview 6, Zhou)

Five families also supplied their children with computers and four families had installed Chinese software on their computers so they could type Chinese characters and write emails in Chinese. Sue described her daughter's enthusiasm for writing emails to her father:

In fact, Kate's written Chinese is far from writing a letter. But she enjoys writing letters to her father. She knows Pinyin, so she uses Pinyin to write emails instead of using Chinese characters. She excitedly told me that she could write emails in Chinese. I said it was not real Chinese, but she did not care. (Interview 4, Sue)

**Combining family and school literacy practices.** Parents used Chinese to teach their children what they thought was lacking in the school curriculum and took advantage of resources in English to improve their children's Chinese literacy.

*Using Chinese to support children's completion of schoolwork.* After children began attending school, family literacy activities frequently revolved around areas of the curriculum which parents perceived as problematic. One such area was mathematics. Several parents thought that the curriculum was not sufficiently rigorous. The parents employed literacy activities at home to teach their children the preferred learning content in their preferred styles. The following are examples of how parents, instead of criticizing the teachers or asking the schools to change their styles, quietly taught at home what they believed their children needed to learn:

Their math is too simple. The math learning in grade four is like what students learn in grade two in China. David's grandparents mailed math textbooks as well as supplementary workbooks. We taught him at home and assigned additional math homework. (Interview 5, Li)

Sue arranged her daughter's time for study and play at home:

I doubt how much she can learn from school because she has little homework. I don't want her to waste her time, so I arrange her time for study. Now, every day she has to do math for half an hour, writing for half an hour and play the piano for an hour. (Interview 4, Sue)

Parents included instructions and explanations in Chinese when they helped their children with their study and homework. Liang noted that

although most of the time I use English to help him complete his homework, sometime I try using Chinese to explain, which he finds more easily to understand. The reason, I guess, is that he has formed the concept of certain things in Chinese earlier than in English. (Interview 1, Liang)

Tan found that supervising his daughter's math homework involved reciprocal learning:

The concept is simple actually, but I am not familiar with the English terms. Each time I read the item and translate it into Chinese first, then explain to Liz. For me, I learn English; for Liz, she understands the meaning both in English and Chinese. (Interview 4, Tan)

*Using English to support children's Chinese learning.* Parents not only made necessary accommodations to help their children advance in their education, but also used the prolific educational resources available in English to maintain their children's Chinese language and culture learning. Li was invited twice by his son's social studies class to give presentations on Chinese culture and history. He felt this make his son proud of the Chinese culture and history:

David was very excited about my presentations. He told me that his classmates kept asking him questions about China. It made himself pretty interested in knowing about China and its history. I felt it was a good opportunity to encourage him to learn Chinese. (Interview 5, Li)

Two parents used the method of translation to reinforce their children's Chinese vocabulary. They asked their children to translate some English stories they had read. For example, Sue explained that



Kate loves reading, and she reads fast. I had tried asked her to repeat the story in Chinese. Sometimes it worked if the story was very fascinating. She was anxious to tell me the story, although she found Chinese was difficult for her. (Interview 4, Sue)

Tan emphasized why he asked his daughter to tell him English stories in Chinese:

This is an effective way to make her be familiar with two languages. Also it is like a kind of connection between school and home. On the one hand, we can know what she reads in school, on the other hand, we can help her to keep her Chinese fluency. (Interview 3, Tan)

Although the parents had the best of intentions to maintain the Chinese language and culture, they experienced problems that they found difficult to resolve. The next section discusses the parents' concerns and issues.

### **Concerns and issues**

Parents reported concerns and issues which hindered their efforts to maintain Chinese language and culture. These centered on the lack of resources and community support.

**Lack of resources.** Compared to the rich variety and number of resources available in English, there was a paucity of resources in Chinese. The local Chinese Association had neither a library of its own nor Chinese literacy resources for children. Although all four public libraries in the city have holdings relevant to China or Chinese culture, most of these are translated versions or books written in English. The university library has several subscriptions for original Chinese magazines and has books intended for adults, but there are few Chinese reading resources for children. Therefore, parents have little access to Chinese literacy resources through community services. Sue expressed her wish to have a Chinese library in the community,

When we were in Vancouver, there were many types of libraries. It was very easy to find Chinese magazines and story books for children. I often borrowed some

books to read to Kate. But here, I haven't found any Chinese children's books. How I wish the multicultural center can provide us with a Chinese library. (Interview 4, Sue)

All the parents had purchased Chinese books in China or had their extended family relatives who were living in China mail books to them. For example, Zhou ordered for his son the grade one to grade three textbooks for Chinese and math in China:

Each time when I went back to China, I would go to the bookstore to select some textbooks of Chinese and math. We use these books to teach Andrew Chinese at home. (Interview 6, Zhou)

Sue's family visited Taiwan last Christmas and returned home with a box of Chinese books for Kate:

Each time when we go home in Taiwan, we will purchase lots of books. This year, we had 16 books, full of a box. (Interview 4, Sue)

Li's parents-in-law often sent textbooks as well as other reading materials by mail:

David's grandparents are concerned about David's Chinese development. They keep mailing books to him. Recently, we just received an illustrated book of Tang Poetry from them. (Interview 5, Li)

**Lack of community support.** Four families in this study mentioned that when they had lived in large cities such as Vancouver, Montreal and Toronto, they had participated in some traditional festival celebrations organized by the local Chinese associations. These parents considered celebrating festivals as opportunities for their children to perceive Chinese culture. For example, when they lived in Vancouver, Sue often took her daughter to attend the traditional festival celebrations held by the Chinese community. She recalled that

I like the traditional Chinese performance, especially dancing. Kate likes dancing as well. Last year, Kate was selected to give dancing performance in the Chinese New Year celebration. She was very excited. (Interview 4, Sue)

Two families showed indifference towards these celebrations. Liang and Tan thought that the purpose of such activities was to exhibit Chinese culture and to attract foreigners. They preferred get-togethers with close family and friends. For example, Liang described the way his family celebrated traditional holidays:

When Chinese New Year comes, we invite our close friends to come over for dinner. We will have a delicious dinner, make dumplings, and watch TV broadcasted through satellite dishes, which are the most traditional New Year celebration of families in Mainland China. Gradually the children will sense the importance of such celebrations, I think. (Interview 1, Liang)

Although they held differing opinions on the mission of the Chinese Association, all the parents supported the foundation of the Chinese school which they believed would benefit their children's language maintenance. Three parents, whose children had learned Chinese at Chinese schools previously, spoke highly of the function of the Chinese school. For example, Sue described her daughter's experience of learning Chinese in Vancouver as follows:

When we stayed in Vancouver, we kept sending Kate to Chinese school each Sunday, about two hours and a half each time. The teachers assigned her some assignments, and sometimes I gave her more to do. In Vancouver, there were many children taking Chinese class and speaking Chinese. However, now she is becoming more and more dislike Chinese. She feels it less useful because no one except her and her cousin speak Chinese in her school now. (Interview 4, Sue)

With the establishment of a Chinese school in the community, Kate spent time regularly on learning Chinese and doing Chinese assignments. In the Chinese school, when she discovered that not only Chinese children but also children from other ethnic backgrounds were learning Chinese, Kate became more interested in Chinese.

Parents also mentioned that they spent more time in supervising their children's Chinese study when children attended a formal Chinese school and had assignments than when they attempted to teach the children by themselves. Li explained that

David and his mother spent a year in Montreal, where it had a very big Chinese school. He was sent there to learn Chinese and math. Teachers were very strict. Each week, they assigned children with lots of homework. During that time, we did pay more attention to his Chinese study and supervised his homework. We checked his recitation of the text after each class. In addition, we spent more time to help him with his writing than now. (Interview 5, Li)

Chinese schools provided children with a formal learning environment within which they could receive systematic language training. Liang emphasized the importance of having a Chinese school, because

parents, however, are unable to teach children as professionally as teachers do at school; on the other hand, children need a kind of formal environment with peers learning together so that they can sense the value of learning Chinese. (Interview 1, Liang)

Most parents in this study were not satisfied with the initiatives that the local Chinese Association undertook to support Chinese culture and language retention and maintenance. Liang said:

Personally, I don't think the Chinese Association here does a good job. As far I know, most people who serve in the Chinese Association are from Hong Kong, Taiwan, or Chinese descendents of other countries. They have little connections with people from Mainland China. On the other hand, they do not seem interested in the culture and language maintenance, such as setting up a Chinese school. (Interview 1, Liang)

Parents contended that the Multicultural Association should provide the children of minority backgrounds with opportunities to appreciate their home cultures and continue learning their mother tongues. Parents also called on the Chinese Association for more support and effort on the issue of language maintenance. For example, Sue commented that

no matter how small the number of Chinese population, the Chinese Association should represent their voice and consider their needs. I know lots of parents hope there will be a Chinese school so that their children can learn Chinese. (Interview 4, Sue)

The above section described the research findings. The following section discusses the interpretation of the findings.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The six respondents in this study came to Canada as immigrants and brought with them the language and cultural values of their homeland, China. The purpose of the study was to describe these respondents' perceptions of Chinese language maintenance, the factors which influence their children's Chinese literacy development, and the strategies they used to maintain their children's family literacy. Three themes emerged from the analysis of data: general perceptions of language maintenance, family literacy practices, and concerns and issues which influence Chinese language and culture maintenance.

Respondents articulated four values and benefits of maintaining Chinese language and culture. Four parents perceived Chinese learning as a way to help their children identify with the Chinese culture. They believed that language symbolized the primary characteristic of one's identity and culture and considered it as an obligation to require their children to learn Chinese. Such beliefs are consistent with Kramsch's definition of culture:

membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history. Even when they have left that community, its members may retain, wherever they are, a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and acting. (Kramsch, 2000, p. 10)

Kramsh (2000) also notes that common attitudes, beliefs, and values are reflected in the way members of the group use language. Language, therefore, is the most sensitive indicator of the relationship between an individual and his/her cultural heritage. Gee (1990) maintains that "through language, children acquire cultural identity, which means certain ways of using the language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting"

(p. 132). In his research with 190 respondents who were newly arrived adolescent Chinese immigrants living in a large metropolitan area, Tong (1996) found “close association with their native culture and language was helpful because it encouraged a sense of security which provided some respondents with the confidence to explore the main culture” (p. 538).

Two parents, however, recognized that their children would develop a unique cultural identity which would be influenced by two cultures, Canadian and Chinese, a phenomenon which Aoki (1992) describes as “Canadian multiculturalism” that “polyphony of lines of movement that grow in the abundance of middles” (p. 94). This finding is also consistent with Hamers and Blanc’s (1989) assertion that a bilingual child does not develop two cultural identities but integrates both of his cultures into one unique identity.

Another important benefit of maintaining the Chinese language and culture was to maintain communication within families. In all six families, traditional Chinese multi-generational membership was valued and maintained through extended visits by grandparents to their Chinese-Canadian children and grandchildren’s return visits to China, and through the mail. Family members helped each other when needed even though they lived far apart. Grandparents, in particular, came to live with the family to support their children for long periods of time. They cared for grandchildren and supervised their Chinese study. Grandparents who lived in China maintained close relationships with their children and grandchildren. They mailed children’s books and study materials and wrote letters to support and encourage their grandchildren’s Chinese

study. Therefore, the extended family tradition was developed and maintained through ongoing family literacy practices.

Five parents mentioned the ease with which their children learned a second language even though they had spent their pre-school years immersed in their mother tongue. Liang stated this explicitly: “A concept formed in one language can be transferred into another, therefore, the continuance of learning mother tongue had no negative impact on other languages acquisition” (Interview 1, Liang). This is consistent with Cummins’ (2000) and Verhoeven’s (1994) research findings about the nature of language development in bilingual contexts. Cummins’ (2000) linguistic interdependence theory explains that the two languages are interdependent, and children’s knowledge and skill transfers across languages from the mother tongue to the second language. Verhoeven (1994) proposed that although surface aspects such as orthography or fluency develop separately, an underlying cognitive/academic proficiency is common across languages.

Three respondents specially mentioned the potential of career opportunities for bilingual children. This is consistent with the findings of Heath (1990), and Gibson and Ogbu (1991)’s research on Chinese immigrants’ perception of education. Heath (1990) suggests that Chinese parents expect their children to do well in school and enter fields which will ensure their future employment. Gibson and Ogbu (1991) reported Chinese immigrants perceiving education as “the single significant avenue to status mobility in the new land” (p. 91).

The parents in this study did not see the cultural and language differences as barriers to achieve their goals, nor overcoming these barriers as essential to their

children's academic, social and economic success. With this practical perspective on language and culture, the families regarded learning a second language as non-threatening to their own culture, language, and identity. Therefore, they encouraged their children to learn more than one language, such as Chinese, English, and French. This finding is different from Butcher's (1995) findings in her investigation of the Chinese literacy skills of Chinese children in Brisbane, Australia. Most parents in her study did not encourage their children to continue learning Chinese because they believed that it would slow down their English learning process.

When asked about factors which influenced their children's language maintenance, the respondents mentioned the following five: child's age, the position among siblings, interest, parents' attitudes and involvement, and school environment.

The respondents perceived that the age of a child influenced his/her language development. Parents emphasized the importance of communication with the child in his/her early years and realized that it was advantageous for the child to be immersed in his/her first language in the home in his/her pre-school years. According to his daughter's experience of acquiring Chinese, Tan believed that "it would be twice more difficult to teach children Chinese after age six than before six". Such findings confirmed the conclusion of earlier research on children's language acquisition (Owens, 1988; Cole & Cole, 1989) that the preschool years are the critical period of language acquisition.

The parents who had two children noted that the position of the child among siblings in the family had an impact on his/her Chinese literacy development. Both Liang and Zhou reported that their first-born child's Chinese developed better than did the



second-born child. The parents devoted more time and taught more formally to support their first child's Chinese literacy learning than they did for their second child. Other parents with one child reported spending considerable time and energy in tutoring their children in their Chinese learning. These findings are consistent with McGillicuddy-DeLisi's (1982) study of family environment and parental beliefs, which indicates that the number of children in the family and the order of the child in the family affect the home literacy practices of the children. He notes that in families with more than one child, parents provided less direct instruction to the second-born than to the first-born, and parents with fewer children spent more time with children around home literacy activities than did parents with more children.

Interest was another factor that parents thought affected their children's Chinese oracy and literacy development. Both Tan and Li tried letter writing to encourage their children to write in Chinese. Tan's daughter began to like copying words and practising her hand-writing in order to write to her grandparents. Her desire to communicate with her grandparents made her practise Chinese writing. Li's son was fond of reading Chinese history stories and science fictions, so this motivated him to read Chinese stories by himself. However, he still did not like writing in Chinese. Three respondents reported that their children gradually lost their understanding of Chinese expressions and interest in speaking Chinese.

All the parents in this study believed that parents played an important role in maintaining their children's Chinese as well as their education. This is consistent with Rawski's (1979) research findings on the duties that the parents in Confucian cultural tradition carried on in respect to their children's education. One of the parental duties is

to support their children's education to build up their personal strengths and to help them gain status in the society. The example of language loss given by Li illustrated his understanding that parents' attitudes towards the home language directly influenced their children's attitudes towards the language and then their proficiency in it. Sue, too, believed that it was parents' views as to what was important and valuable that determined a child's Chinese development, not those of the outside society. Such beliefs are in accordance with Harding's and Riley's (1999) findings that

the parents' attitudes towards their own language are perhaps more important than the objective situation of that language in the foreign society. Parents cannot hope to educate their children without revealing to them their attitudes towards their own families and parents, and their country and community of origin. And in those cases where the parents want to forget about such things, the child is almost certain, sooner or later, to want to know why. (pp. 74-76)

All the respondents in this study were bilingual. They supported bilingualism and recognized the important role that parents could play in their children's bilingual development. This finding is different from Aldridge and Waddon's (1995) findings in their survey concerning the parents' awareness of their role in children's language development. They found that

some parents, while aware of their role in language development, need more information on just how crucial their role in language development can be. And surprisingly, parents who are themselves bilingual show no greater awareness of child language issues than those who are monolingual. (pp. 217-218)

The respondents mentioned the influence of school environment on Chinese language maintenance. In all six families, Chinese was the dominant language spoken in the home before children attended school. However, "just a couple months later after he went to JK"(Interview 1, Liang) or "two months later" (Interview 2, Wang), respondents discovered that their children began to develop a preference for English over Chinese.

The finding is consistent with Wong Fillmore's (1991) conclusion that children may lose their first language skills as the second language begins to dominate. Parents were convinced that schools had an inevitable effect on the language maintenance. Li explained that "the environment for English learning is rich and strong, while the Chinese one is relatively small and weak" (Interview 5, Li). Outside the home, the families were immersed in an English speaking milieu. The children spent six hours each day at school. Close interactions between the children and the host language community enabled the children to learn English quickly. When the children discovered that their teachers and peers did not speak Chinese, they questioned their parents about why they had to speak Chinese and became reluctant to speak Chinese at home. For these children, language is not simply a means of communication information, but it is also an important means of establishing and maintaining relationships with other people. The desire to identify with the peers can be powerful and implies the rejection of everything that could delay this identification. This includes his/her mother tongue. Tim and Jason, Liang's two sons, spoke English to their parents in most situations; they spoke only English when the conversations were between them. Andrew, Zhou's elder son, spoke both English and Chinese to his parents and brother. Such findings are consistent with Cummins' (2002) conclusion that the minority children may retain receptive (understanding) skills in the language, but they will use the majority language in speaking with their peers and siblings and in responding to their parents. Thus there is a tension between the larger society and the parents' wishes to preserve the ancestral language and culture. The parents in this study hoped that their children's teachers would value minority children's languages and cultures so that their children would appreciate the value of

their mother tongue. Such concerns are consistent with Hamers' and Blanc's (1989) contention that "The child will develop shared representations of the languages which will include the status, values and attitudes transmitted by his [*sic*] social network; he [*sic*] will thus more or less valorize his [*sic*] own mother tongue(s) relatively to the other languages around him [*sic*]" (p. 76). The setting for this study was a small urban centre which has few Chinese families. In contrast to large metropolitan areas such as Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, where children may be immersed in both Chinese and English communities, the children of the respondents only spoke English outside the home.

Respondents described their family literacy activities as follows: enforcing communication in Chinese in the home, tutoring in the mother tongue, and combining family and school literacy practices. Four families in this study deliberately continued to communicate in Chinese in the home and required their children to speak Chinese. These parents perceived that by establishing a strict rule of speaking Chinese at home when their children were very young, the children would form the habit of speaking Chinese in the home even after they had started school. This finding is consistent with Cummins' (2002) recommendation that to reduce the extent of language loss, "parents should establish a strong home language policy and provide ample opportunities for children to expand the functions for which they use the mother tongue" (p. 15). Cummins (2002) also indicates that children's cultural and linguistic experience in the home is the foundation of their future learning and that we must build on that foundation rather than undermine it.

The strategies that parents used to tutor Chinese literacy included: reciting Tang Poetry, teaching Pinyin, storybook time, teaching reading and writing skills, and using

media to assist learning. Pflaum (1986) points out that the difference between learning language and learning literacy is that to practise language, children need only to engage in talk with family and friends or by themselves; to practise literacy requires more adult intervention and, at the very least, the provision of literacy materials.

Reciting Tang Poetry is a traditional practice in Chinese families. Parents in this study recalled that their children could recite many poems in their childhood. Rhyming is characteristic of Tang Poetry and it helps the children to memorize the poems, even though they don't know the exact meaning. Three parents also mentioned that it was difficult to continue reciting poetry once their children had begun formal schooling. Li perceived little benefit in poems written in the old Chinese language.

Five children in this study had learned Pinyin either from their parents or in Chinese schools. Parents considered it important because, even though the children could not recognize Chinese characters correctly, they could read the Chinese books with Pinyin marked and learn Chinese characters with the help of Pinyin.

All the parents in this study provided their children with many Chinese and English storybooks. They read Chinese stories with their children when they were very young. Parents believed that shared reading was an effective way to get children involved in Chinese literacy learning. When reading, some parents also explicitly helped their children to recognize Chinese characters in the books. By doing this, the children accumulated vocabulary and were actively involved in the reading. Such findings support earlier research on the home literacy environment and parent-child reading during the preschool years (Spreadbury, 1994; Morrow & Paratore, 1993). Spreadbury (1994) concludes that there are four factors that constitute a positive home literacy environment:

a) availability and range of printed materials in the environment; b) reading being “done” in the environment; c) an environment facilitating contact with paper and pencil (reading and writing); d) responses by others such as encouragement, providing feedback, and helping in the environment. (p. 18)

Morrow and Paratore (1993) claim: “[s]uch practices in the home as shared reading, reading aloud, making a variety of print materials available, and promoting positive attitudes toward literacy have been found to have a significant impact on children’s literacy learning” (p. 97).

Two respondents mentioned that as the children grew older, they began to show interest in exploring stories by themselves. They read in both languages, although they preferred English. Sue required her daughter to read Chinese books. Li provided his son with a Chinese dictionary to assist reading. Dickinson (1994) notes that reading is also children’s personal solitary exploration.

All the respondents reported that they had taught their only/elder children basic Chinese literacy skills at home before children attended public schools. Textbooks for Chinese primary schools were the main teaching resources for families. When children were young, parents taught them to recognize and memorize Chinese characters. As children grew older, some parents assigned copying characters from textbooks as homework. However, parents did not pay much attention to their children’s writing ability because the children found it more difficult to write in Chinese than in English and did not like it. This finding is consistent with Butcher’s (1995) finding that children in her study also found it more difficult to learn Chinese script than English and did not like Chinese writing. Tan also explained that he found it difficult to teach his daughter to write at home without a supportive formal Chinese learning environment. Therefore, few parents had high expectations for the writing ability of their children, but all the parents

expected their children to be fluent in Chinese oracy.

The respondents reported that media, including television, videos, and computers, were used as pedagogical aids to teach children Chinese. Five families installed satellite transmission equipments so they could receive Chinese channels. Five families supplied their children with computers; and four families had installed Chinese software on their computers so they could type Chinese characters and write emails in Chinese. The parents let their children watch Chinese video-tapes and DVDs, and listen to CDs. Tan believed it was “the best way to teach Chinese to children living abroad” (Interview 3, Tan).

Zhou noted that for his son, Chinese television programs functioned as “a medium providing him the knowledge of his language and culture” (Interview 6, Zhou). Two Chinese families noted that programs served as a medium to help their children maintain the Chinese language and a medium to preserve their culture. Two respondents also mentioned that media were also important vehicles for their children to learn English before they attended school. Media performed a significant social function in the families’ cultural adjustment in Canadian society. Such findings are consistent with the earlier research (Giroux and Simon, 1989; Kelly, 1997) on the relationship among media, literacy learning and culture. Media is a “pedagogy of pleasure and meaning” closely associated with cross-cultural literacy and living (Giroux & Simon, 1989, p. 1).

After children began attending school, parents maintained family literacy activities to assist their children to advance in their education, particularly in areas of curriculum which they perceived as problematic. They also used the prolific educational resources available in English to maintain their children’s fluency in Chinese. Three

respondents reported using Chinese for instructions and explanations when they helped their children with their study and homework. Tan noted it was a reciprocal learning experience for him and his daughter. Two respondents mentioned that they used the method of translation to reinforce their children's Chinese vocabulary. Li reported giving presentations on Chinese culture and history in his son's social studies class. Active literacy connections between the family and school are beneficial to bilingual children's home language development as well as academic achievement. The families used all strategies for shared home literacy articulated by Taylor (1995) with the exception of use of the public library.

Although the parents had the best of intentions to maintain the Chinese language and culture, they experienced problems that they found difficult to resolve. The respondents voiced concerns and issues which hindered their efforts to maintain Chinese language and culture. These centered on the lack of resources and community support. Parents found that few children's books in Chinese could be accessed through the public libraries. The families purchased Chinese books when visiting China or had their extended family relatives living in China mail books to them.

The respondents contended that the local Chinese Association and Multicultural Association should provide the children of minority backgrounds with opportunities to appreciate their home cultures and continue their learning of their mother tongues. Most parents in this study were not satisfied with the initiatives that the local Chinese Association undertook to support Chinese culture and language retention and maintenance.



This chapter presented a profile of the participants in the study, the findings, and the interpretation. Chapter Five presents the conclusion, implications, and recommendations.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Conclusion, Implications and Recommendations**

The purpose of the study was to describe Chinese Canadian parents' perceptions of the Chinese language maintenance, the factors which influence their children's Chinese literacy development and the strategies they used to maintain their children's family literacy. The design of the study was qualitative and the primary methodology was the interview guide approach (Patton, 2002). Six Chinese parents were the respondents. Three themes emerged from the analysis of the data: (1) general perceptions of language maintenance; (2) family literacy practices; and (3) concerns and issues. The following sections discuss the conclusion, implications and recommendations which grow out of the findings of this study.

#### **Conclusion**

The respondents articulated four values and benefits for their children's maintaining Chinese language and culture. They perceived that learning and maintaining the Chinese language served as a process of cultural transmission, which helped their children identify with the Chinese culture, and as a way to maintain communication within the extended multigenerational family. The parents recognized the benefits of learning several languages and regarded learning foreign languages as non-threatening to their own culture, language, and identity. Two parents noted that their children would develop a unique identity between Chinese and Western cultures. They anticipated or recognized the potential of bilingualism to increase their children's job opportunities through communication with people of two different languages and cultures.

Parents perceived that five factors affected their children's Chinese literacy

development: (a) child's age, (b) the position among siblings, (c) interest, (d) parents' attitudes and involvement, and (e) school environment.

Two parents who had two children mentioned the impact of birth order. They reported that their first-born child's Chinese developed better than did that of the second-born child. Parents indicated that they devoted more time and taught more formally to support their first child's Chinese literacy learning than they did for their second child.

The respondents noted that the importance of teaching their children Chinese at an early age. This finding is particularly important given the social context of the setting where immersion in the broader society and the majority language occurs when children begin schooling. Generally, children developed a preference for English over Chinese and became reluctant to speak and learn Chinese after they began to attend school. Therefore, school environment was another important factor affecting the minority children's motivation for valuing and development of their mother tongue. This finding confirmed Wong Fillmore's (1991) conclusion that children may lose their first language skills as the second language begins to dominate. Respondents also noted that parents' attitudes and understanding of the importance of language maintenance influenced the children's attitudes toward maintaining Chinese language and culture.

The respondents in this study were well educated. As professors teaching at university or, in one case, a businessman (Tan's wife studied at the university), the parents in the family had affiliations with institutions of higher education. The families' lives in this study were rich with literacy-mediated activities. The parents supported their children's Chinese learning by providing a variety of learning activities, such as: reciting

Tang Poetry, teaching Pinyin, storybook time, teaching reading and writing skills, using media to assist learning, using Chinese to support children's completion of schoolwork, and using English to support children's Chinese learning. However, the parents reported that it was difficult to teach children to write because the children found it more difficult to learn Chinese script than English.

The respondents noted concerns and issues which hindered their efforts to maintain Chinese language and culture. These centered on lack of resources and of community support. Participants were unanimous in their request that the local Chinese Association should set up a Chinese school so that their children can receive formal training.

This study provided insights into parents' perceptions of the Chinese language and literacy experiences of Chinese/English bilingual children and the factors influencing culture and language maintenance. The study also provided information on ways in which parents promoted language maintenance in their families.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study were based on a small sample, six Chinese parents, who live in an urban area which is predominately English speaking. Unlike large metropolitan centers such as Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal, where there are large populations of Chinese and the language is spoken in the community, in this setting, support for language culture and maintenance came primarily from within the family and extended family unit. The findings are not generalizable; however, they may be transferable to similar settings and contexts. Thus the findings may still be useful to parents, educators, and others who work with Chinese children or whose work is related to Chinese families.

The study identified five factors that affect language maintenance, including child's age, his/her position among siblings, interest, parents' attitudes and involvement, and school environment. Parents noted that the pre-school years were an important period for their children to develop and maintain the home language and culture. Once the children learn to communicate in Chinese when they are young, it is easier for them to continue even after they begin formal schooling. Thus, it is important for parents to start communicating with children in their mother tongue from infancy and to consciously cultivate the habit of speaking the mother tongue. Parents who have more than one child should continue to use these strategies to promote each child's literacy development.

Parents should also explore ways to encourage children to learn the Chinese culture and language. Close family relationships and return visits to China are useful ways to promote children's interest in communicating with relatives. Parents should capitalize on children's interests and hobbies by encouraging them to explore these in the mother tongue. Parents should provide a learning environment which includes a variety of resources and opportunities for learning language and culture. The findings of the study showed that family literacy practices were a conscious choice for parents to maintain their children's Chinese culture and language. Parents influenced children's language learning mainly through parent-child oral interactions, direct teaching and parent-child shared storybook reading. Besides these family literacy practices, the use of media was also a crucial part of children's literacy development. The Internet, as the latest kind of media, has become more reliable and dominant in people's lives. If the community is lacking in teaching resources, the parents could take advantage of abundant Internet resources to help their children learn Chinese and encourage them to search for

information by themselves. Parents also could inspire their children to communicate with their siblings or other relatives living in China by writing emails so that they can practise Chinese writing.

For minority children, starting school represents a major change in their lives. They have to adapt to a new network of relationships and to learn new languages. This implies that schools and teachers need to provide support. It is very important for educators to understand the ways of using language and literacy practices in their students' homes. When teachers understand the families' cultures, they will better understand these families' needs and concerns about their children's education. Cummins (1986, 1994) contends that the interactions between the language learners and teachers are critical for the development of language as well as academic skills. Helping families use their strengths to support their children's schooling should be an important mission of the school.

In more monolingual communities, where minority language children are fewer, there should be an access to an interpreter who can communicate with the teacher and parents and advise teachers about home culture. The Multicultural and the Chinese Associations should work towards the goal of formal heritage language classes for the children. Parents should also be proactive in joining the local Chinese Association so that they have a voice in the directions the Association takes. Local public libraries should provide children of various ethnic backgrounds with children's literature in their mother tongues.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Following are suggestions for further research to expand upon the findings of this

study:

1. More research needs to be done with different Chinese Canadian groups: groups of different origins from China who have different dialects, educational levels, and socio-economic status.
2. How does parents' acculturation affect their children's Chinese maintenance?
3. What are the differences between the family literacy practices of monolingual and bilingual Sino-Canadian parents in promoting Chinese language and culture?
4. What are the lived experiences of Sino-Canadian children who are attending schools in a majority culture language in maintaining Chinese language and culture?
5. What are the curricula for formal Chinese schools? What experiences do children have in learning the language and culture? How effective are such programs in promoting language proficiency and positive attitudes about the language and culture?

### **Personal Reflections on the Research Process**

The impetus to do a study on the Chinese literacy of Sino-Canadian children came from a personal concern regarding the increasing loss of mother tongue among minority groups. It was frustrating to see some Chinese children not speak Chinese to their parents at home. The parents seemed more concerned with their children's English proficiency and their school achievements. As Cummins (2002) recognizes, mother tongue loss in minority groups is becoming common. I wanted to investigate parents' perceptions of language maintenance and the family literacy practices they

conducted with their children in order to gain a better understanding of the factors leading to mother tongue loss. Qualitative research methodology enabled me to focus on what parents experienced in their children's language development and how they interpreted the experiences.

The research study took place over one year. When I started collecting data for the study, my husband and I organized a Chinese class. We volunteered to teach Mandarin Chinese each Sunday morning. Working with these children provided me with more insights into their language characteristics. Also it was the most interesting and rewarding part of doing this study. We adopted poetry-teaching, and shared reading practices in our Chinese class. Children loved to read and recite poems with beautiful rhymes. The poetry recitation period occurred ten minutes before each class. Students took turns to recite the poem, taught in the previous class, in front of the whole class. They enjoyed this part. This notion was not reflected in the findings, but may be useful for educators who teach Chinese to immigrant Chinese children.



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# **APPENDIX A**

## **General Interview Guide**

## GENERAL INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Describe your child/children's literacy experiences of learning Chinese.
2. What factors contribute to your child's/children's literacy development in Chinese?
  - environments of learning (i.e. school, family)
  - motivation
  - social factors
3. In what ways do you get involved in your child's/children's language learning in Chinese?
  - language use in the home
  - reading stories to your child/children
  - helping your child/children with his/her/their homework
  - relationship with the school/teachers
4. What is the role of the family in your child's/children's Chinese literacy development?
5. What is the role of the school in your child's/children's Chinese literacy development?
6. What are your expectations for your child's/children's literacy ability in Chinese?
  - maintenance of Chinese language and culture
  - what are your concerns?
7. What suggestions would you give to your child's/children's classroom teachers or community leaders concerning the maintenance of Chinese language and culture?
8. Any other comments?

# **APPENDIX B**

## **Cover Letter**

Dear Participant:

I am a graduate student at Lakehead University in the Master of Education program. I am conducting a study for my thesis, "Sino-Canadian Parent's Perceptions of Their Children's Chinese Literacy Development." The purpose of this study is to describe the perceptions of six Chinese couples of their children's Chinese literacy development and the roles parents play in maintaining their children's Chinese literacy. As a part of this study, you are being asked to participate in one in-depth interview which will take about 60 minutes. Each interview will be audiotaped and later transcribed by me.

There are no risks involved in the study. The potential benefit is that the study may provide insights into social-cultural environments of first language literacy development and language maintenance in Chinese immigrant families.

The study follows the ethics guidelines of the Research Ethics Board of Lakehead University. The data I collect will be confidential and the written report will not include your names. You may withdraw from the study at any time. The data will be stored securely at Lakehead University.

My thesis will report the research findings. As well, I may present the findings at conferences or publish reports in journals. A summary will be made available to you at your request.

If you have any questions concerning the study, please contact me by phone (684-0851) or email ([everwang@hotmail.com](mailto:everwang@hotmail.com)) or contact my supervisor, Dr. Mary Clare Courtland at (343-8696).

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,



Danqing Wang

## CONSENT FORM

My signature on this sheet indicates that I agree to participate in a study by Danqing Wang , on SINO-CANADIAN PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR CHILDREN'S CHINESE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT. I have received an explanation about the nature of the study, its purpose, and procedures. I understand the following:

1. I am a volunteer and can withdraw at any time from the study.
2. There are no risks involved in participating in this study.
3. The data I provide will be confidential and anonymous.
4. The data will be stored securely at Lakehead University.
5. I will receive a summary of the thesis, upon request, following the completion of the thesis.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name (Print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

If you would like a summary of the thesis, please write your name and address below:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

# **APPENDIX C**

## **Demographic Information Form**

## Demographic Information Form

Name(s) of Participant(s): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Date of Entry to Canada: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Children: \_\_\_\_\_

Child/Children's Grade Level(s): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Years of Schooling Child/Children Had in China : \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Years of Schooling Child/Children Have in Canada: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX D**

### **An Example of Chinese Characters and Pinyin**



táng shī shǎng xī  
唐 诗 赏 析 (T'ang Poem)

qiū xī  
秋 夕

táng dù mù  
(唐) 杜 牧

yín zhú qiū guāng lěng huà píng  
银 烛 秋 光 冷 画 屏,  
qīng luó xiǎo shàn pū liú yíng  
轻 罗 小 扇 扑 流 萤。  
tiān jiē yè sè liáng rú shuǐ  
天 阶 夜 色 凉 如 水,  
wò kàn niú láng zhī nǚ xīng  
卧 看 牛 郎 织 女 星。

**Word(s) Explanation:**

- |  |                              |
|--|------------------------------|
| 1. 秋 夕: autumn evening                     | 2. 冷: chilly, cold           |
| 3. 扑: chasing                              | 4. 流 萤: flying fireflies     |
| 5. 凉: cool                                 | 6. 如: it seems or feels like |
| 7. 卧 看: lying on the ground and looking up |                              |

**Translation:**

On this autumn evening, the moonlight shines like silvery candlelight on the colorfully painted screen and creates a chilly feeling.

I pick up a small and silk made fan to chase the flying fireflies.

Outdoors on the steps, I feel the night is as clear and cool as water.

Lying on the ground to look up the Cowboy and Weaving maiden constellations (two lovers in Chinese mythology, who are separated by the Milk Way and permitted to meet once a year) in the sky, I am overwhelmed by the beauty of that fairytale.