

**Identity Development and Culture
Instruction in Chinese as a Heritage
Language Education: Examining Immigrant
Identity in Chinese-American Cross-Cultural
Films**

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Abstract

Under the burgeoning social climate of anti-Asian violence catalyzed by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is of paramount importance for Chinese language instructors to address the identity needs of Chinese as a heritage language (CHL) learners. Despite increasing scholarly interest in the study of the identity issues facing CHL learners, pedagogically-orientated discussions on how to incorporate college-level CHL learners' identity development into the curriculum are almost nonexistent. This study argues that Chinese-American cross-cultural films provide valuable instructional materials that address CHL learners' identity and cultural needs. This study analyzes four major types of challenges and struggles experienced by Chinese immigrants depicted in ten Chinese-American cross-cultural films (i.e., obligation to parents, a tendency toward "invisibility," the

paradox of Chinese-American assimilation, and intergenerational struggles) and demonstrates how such challenges and struggles can be utilized to facilitate CHL learners' identity development through intergenerational communication, peer interaction, community involvement, and intercultural learning.

Keywords: Cross-cultural films; Chinese; heritage language education; identity development; culture instruction

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Introduction

Since the advent of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the severity and visibility of anti-Asian violence has gained increasing public attention. The Center for the Study of Hate & Extreme published a report documenting hate crimes in 16 big American cities in 2020. The statistics showed anti-Asian hate crimes in these cities rose by 149% in 2020 despite the fact that overall hate crimes dropped by seven percent (Center for the Study of Hate & Extreme, 2021). A group called Stop AAPI Hate (AAPI stands for Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders) reported 3,795 hate incidents against the AAPI community in the U.S., among which Chinese were the largest ethnic group (42.2%) that reported experiencing hate, followed by Koreans (14.8%), Vietnamese (8.5%), and Filipinos (7.9%) (Jeung, Horse, Popvic, & Lim, 2021). Horrific cases of violence have shaken the AAPI community.

Discussions surrounding anti-Asian violence exploded online after a white man killed eight people, mostly Asian women, at spas in the Atlanta area on March 16, 2021. In response to these tragic incidents, AAPI communities across the U.S. organized a large number of rallies protesting against the Asian hate. Under this social climate, people with Asian descent are forced to be more conscious of their ethnicity and

to re-examine their social identity. Asian mothers now need to prepare an answer for a hard question from their young children: “Why do they hate us?” It is also common for Chinese American college students to seriously start thinking about what it means to be a Chinese American and what they can do to help their parents and communities.

For the field of Chinese language education, it has never been so urgent to incorporate Chinese as a heritage language (CHL) learners’ identity development into the curriculum. It has been widely recognized in the general field of heritage language education that culture instruction is important for addressing heritage language learners’ identity needs (Samaniego & Pino, 2000; Valdés, 2000; Webb & Miller, 2000). However, many basic questions remain underexplored: How should instructors conduct culture instruction in the heritage language classroom? What materials can be used? What aspects of culture should be taught? Pedagogically-orientated research and discussions on college-level CHL education are particularly meager with only a few exceptions (e.g., McGinnis, 1996; Luo, Li, & Li, 2017, 2019) and those dedicated to CHL learners’ identity development are almost non-existent. This paper intends to discuss the pedagogical possibilities of utilizing Chinese-American cross-cultural films

to address college-level CHL learners' identity and cultural needs in the heritage language classroom.

Heritage Language Education: Identity and Culture

Since the 1990s, HL education has increasingly attracted scholarly attention, developing into a distinct subfield of applied linguistics and language pedagogy (Valdés, 2005). A large body of research has been dedicated to analyzing HL learners' linguistic profiles and identifying their linguistic needs (Campbell & Rosenthal, 2000; Carreira & Kagan, 2018; Polinsky & Kagan, 2007; Renganathan, 2008). Carreira (2004) has insightfully pointed out that HL learners also have identity needs in addition to linguistic needs. Indeed, it is a long-held assumption that HL learners “seek to (re)claim their ethnic identity through language study” (Leeman, 2015, p. 100) because they are motivated “by an identification with the intrinsic cultural, affective, and aesthetic values of the language” (He, 2006, p. 2). The impact of identity on student motivation in HL education is supported by survey data. In Carreira and Kagan's (2011) report on the National Heritage Language Survey (NHLS) conducted by the federally funded National Heritage Language Resource Center, the most common responses to a multiple-choice question about students' reasons for enrolling in heritage language courses

were “to learn about their cultural and linguistic roots” (p. 48). Although educators, activists, and policymakers have long made reference to identity in their calls for HL education, an explicit focus on identity in HL education research is relatively recent, emerging only about a decade ago (Leeman, 2015).

In a seminal piece on CHL learners’ development, He (2006) argues that learner identity is “the centerpiece rather than the background of heritage language development” and that “identity formation and transformation is symbiotic with CHL development” (p. 7). This position, to a degree, has received support from a large number of correlational studies that examined the relationship between HL achievement and learner identity development (e.g., Kondo, 1997; Kondo-Brown, 2005; Lee, 2002; Li, 1994; Tse, 2000). The findings of all these studies show that ethnic identity is a key factor in HL development in addition to other internal factors such as motivation and attitudes. For example, Li’s (1994) study revealed that proficiency correlates positively with a well-developed sense of ethnic identity manifested in group members having a greater understanding and knowledge of their groups’ cultural values, ethics, and manners. Tse (2000) concluded that HL development is facilitated when HL learners have positive attitudes toward the language and feel positively about their ethnic group. Meanwhile, Potowski

(2012) warned that HL learners “face complex issues as they construct an ethnolinguistic identity within a predominately English-speaking society” (p. 193) and thus called for efforts to advance the field of identity studies in HL education.

As scholars and researchers have widely recognized the question of identity as a core topic for HL education (Carreira, 2004; He, 2004, 2006, 2010; Hornberger & Wang, 2008; Leeman, 2015), it is thus of paramount importance for the HL curriculum to incorporate HL learners’ identity development. One of the ways to address HL learners’ identity needs suggested by scholars is to teach culture that can help HL learners connect with their home and community (Samaniego & Pino, 2000; Valdés, 2000; Webb & Miller, 2000). This suggestion is corroborated by the results of studies on HL learners’ voices and perspectives, reporting the overwhelming emphasis HL learners place on the importance of culture and the need for a stronger cultural component in the curriculum (Beaudrie, Ducar, and Relaño-Pastor, 2009; Schwarzer & Petró, 2005). As culture is an extremely complex concept, it is critical to discuss what aspects of culture should be included in the HL curriculum in order to meet students’ identity needs. Specifically for Spanish HL learners, Carreira (2004) suggests that the curriculum should focus on the culture of U.S. Latinos so that students can bring their own experiences to the

classroom, and culture can be explored by HL learners as insiders of the local communities. Aparicio (1997) proposes three levels of cultural knowledge: self-cultural knowledge (culture related to one's own home and community), intracultural knowledge (other Latino cultures in the U.S.), and intercultural knowledge (the Latino culture in relation to other ethnic groups in the U.S.). For CHL learners, He (2020) posits that the teaching of traditional Chinese culture, contemporary Chinese culture, and Chinese American culture is integral to students' identity development with specific emphasis given to Chinese American culture as this is the cultural component that is currently lacking in the CHL curriculum.

However, pedagogically-based discussions on what HL learners' identity needs entail and how cultural instruction should be implemented to meet their needs are relatively scarce. Above all, identity is about "belonging" (Weeks, 1990, p. 88). Moreover, "identities are not determined by essence or nature, but are derived from and maintained through social interaction" (He, 2010, p. 72). Thus, HL learners' sense of belonging may be strengthened by establishing meaningful connections with their family members, peers of similar backgrounds, and local communities. As research shows, HL learners' perceived degree of family bond influences language maintenance (Tannenbaum & Howie, 2002), social interaction

with peers from one's own ethnic group is related to ethnic identity (Phinney, Romero, Nava, & Huang, 2001), and HL learners express the need to build relationship with their HL community (Feuerverger, 1991). It is, therefore, reasonable to believe that cultural instruction in the HL classroom that facilitates intergenerational communication (He, 2020; Wang, 2021), social interaction with peers, and participation in the HL community (Carreira & Kagan, 2011) has great potential to address HL learners' identity needs.

In terms of cultural learning, HL learners have two characteristics that distinguish them from non-heritage learners. First, HL learners have had extensive exposure to their heritage culture at home before entering the HL classroom, especially in terms of cultural products and cultural practices, which should be seen as a resource for HL learning and teaching (Beaudrie, 2016; Leeman & Serafini, 2016). In this sense, HL learners may be more interested in learning the underlying beliefs and attitudes of their heritage culture (i.e., cultural mind or cultural perspectives) that are able to explain the cultural products and practices they have observed or experienced while growing up. Second, heritage language speakers have extensive intercultural experiences as “moving between languages and cultures happens at the threshold of their homes” and therefore, “heritage language learners may

carry an everyday intercultural burden that is not familiar to second language learners or native speakers of the language” (Kagan, 2012, p. 72). Because of their daily existence in two cultures, HL learners may find cultural instruction with an explicit focus on cultural comparison or intercultural learning particularly relevant to their life experiences.

Ideally, HL education in general and CHL education in particular need to center the curriculum around HL learners’ identity and develop pedagogical materials and activities tailored to their cultural characteristics and intercultural experiences that are able to facilitate their connection and interaction with their home, peers, and communities. As Xiang (2016) has insightfully pointed out, “it would be fruitful for university-level HL instruction to incorporate identity as a focal point to organize instructional content and provide ample discursive opportunities for HLLs to express, articulate, understand, and broaden their sense of being a multilingual and multicultural individual. (p. 177).

This study argues that Chinese-American cross-cultural films have great potential to provide valuable cultural materials that facilitate CHL learners’ identity development and address their unique cultural needs. A close examination of ten Chinese-American cross-cultural films shows that

immigrant identity is a recurring theme thoughtfully depicted in all the titles, in which the lived cultural conflicts faced by first- and second-generation Chinese immigrants are examined in great depth. While some challenges may be universal to all first-generation immigrants in the U.S., other struggles tend to be unique to immigrants who identify with Chinese culture. The immigrant identity issues delineated in the films may prompt CHL learners to reflect on their own identity and initiate intergenerational communication within their family, whereas the unique challenges experienced by Chinese immigrants may invite CHL learners to examine the Chinese cultural mind that shapes their parents or grandparents' distinctive struggles. Moreover, the cross-cultural contexts employed in these films resonate with CHL learners' daily intercultural experiences and thus naturally invite them to compare and contrast Chinese and American cultures while bringing in their own voices and perspectives. Therefore, these films may not only be intrinsically motivating for CHL learners, but also have the potential to further develop their intercultural awareness and competence by engaging them through explicit cultural reflection, analysis, and comparison.

Overview of Chinese-American Cross-Cultural Films Highlighting Immigrant Identity

Chinese immigration has an extensive history in America, including an uneven road to acceptance and inclusion due to the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and rampant racist characterizations and incidents associated with the “yellow peril” (Lee, 2002). Following a wave of immigration in the 1960s and 1970s, leading to an influx of Asian immigrants to America, the myth of the “model minority” has continued to influence and inform both American perceptions of Chinese immigrants as well as immigrants’ own reflections on their Chinese heritage (Museus & Kiang, 2009). Most recently, as investigated by Viladrich (2021), an outbreak of Sinophobia and violence against Asians due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and its suspected origins has further highlighted many of the challenges endured by Chinese immigrants.

The simultaneous richness and tension characterizing the Chinese immigrant experience in America over the past two centuries has been communicated in many mediums beyond that of academia, including through artistic channels—novels, memoirs, and films. Of these channels, cross-cultural or transnational cinema has demonstrated a consistent, robust

ability to viscerally and empathetically portray Chinese immigrant identity in America. The study selects ten Chinese-American cross-cultural films highlighting immigrant identity. As organized below in Table 1, the films were categorized according to chronology, directorship, setting, language, and thematic content. With the locus of each film situated firmly within the concept of immigrant identity, many of the films contain thematic overlap, yet each film proves its unique importance through the nuances of narrative storytelling.

Table 1. Categorization of Ten Chinese-American Films on Immigrant Identity

Film Title	Date	Directorship	Setting	Language	Themes
“Pushing Hands”	1991	Taiwanese-American Co-production	U.S.	English Chinese	Filial piety; obligation to parents; tradition vs. modernity.
“The Wedding Banquet”	1993	Taiwanese-American Co-production	U.S.	English Chinese	saving face; obligation to parents; filial piety; LGBTQ+ issues.
“The Joy Luck Club”	1993	American	U.S.	English Chinese	generational struggles; assimilation paradox; role of women.
“Siaoyu”	1995	Taiwanese	U.S.	English Chinese	Role of women; invisibility & self-effacement.

“Gua Sha”	2001	Chinese	U.S.	Chinese English	Saving face; familial obligation; generational struggles; assimilation paradox.
“Saving Face”	2004	American	U.S.	English Chinese	Assimilation paradox; generational struggles; saving face; role of women; LGBTQ+ issues.
“Dark Matter”	2007	Chinese	U.S.	English Chinese	Invisibility & self-effacement; familial obligation; mental health.
“Shanghai Calling”	2012	Chinese-American Co-production	China	English Chinese	Chinese-American assimilation paradox.
“Crazy Rich Asians”	2018	American	U.S. Singapore	English	Generational struggles; assimilation paradox; familial obligation.
“The Farewell”	2019	American	U.S. China	Chinese English	Familial obligation; generational struggles; assimilation paradox.

Immigrant Identity in the Chinese-American Cross-Cultural Films

The immigrant experience is shaped by the tension between one’s native culture, ethnicity, and language, and that of the new home country. This naturally engenders

multilayered challenges that range from barriers to communication and employment, discrimination and racism in society, and the continual contestation of tradition versus modernity in family and cultural ethics (Massey & Sanchez, 2010). The canon of ten films as described above portray a wide yet consistently applicable range of challenges experienced by Chinese immigrants in the U.S. As extracted thematically from the films, some of the greatest challenges facing Chinese-American immigrants include feelings of obligation to succeed and bring honor to the family, a tendency toward self-effacement or “invisibility,” the overarching paradox of Chinese-American assimilation, and intergenerational struggles. These challenges not only uniquely shape the Chinese immigrant identity, but also foreground the contested nature of Chinese identity in the context of the immigrant experience. As with many aspects of Chinese philosophy, Confucianism lies at the root of these challenges shaping the Chinese cultural mind and thus the Chinese immigrant experience.

1.1. Obligation to Parents: Honor, Success, and Guilt

As depicted in the selected films, one of the most prominent realms of thought influencing the Chinese immigrant experience is the Confucian emphasis on a sense of

responsibility, obligation, and even guilt toward one's parents. This relates directly to the concept of filial piety, which informs parent and child relationships and also acts as a guiding code for governing intergenerational actions (Lai, 2010). Applied to the concept of immigrant identity, filial piety relates to concepts of family cohesiveness, as well as ideals of success. The desire to succeed and bring honor to the family, a strong undercurrent shaping the motivations and aspirations of Chinese immigrants, is also closely related to the concept of filial piety. This desire is compounded in the Chinese immigrant experience, as first-generation immigrants may be supporting their parents and in-laws who still reside in China, while second-generation immigrants and their children bear the burden of both filial piety as well as the knowledge of their parents' and grandparents' sacrifice to ensure a better life and future for the family. Accordingly, this obligation to succeed and bring honor to the family is accompanied by a sense of guilt to one's parents, or a sense of responsibility, that is compounded by the sacrifices made by one's parents. As a product of obligation and strict hierarchical relationships (Kim, 2009), this theme of guilt and obligation often moves hand in hand with the desire to succeed and reflect highly on the family, and informs much of the Chinese immigrant experience across generations.

In Ang Lee's film "Pushing Hands," the issues of Chinese-American immigration take center stage across cultural, linguistic, and generational lines. The arrival of Alex Chu's aging father from China throws cultural and linguistic differences into sharp contrast, as Alex's American wife clashes with the traditional Chinese values old Chu attempts to impose. Alex is thus mired in a crisis, as he feels strongly obligated to abide by his father's wishes due to a deeply-ingrained sense of filial piety as per the Confucian dictates of Chinese culture. The film is defined by this relationship with his Chinese-born father, as Alex must navigate the emotionally precarious position of acting as a filial son to his father while also acting as a father and husband to his nuclear family. His devotion to his father mandates that they all live together, and that old Chu is shown proper respect and attention as is due his age and status. However, as the common link between Chu and Martha, Alex is responsible for handling both of their burdens, presenting immense strain to the whole family. Alex's stress boils over when Martha callously allows Chu to take a walk outside and temporarily go missing. Referencing the filial piety baked into his culture, Alex exclaims, "I grew up believing you should care for your parents the way they care for you. My father is a part of me. Why can't you accept that?" His outburst reveals not only the Chinese origins of this obligation, oriented towards filial piety, but also his own feelings of responsibility

and even guilt toward his parents that shape his experience as an immigrant son and father. This sense of obligation or duty to his father, and by extension to his Chinese cultural roots, forms the nexus of Alex's own personal struggle with his heritage and the dominant society in which he lives, and also acts as an important illustration of common struggles affecting Chinese immigrants in America.

Within the film "Gua Sha," the parent-child dynamic of obligation to succeed and responsibility to one's parents takes center stage, as protagonist Datong makes the decision to legally state that he gave Dennis the Guasha treatment; in doing so, Datong spares his father, who had actually administered the treatment, from legal ruin. Confucian philosophy dictates that filial piety from a child to a parent involves obedience and respect in many life contexts, including but not limited to the care of the parents during their lives, performing duties after their death, and generally upholding the family's good name. In the film, Datong exhibits filial piety by seeking to shield his father from undue hardship and instead shouldering the legal and emotional burdens himself, fulfilling the role of a dutiful son while also continuing to work and support his family. While this obligation to his father is particularly conspicuous, the various hardships endured by the

family also serve as an important on-screen representation of these nuanced immigrant experiences.

Using a more marginalized thematic representation, the film “The Wedding Banquet” portrays the unique influence that the protagonist Wai-Tung’s traditional Chinese parents exert over the course of his life, particularly in the realms of filial piety. The issue of Wai-Tung’s sexuality is intimately linked to his family’s social and cultural reputation—because Wai-Tung is cognizant of his Chinese background and the cultural values that stigmatize both homosexuality and childless relationships, he is highly influenced by his parents’ desire to see him married and with children at this stage of his life. To refuse his parents’ wishes would be a sign of disrespect and a flippant rejection of Confucian family values—especially in the context of all the sacrifices Wai-Tung’s parents made for his future and his overall success—as well as a significant loss of face. This gives rise to one of the most prominent plot devices contained within the film: in order to appease his family, Wai-Tung agrees to a heterosexual marriage of convenience with a woman from mainland China. A deeper understanding of filial piety and Confucianism within the family reveals that this wedding, though unorthodox by Western standards, represented Wai-Tung’s desire to mollify and respect his parents’ wishes. As Wai-Tung is eventually able

to live his authentic life as a gay man, this also may help heritage learners feel validated as they see a second-generation Chinese immigrant expressing his sexuality while also balancing a sense of obligation to his first-generational Chinese parents.

1.2. Tendencies toward Self-Effacement and “Invisibility”

The invisibility of Asian Americans in the United States remains a well-known social issue (e.g., Huang & Hall, 2020; Waxman, 2021) and accompanies a related social phenomenon: the societal imposition of a “bamboo ceiling” in which Asian Americans are viewed as hardworking and industrious but ill-suited for leadership positions (Hyun, 2005). With the understanding that complex historical, political, social, and cultural factors contribute to the problem, Chinese immigrants’ tendency toward self-effacement or invisibility may, to a certain degree, relate to Confucian traditions associated with struggling silently and diligently in various settings, especially those related to education or work. While this virtue is highly admirable, and constitutes much attention for the lessons it teaches about hard work, humility, and dedication, it often manifests in the immigrant experience as a negative trait that may be seen as overly submissive--to the

point of perceived invisibility in the classroom, the workplace, or even society.

In the film “Siaoyu,” issues of self-effacement and invisibility emerge as one of the most prominent struggles facing the Chinese protagonist, who is pursuing the ultimate goal of gaining a green card to stay in America. Siaoyu falls victim to many stereotypes in America due to her identity as a woman of Chinese descent; these stereotypes are only compounded by her perceived submissiveness and reticence to speak or engage in confrontation. This wrongly feeds into perceptions of her as a “China Doll” or a kind of mute, erasing the richness of her ambitions, cultural heritage, and compassionate personality. While Siaoyu and her boyfriend work tirelessly with only low wages in return, uncomplaining and dedicated to their work, their immigrant experience is shaped by the limited nature of their opportunities to change their situation. While Americans hurl thinly-veiled insults and jabs at Siaoyu, she remains dedicated to her pursuit of a green card and ultimately to a better life. The challenges posed to her as a Chinese immigrant are thus informed by the Chinese tendency toward self-effacement, which is misconstrued and weaponized against her by members of the dominant society who minimize her character and her identity as a three-dimensional, well-rounded member of society.

This theme of invisibility is continued by the 2007 film “Dark Matter,” in which a Chinese graduate student attending an American university falls prey to a callous and ultimately malicious graduate project advisor. The protagonist Liu Xing exhibits a commitment to his parents back in China, armed with the knowledge that they are working tirelessly to earn money and support a better lifestyle for the family. As a result, Liu Xing holds a strong sense of responsibility and duty to his parents, to whom he sends money and with whom he corresponds often. His filial piety even drives him to lie about his own condition at the university in order to uphold the family pride and bring honor to his parents. In reality, while Liu Xing was highly eager and capable, completing every task assigned to him expediently and diligently, he was viewed by his graduate mentor as nothing more than a workhorse, unable to form novel ideas that could compete with established theories. This treatment originated from the stereotype of Asian invisibility, in which Liu Xing’s quiet brilliance was taken for granted as just another faceless Chinese immigrant who excels in STEM fields. In the film, these feelings of invisibility and isolation culminate in the worse-case scenario, as Liu Xing explodes into an episode of fatal gun violence and suicide. This film can serve as a tragic cautionary tale for how the dominant American society may contribute to furthering negative

stereotypes that harm individual Chinese immigrants' ability to contribute and view themselves as productive members of that society.

1.3. The Paradox of Chinese-American Assimilation

As Chinese immigration, alongside all immigration, continues to rise in America, scholarship on the nuances of immigrant identity mired between Chinese and American values has gained prominence. For example, Pedraza (2006) asserted of the immigration experience, "Immigrants today are there not just in their memories and imaginations, but vicariously, in that very moment; they are able to participate—economically, politically, socially, emotionally—in a regular, constant way, often creating two "homes" that rest on the pillar of an identity (or identities) that incorporate two or more nations, social worlds, at the same time. Dual loyalties can be conflicting" (p. 242). This encapsulates the paradox of Chinese-American assimilation, in which the desire to assimilate into American society may clash with the desire to maintain one's Chinese roots and identity.

This paradox of assimilation within the Chinese immigrant experience is embodied by the intertwining narratives contained within the film "The Joy Luck Club." Following the lives of various mother-daughter pairs, all of

whom are either Chinese-born or American-born Chinese, the paradox of assimilation all play out through mother-daughter relationships. The phenomenon of the “Tiger Mom,” typically portrayed as a Chinese or Asian immigrant mother who demands obedience and outstanding results from her children, manifests as several of the daughters feel burdened by the politics and dictates of their family and Chinese social culture. This is an experience many Chinese heritage learners may relate to, as the enforced learning of piano, chess, or other activities becomes a social weapon as well as a benchmark of filial piety and success. Additionally, many of the women—both mothers and daughters—wrestle with feelings of incompatibility between their authentic selves and the dictates and demands of the dominant society. As per traditional Chinese ideals of womanhood, many of the women remain silent in the face of mistreatment or even abuse from within their family, leading to an effacement of their challenges and personal stories. However, the film advocates strongly for the cycle of mistreatment to be broken, offering a path forward from the traditional Chinese perspective to one more aligned with the American values of individual choice and freedom. Ultimately, this film clearly demonstrates and explores the condition of children who either feel alienated, resentful, or burdened by the Chinese culture forcefully imposed upon them by their Chinese-born parents. While continually exposing the raw,

often ugly side of this cultural reckoning, the film seeks to humanize each parent-child relationship, portraying empathetically the motivations and wisdom of Chinese culture while also advocating for a more modernized balance among the two competing cultures. This offers rich opportunities for heritage learners to explore the challenges that arise from the allure of American society juxtaposed with the pull of their Chinese heritage.

In a more transnational subversion of the themes of Chinese-American immigration, the film “Shanghai Calling” (2015) explores the paradox of heritage learners feeling excluded from or alienated from their own cultural roots and language. The protagonist Sam, who is of Chinese descent but embodies every American ideal, struggles after being relocated to China and being immersed in his “native” culture after assimilation into American society his entire life. This clearly demonstrates the paradox of Chinese-American immigrants, especially American-born Chinese, as their ability to assimilate into American society and adopt American sensibilities often has an inversely proportional effect on their feelings of pride and proximity to the cultural Chinese heritage. For example, Sam feels strongly aligned with American values of individualism, while struggling to re-introduce Chinese business manners and cultural practices and thus experiencing

feelings of inadequacy. However, the film teaches that with closer contact with Chinese culture through people, society, and other connections, a pride and appreciation for one's own Chinese heritage can be rekindled. Sam eventually grows to enjoy and understand Chinese customs and values that resonate with him, ultimately allowing him to reconcile his American upbringing with his Chinese heritage.

The hit film "Crazy Rich Asians" also concerns themes of the contested nature of "Chineseness," against the backdrop of expectations of filial piety and sense of duty to one's family. Rachel Chu encounters competing expectations and definitions of being Chinese once she returns to the elite social circle of her boyfriend Nick Young in Singapore, where her emphasis on individualism and career ambition as a professor distance her from the expectations of tradition via Nick's family. They consistently reference that one's dream and even life trajectory should be subject to the family's and parents' wishes, invoking many principles associated with filial piety and Confucian family ethics. Nick himself faces tremendous pressure when his family delivers an ultimatum: either renounce his relationship with the Americanized, common-born Rachel, or risk the shame and rejection of his family. Rachel's limited Chinese speaking skills create further distance between herself and Nick's family, highlighting Rachel's

struggle as an American-born Chinese immigrant. External expectations of what it means to be Chinese cause her to wrestle with issues of identity and her own heritage, yet ultimately the film offers a way forward: balancing the desires of one's parents and heritage, while also pursuing one's own life path. This can be viewed as a successful hybridization between the two worlds Rachel and Nick inhabit.

1.4. Intergenerational Struggles

It is common for Chinese immigrants and their children to experience intergenerational cultural conflicts as a result of acculturation gaps, which often lead to disagreements or even clashes in values and beliefs (Liu, Liang, Nguyen, & Melo, 2019; Lin, Bryant, & Boldero, 2015). While many of the delineated themes drawn from the ten films overlap, the motif of intergenerational challenges across the canon encapsulates many of the compounded struggles faced by various generations of Chinese immigrants in America. The fissures of age and generation often expose challenges that both divide and unite Chinese immigrants in America, ranging from conservatism versus progressivism, tradition versus modernity, and more. Through the prism of Chinese-American immigration, intergenerational struggles often exacerbate the

discrepancies between American and Chinese society across the lines of gender, sexuality, and age.

The theme of generational heritage and struggle of Chinese immigrants in America is displayed prominently in the 2019 film “The Farewell.” Premised on the familial decision to withhold a terminal cancer diagnosis from their elderly grandmother Nai Nai, the film reveals the nexus of cultural clash between American and Chinese ways of thinking regarding how one’s parents should be best treated. In Chinese culture, as such a matter is of extreme importance, sparing Nai Nai from the horrors and prolonged anxiety of her diagnosis was a solution that seemed widely accepted. However, the protagonist Billi is forced to confront her own Americanized beliefs regarding individual choice and the right to take hold of one’s own fate; her family’s decision remains a tough pill for her to swallow, as she initially resists this treatment. This spotlights the paradoxical nature of Chinese-American immigration, as Billi identifies so strongly with the American value that she resists the Chinese value. Her struggle is compounded by intergenerational views of one’s sense of duty to one’s parents--from grandmother, to mother, to daughter. However, as she engages in greater dialogue with her family members and even returns to China, reliving and rekindling some of the fondest memories she shared in her upbringing,

she is eventually able to see the wisdom in both the American and Chinese cultures. This also points to a successful hybridization of the cultural clash between American and Chinese societies.

Finally, the film “Saving Face” explores the generational challenges exposed by changing times in American society, through the lens of sexuality. For the protagonist Wilhelmina, her Chinese identity is often jeopardized by the nature of her sexuality as a lesbian woman, branded as taboo by her traditional Chinese community, as well as American society at the time. In one poignant scene, Wilhelmina comes out to her mother, only for her mother to respond, “I am not a bad mother. My daughter cannot be gay.” This remark exposes the pernicious belief that homosexuality is a sign of sexual deviance and a result of poor parenting, rather than an innate characteristic. As a relic of less progressive times, members of the community view homosexuality as incompatible with traditional Chinese family values. Wilhelmina living her life as a homosexual woman would constitute a grave loss of face for the family, who operate based on an older generation’s schema regarding sexuality.

As an unmarried twenty-eight-year-old woman, Wilhelmina also bears the burden of certain old-fashioned, gendered double standards regarding women's age of marriage. A Chinese family-friend at a party warns her, "Forget meat on the grill, and it will dry out." This saying reflects women's perceived depreciation in value on the marriage market as they age--their value and "freshness," as with a piece of meat, is dependent on their youth. This double standard within the Chinese community, and Wilhelmina's frustrations with them as well as with her own internalized homophobia, may resonate deeply with second- or third-generation immigrants and heritage learners navigating their private lives and cultural roots.

Pedagogical Implications for CHL Education

It is by now widely recognized that identity development is central to CHL education (He, 2006, 2010; Li & Duff, 2008; Wong & Xiao, 2010; Xiang, 2016). To fulfill CHL learners' identity needs, it is critical for classroom instruction to provide CHL students with ample opportunities to connect with their family, peers, and local communities. In particular, intergenerational communication within the family is of paramount importance. To address and utilize CHL learners' cultural characteristics, CHL education could benefit

from a focus on intercultural learning which allows CHL learners to bring in their own cultural and intercultural experiences into HL learning. The development of intercultural competence or intercultural citizenship (Byram, 2008, 2013) is essential for CHL learners to prepare themselves for the multilingual and multicultural society and the globalized world. This paper argues that Chinese-American cross-cultural films highlighting immigrant identity issues are able to serve as a springboard for creating instructional materials and tasks to achieve the above-mentioned pedagogical goals of CHL education. This section discusses a number of pedagogical possibilities on how the films and the key themes of immigrant identity analyzed in the previous section can be employed for identity development and intercultural learning in CHL education at the college level (see Appendix for a summary of suggested pedagogical activities).

The challenges and struggles of first-generation Chinese immigrants depicted in the cross-cultural films may be employed as powerful pedagogical tools to facilitate intergenerational communication within the family. After reviewing the films such as “Pushing Hands,” “Guasha,” “Dark Matter,” and “Siao Yu,” students can be asked to first identify the challenges faced by the first-generation Chinese immigrants and then reflect on the degree to which their

parents or family members may have experienced similar struggles upon immigrating to the U.S. When the challenges and struggles experienced by their parents are more fully explored, the students can be guided to focus on analyzing the reasons behind the unique challenges faced by first-generation Chinese immigrants, such as the strong desire to succeed and bring honor to the family, the sense of guilt and responsibility toward one's parents, intergenerational conflicts, and a tendency toward self-effacement or "invisibility." Through this process, the CHL learners may reach a greater understanding of their parents' struggles, alongside related connections to Chinese values and Confucian teachings, including Chinese family ethics, the importance of filial piety, the importance of humility, hard work, and putting action before speaking, as well as the importance of social harmony and respecting authority. All of these values, if portrayed correctly and fairly, are not only reasonable, but also can be viewed as virtues that are beneficial for both individuals and society. Such understandings can potentially boost CHL learners' pride in their heritage and strengthen their connection with Chinese culture.

Chinese immigrants' challenges and life stories as depicted in the selected canon of films can be conveniently integrated into CHL class projects or tasks that require intergenerational communication. For example, the instructor

may ask the CHL learners to write a letter to their parents to express how the cross-cultural films have educated them on the possible challenges they might have undergone and further inquire about their parents' life experiences as immigrants in the U.S. The students may then share their findings with their classmates and hold in-class discussions on the similarities and differences of all the shared life stories, as well as the underlying driving forces of various experiences. Alternatively, this task can be turned into a video project that requires CHL learners to interview their family members and members in their local communities and collaborate with their parents or other family members. Such class projects or tasks that encourage intergenerational communication are in line with pedagogical practices "facilitating the learner's search for identity vis-à-vis the HL/HC" (Carreira, 2004, p. 8). Other activities to this end include "compiling oral histories of relatives, writing heritage-culture autobiographies, and exploring the history of the HL community in the U.S." (Carreira, 2004, p. 8). Thus, along with their parents' struggles and challenges as immigrants in the U.S., the CHL instructor can also encourage the students to explore and discuss the Chinese-American history and other related topics such as the "model minority" myth with their parents.

The paradox of Chinese-American assimilation as experienced by Sam in “Shanghai Calling,” Rachel in “Crazy Rich Asians,” and Billi in “The Farewell” can serve as reference points for CHL learners to discuss identity struggles through adolescence and young adulthood, so as to promote peer interaction. It is very common for CHL learners to experience considerable ambivalence about their Chinese-American dual identities (Li & Duff, 2008). The issue of identity tends to evoke strong emotions among CHL learners (Xiao-Desai, 2020) and thus opportunities for them to openly share and discuss their experiences and struggles associated with identity can not only help reduce their anxiety, but also strengthen the bonding among peers and build a supportive community for the CHL class. To further facilitate peer interaction, the instructor can hold in-class discussion sessions for students to share their challenges and life stories associated with identity, aiming to explore what causes such struggles and how CHL learners may approach them. This class activity can then lead to a final writing assignment or a video project depicting CHL learners’ autobiography, highlighting key points in their life and reflections on their journey of identity development. The documentaries: “Stories About Us, By Us, For Us” ([https://2019 chin243.wixsite.com/website-1/documentary](https://2019chin243.wixsite.com/website-1/documentary)) and the Final Project “We, Together”,

(<https://chinprogram.wixsite.com/143and243>) created by CHL instructors at the University of British Columbia (Wang, 2021) provide an excellent example of class projects that encourage students to incorporate their own stories and identity experiences. If parents or family members are invited to the final presentations of these projects, it provides a valuable opportunity for parents to understand their children's identity struggles, which further strengthens intergenerational connection and parent-child relationship.

Another way to promote peer interaction and connection is to create opportunities for CHL students to collaborate and accomplish community-based projects as a group. Ideally, these projects are aimed at addressing the real-life issues facing Chinese-American communities, such that involvement in these projects may also strengthen CHL learners' connection with the local Chinese communities in the U.S. Based on the stories narrated in these cross-cultural films, the instructor can first ask the students to identify problems Chinese immigrants may need examine further as a community. For example, in "Guasha," Datong and his wife mandate an English-only policy at home so that their son Dennis could be optimally adjusted to his life at school in America. Datong also hits Dennis in front of his boss just to

show respect in the wake of an altercation between Dennis and his boss's son.

The students can be guided to discuss whether these practices are problematic and what can be done to help Chinese families like Datong's utilize different strategies. In "Pushing Hands," Chinese-speaking tai chi master Chu gets lost in an American neighborhood and cannot find his way home due to a steep language barrier. He also suffers immensely from loneliness in the U.S., qualifying his experience as very representative of the experience of the elderly in Chinese immigrant families. The instructor may invite the students to propose feasible plans to help the elderly and their families. Other problems manifested in the films include the identity struggles of second-generation Chinese immigrants, the invisibility of Chinese-Americans, the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in the Chinese-American community, and more. In addition, the instructor can also encourage CHL students to communicate with members of the local Chinese communities (e.g., parents, school-aged children, the elderly, administrators of Chinese community schools) to explore other existing real-life issues faced by the community. For example, under the current social environment of Asian Hate, what can the Chinese community do to voice out their sufferings and win support from other

ethnic groups? What steps do the Chinese community need to take to request Chinese- and also Asian-American history be added to K-12 education in the U.S.? What problems can the myth of model minority cause for Chinese-Americans? How should the Chinese communities respond to the Black Lives Matter movement?

It is no exaggeration that many adult members of the Chinese community (especially among first-generation immigrants) respond to these questions with answers that lack nuance, shedding light on a potentially problematic phenomenon. The CHL learners can be divided into small groups; each group can then identify a specific problem that interests them, propose a plan to solve the problem, try to implement their plan in the local Chinese community, write up a report and reflection, and share their results with the class.

The CHL students may organize a weekend club for the elderly where they can learn the English language and American culture, sponsor a workshop on the importance of self-advocacy among Chinese children at the weekend Chinese community schools, hold discussion sessions for their parents and others in the community to examine the implications of the model minority myth and the importance of intersectionality with other marginalized groups in America,

initiate a meeting with the local senator to discuss the steps of incorporating Asian-American history into the district's K-12 schools, and much more.

Many Asian Americans are increasingly beginning to educate their parents and become invested in local Asian-American communities. For example, back in 2016, hundreds of Asian Americans came together online to co-author an open letter to “Mom, Dad, Uncle, Auntie, Grandfather, Grandmother,” explaining why Black Lives Matter to Asian Americans and the importance of solidarity with African Americans and other communities of color (Wang, 2016). This open letter has been translated to various Asian languages and circulated among Asian-American communities in the U.S. Similarly, during the pandemic, a Yale student named Eillen Huang wrote a letter to the Chinese American Community and warned that “the rampant anti-Blackness in the Asian American community that, if unchecked, can bring violence to us all” (Huang, 2020, n. p.). To establish strong connections between the CHL learners and the Chinese-American community, it is important for instructors to create opportunities for students to first understand their community and people, then to involve themselves in community issues, and eventually take actions to transform their community. As He (2016) insightfully points out, “Heritage language learning

has the potential to transform all parties involved in the socialization process” (p. 9). The ultimate goal of CHL education should be transformation.

In addition to facilitating connections with family, peers, and community, the cross-cultural films also provide CHL learners with invaluable materials for intercultural learning. The generational struggles portrayed in the films can serve as natural discussion points for CHL learners to compare and contrast Chinese and American cultures in terms of parenting styles and child-parent relationships, while bringing in their own familial and intercultural experiences in daily life. For example, the spectacle of Datong hitting Dennis in front of his boss in “Guasha,” the “Tiger Mom” personas in “The Joy Luck Club,” the filial piety of Alex trying to maintain his nuclear family and also fulfill his obligation to his father as a Chinese son in “Pushing Hands,” and Wai-Tung’s decision to arrange a fake wedding banquet in “The Wedding Banquet” can all be used as prompts to elicit CHL learners’ personal experiences and further intercultural learning. Seeing these stories represented with clarity and empathy may prompt heritage learners to compare their experiences with those of the protagonists on-screen, likely leading to a dialogue or self-reflection on how an American-born Chinese can reconcile the pressure to assimilate to American society with the demands

of success and honor to their Chinese family. Moreover, an in-depth analysis of the reasons behind the generational struggles as well as cultural differences and conflicts depicted in the films will lead to Chinese-American cultural comparison and the discussion of concepts such as individualism vs collectivism, filial piety, saving face, and Confucianism, which constitute the core of the Chinese mind (i.e., values, beliefs, behaviors).

Furthermore, through the personal experiences and struggles shared by individual students, CHL learners will learn that the Chinese-American community in the U.S. embraces diverse subgroups, which creates opportunities for them to discuss the differences and similarities while practicing empathy and intersectionality. Byram (2013) believes the main goal of language learning is to “develop competence for communication and interaction whilst stimulating critical thinking and action in the world” (p. 53). Thus, it is also meaningful and important for the CHL instructor to design assignments and tasks to extend intercultural learning beyond the Chinese-American cultural comparison and subgroups of the Chinese-American community to connecting with other ethnic groups in the U.S. and other cultures. Hopefully, such trainings will help CHL students to suspend judgements and demonstrate openness, curiosity, and respect to all cultures and groups different from themselves.

Conclusion

Under the burgeoning social climate of anti-Asian violence brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is of paramount importance for CHL education to incorporate identity development into the curriculum. The canon of ten Chinese-American cross-cultural films selected for this study presents numerous unique opportunities to amplify the experiences of Chinese immigrants and breathe life into important but often marginalized stories. Chinese immigrants' challenges and struggles depicted in these films, in particular, can be utilized to facilitate generational communication, peer interaction, community involvement, and intercultural learning in college-level CHL education. However, it should be noted that CHL learners' identity development is an ongoing process. As He (2006) explains, identity should not be understood "as a collection of static attributes or as some mental construct existing prior to and independent of human actions, but rather as a process of continual emerging and becoming, a process that identifies what a person becomes and achieves through ongoing interactions with other persons (p. 7). Therefore, CHL learners' linguistic and identity development is a combined result of classroom instruction, home exposure, peer interaction, and community engagement. CHL education relies on the efforts of the very people CHL learners grow up

and socialize with, encapsulating an ever-evolving process in which learners are guided to understand, participate in, and finally transform their relationship with their own community and culture.

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Appendix Summary of Pedagogical Activities for CHL Learners

Activities that facilitate intergenerational communication

- Analyze the challenges and struggles of first-generation Chinese immigrants depicted in the cross-cultural films and the reasons behind these challenges.
- Ask students to reflect on the degree to which their parents or family members may have experienced similar struggles upon immigrating to the U.S.
- Ask students to write a letter to their parents to further inquire about their challenges and life experiences as immigrants in the U.S. and share their findings with their classmates.
- Hold in-class discussions on the similarities and differences of all the shared life stories, as well as the underlying driving forces of various experiences.
- Create a video project that requires students to interview their family members and members in their local communities.
- Compile oral histories of relatives, write heritage-culture autobiographies, and explore the Chinese-American history and other related topics such as the “model minority” myth with their parents.

Activities that facilitate peer interaction:

- Analyze the paradox of Chinese-American assimilation as experienced by second- or third-generation Chinese immigrants and discuss their identity struggles through adolescence and young adulthood.
- Hold in-class discussion sessions for students to openly share their challenges, life stories, and ambivalence about their Chinese-American dual identities, aiming to explore what causes such struggles and how CHL learners may approach them.
- Ask students to work on a final writing assignment or a video project depicting CHL learners' autobiography, highlighting key points in their life and reflections on their journey of identity development.
- Require students to do a final presentation on the above project in class and invite their family members to the presentations.

Activities that facilitate community connection:

- Ask students to collaborate and accomplish community-based projects addressing the real-life issues facing Chinese-American communities.
- Guide students to identify problems Chinese immigrants may need to examine further as a community and figure out what can be done to help

Chinese families. Possible problems include English-only policy at home, parenting style, language barrier and loneliness of the elderly, the identity struggles of second-generation Chinese immigrants, the invisibility of Chinese-Americans, the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in the Chinese-American community, and more.

- Encourage students to communicate with members of the local Chinese communities (e.g., parents, school-aged children, the elderly, administrators of Chinese community schools) to explore other existing real-life issues faced by the community.
- Guide students to answer the following questions: Under the current social environment of Asian Hate, what can the Chinese community do to voice out their sufferings and win support from other ethnic groups? What steps do the Chinese community need to take to request Chinese- and also Asian-American history be added to K-12 education in the U.S.? What problems can the myth of model minority cause for Chinese-Americans? How should the Chinese communities respond to the Black Lives Matter movement?
- Encourage students to educate their parents and Chinese community on the above questions when necessary and figure out the appropriate ways to do so.

- Discuss the open letter to “Mom, Dad, Uncle, Auntie, Grandfather, Grandmother” co-authored by Asian Americans (Wang, 2016) and Eillen Huang’s letter to the Chinese American Community (Huang, 2020) and encourage students to take actions.
- Divide into small groups and ask each group to identify a specific problem that interests them, propose a plan to solve the problem, try to implement their plan in the local Chinese community, write up a report and reflection, and share their results with the class.
- Possible final project topics: organize a weekend club for the elderly where they can learn the English language and American culture, sponsor a workshop on the importance of self-advocacy among Chinese children at the weekend Chinese community schools, hold discussion sessions for their parents and others in the community to examine the implications of the model minority myth and the importance of intersectionality with other marginalized groups in America, initiate a meeting with the local senator to discuss the steps of incorporating Asian-American history into the district’s K-12 schools, and much more.

Activities that facilitate intercultural learning:

- Use the generational struggles portrayed in the films as natural discussion points for CHL learners to compare and contrast Chinese and American cultures in terms of parenting styles and child-parent relationships, while bringing in their own personal and intercultural experiences in daily life.
- Prompt students to compare their own experiences with those of the protagonists on-screen and facilitate a dialogue or self-reflection on how an American-born Chinese can reconcile the pressure to assimilate to American society with the demands of success and honor to their Chinese family.
- Guide students to analyze the reasons behind the generational struggles as well as cultural differences and conflicts depicted in the films and facilitate Chinese-American cultural comparison through concepts such as individualism vs collectivism, filial piety, saving face, and Confucianism, which constitute the core of the Chinese mind (i.e., values, beliefs, behaviors).
- Use the personal experiences and struggles shared by individual students as a springboard to facilitate the understanding that the Chinese-American community in the U.S. embraces diverse subgroups, which creates

opportunities for students to discuss the differences and similarities while practicing empathy and intersectionality.

- Design assignments and tasks to extend intercultural learning beyond the Chinese-American cultural comparison and subgroups of the Chinese-American community to connecting with other ethnic groups in the U.S. and other cultures so as to help CHL students to suspend judgements and demonstrate openness, curiosity, and respect to all cultures and groups different from themselves.