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## **Transnational Experience, Aspiration and Family Language Policy**

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### **Abstract**

Transnational and multilingual families have become commonplace in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Yet relatively few attempts have been made from applied and socio-linguistics perspectives to understand what is going on *within* such families; how their transnational and multilingual experiences impact on the family dynamics and their everyday life; how they cope with the new and ever-changing environment, and how they construct their identities and build social relations. In this article we start from the premise that bilingualism and multilingualism mean different things to different generations and individuals within the same family. Additive Bilingualism, which is often celebrated for the positive benefits of adding a second language and culture without replacing or displacing the first, cannot be taken for granted as a common experience of the individuals in transnational families. Using data gathered from a sociolinguistic ethnography of three multilingual and transnational families from China in Britain, we discuss the experiences of different generations and individuals in dealing with bilingualism and multilingualism and how their experiences affect the way individual family members perceive social relations and social structures and construct and present their own identities. The key argument we wish to put forward is that more attention needs to be paid to the diverse experiences of the individuals and to the strategies they use to deal with the challenges of multilingualism, rather than the overall patterns of language maintenance and language shift.

**Keywords:** transnational family, Chinese, Britain, generation, family ethnography

Transnational and multilingual families are becoming more common in the UK as statistics suggest. The most recent census of England and Wales in 2011 recorded that 31% of children born in the UK had either one or both parents from another country (Hall, 2013). The census also showed that 4.2 million people (7.7% of the national population) spoke languages other than English as the main language (Office of National Statistics, 2013). Whilst there is considerable public interest in how transnational and multilingual families integrate into the broader British society (e.g. Brown 2013; Phillips 2013), especially how the children from transnational and multilingual backgrounds succeed or otherwise in the school system (e.g. Davies 2012; Doughty 2012; Royal Economic Society 2013), there are few attempts to understand what is going on *within* such families; how their transnational and multilingual experiences impact on the family dynamics and their everyday life; how they cope with the new and ever-changing environment, and how they construct their identities and build social relations.

Family interaction has traditionally been viewed as the ‘private’ or ‘back-stage’ of social life, to use Goffman’s (1959) metaphor. Investigations of what is happening within the family, done by anthropologists, psychoanalysts and others, are sometimes viewed as too detailed and trivial to the understanding of how society in the post-modern era works (see critiques in Budgeon and Roseneil 2004; Roseneil and Frosh 2012). Yet, it is precisely because of globalisation, advancement of media and information technology, and transnationalism, all features of post-modern society, that the boundaries between the public and the private, the front and back stages of social life (Goffman 1959) have become blurred. There is an increased diversity, even superdiversity (Vertovec 2007), of family structures. Different generations and

individuals within the same family have vastly different sociocultural experiences. The impact of such different experiences of individual members of the family on how the family as a whole deals with the challenges of contemporary society remains largely under-explored.

This article starts from the premise that bilingualism and multilingualism mean different things to different generations and individuals within the same family. Additive Bilingualism (Lambert 1974), which is often celebrated for the positive benefits of adding a second language and culture without replacing or displacing the first, cannot be taken for granted as a common outcome of the individuals in transnational families. The experiences of different generations and individuals in transnational, multilingual families in dealing with bilingualism and multilingualism, therefore, are worthy of detailed investigation, not least because they impact on the family relations and dynamics as well as on the way individual family members perceive social relations and social structures, and construct and present their own identities. We will focus on the experiences of three multilingual families from China living in Britain. The general claims that we are making in this article are grounded in prolonged contacts with the families as well as the Chinese community in the UK broadly. Many aspects of their experiences, however, are shared by all transnational and multilingual families across the globe.

The article is structured as follows: We begin with a brief discussion of the main themes that have been discussed in the existing studies of multilingualism in transnational families. We then outline the methodological perspective of the present study. The main body of the article is devoted to an ethnographic account of three multilingual and transnational families from China in Britain and their experiences with multilingualism. The key issues emerging from the account and their implications for policy and practice are discussed in the final section of the article.

A word on terminology is in order before we introduce the context of the study. We choose to call the families in our study 'transnational' rather 'migrant' or 'immigrant' as we consider the interconnectivity across and beyond national boundaries an important dimension of their experience. These families may be living in one country, but remained connected with relatives and friends in other countries. As it will become clear, the literature that we find particularly relevant to our study comes from the work by the new generation of scholars in diaspora studies, who emphasize the connectivities more than the dispersal of migrant minorities (see discussions of the similarities and differences between diaspora and transnationalism in Bauböck and Faist, (2010). Of course, not all transnational families are bilingual or multilingual; certainly not every individual member of these families is bilingual or multilingual. But multilingualism is essential to the experiences of the families we have chosen to study.

### **From language maintenance and language shift to transnational imagination**

Most of the existing applied linguistic studies of transnational and multilingual families focus on the intergenerational language shift and the communicative difficulties that have been caused by such shifts (e.g. Li Wei 1994; Schechter and Bayley 1997; Shin 2005; Lanza 2007; Zhu Hua 2008). The common recurrent pattern is that the first generation migrants find learning the languages of the new resident country is the most important and often challenging task, whilst their local-born children face the challenge of maintaining the home/heritage language. If there are grandparents joining the family in their new setting, they often take up the responsibility of childcare and interact primarily with other family and community members, and have relatively little opportunity for learning new languages. Members of transnational families have to face these different challenges together as a unit: the presence of monolingual grandparents is as much an issue to them as children not wanting or being able to speak the home language in their everyday family life. Transnational families also face the challenges of constructing new identities and fighting against prejudices and stereotypes, sometimes caused by their members not speaking the languages of the resident country.

Two issues have been highlighted by existing research of the changing sociolinguistic configurations in transnational families: necessity and opportunity. Yes, in most cases, it is

necessary to have a good knowledge of the languages of the new resident country as it would enable members of the transnational family to access services, education and employment. Yet opportunities for learning the languages are not always readily available. Using the UK as an example, in 2011, the coalition government announced a series of funding cuts to ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) provision including the introduction of fees for many students, a change in programme weighting, and the removal of a discretionary £4.5 million Learner Support Fund (Exley 2011). The Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant, which was used to fund bilingual teaching assistants in schools for pupils whose English is an additional language, has been mainstreamed into the Direct Schools Grant covering everything, from buildings to stationery (NALDIC, n/d; NASUWT, 2012). With regard to the home/heritage languages, transnational families often find it necessary to maintain them for domestic communication, especially where there are monolingual grandparents around. However, opportunities are not equally available across different home/heritage languages for the children to learn and maintain them. For example, some immigrant languages such as Bengali (150,000 speakers in the 2011 UK census) and Farsi (76,000 speakers) are taught in community schools and classes, while others such as Kashmiri (115,000 speakers), Tagalog (70,000 speakers) are not. Within the same ethnic community, there are better opportunities to learn and use some languages than others. In the Chinese community, for example, varieties of Chinese such as Mandarin and Cantonese are taught in heritage language schools, but no school teaches Hakka (approximately 10,000 speakers in the UK) or Hokkien (approximately 4,000 in the UK) which also have significant numbers of speakers in the Chinese diaspora worldwide.

Families' and individuals' motivations for learning, maintaining and using languages, however, often go beyond necessity and opportunity. They are tied to the families' and individuals' sense of belonging and imagination. As scholars in diaspora studies point out, transnationals construct and negotiate their identities, everyday life and activities in ways that overcome the ethnic identity versus assimilation dilemma, suppressing or neutralising differences and establishing commonality and connectivity in building of a transnational imagination (e.g. Cohen 1997). This imagination provides a site of hope and new beginnings (Brah 1996, 193). Rather than looking back in a nostalgic effort of recovering or maintaining their identity, they discover or construct notions of who they are and where and what home is by essentially looking forward. Applied linguists have paid relatively little attention so far to the links between intergenerational language maintenance and language shift on one hand, and the transnational imaginations on the other amongst transnational family members both individually and collectively.

### **The present study**

The present study is a sociolinguistic ethnography of three transnational families from China living in Britain. It is part of a larger, continuous family ethnography project of the Chinese community in Britain that began in the mid 1980s (Li Wei 1994). The research questions we set out to explore included how the families dealt with issues such as family language policy, children's language socialization, linguistic ideologies, symbolic competence and changing linguistic hierarchies amongst the languages they lived with, and struggles and aspirations in maintaining contacts with both the former and new home countries. We followed a typical ethnography process of going from reflectivity to reflexivity, that is, from observation, description, introspection, to making connections between what has been observed in the present case and our knowledge of other cases. Whilst reflectivity emphasizes critical evaluation and analysis of the available evidence, reflexivity promotes the incorporation of the subjective, i.e. the analyst's own position, experience, and knowledge accumulated and synthesised through previous research in similar as well as different situations, in exploring the understanding or rationale related to questions of what, why, how and by whom. The actual fieldwork process involved the four core elements of ethnography LLTT, i.e. looking, listening, talking and thinking. As it is a family ethnography project, we paid special attention to spatial and temporal

connectedness and ‘relational thinking’ (Enfield 2013), including changes over generations, and contacts with extended relations living in other parts of the world.

The data we gathered include extensive field notes of observations, audio and video recording of family interaction, photography and samples of texts, and conversations with family members. The analysis follows the framework of Moment Analysis (Li Wei 2011; Li Wei and Zhu Hua, 2013), which was proposed in the context of studying multilingual creativity in everyday social interaction, with an aim to redirect the focus of analytic attention for the search of frequent and regular patterns in linguistic behaviour to spur-of-the-moment creative actions that have both immediate and long-term consequences. It is connected to Lefebvre’s concept of rhythm in his ‘rhythmanalysis’ (e.g., 2004), which is concerned with various kinds of repetitions of actions of the human body and in daily life. However, instead of measuring the intervals of repetitions, Moment Analysis focuses on what prompted a specific action at a specific moment in time and the consequences of the action including the re-actions by other people. Moment Analysis requires data from multiple sources. It is particularly important to have metalanguaging data, i.e., commentaries on the speaker’s language practices as lived experience. This can be done by the speaker herself or by other interlocutors either during the interaction as it happens or afterwards on reflection. Metalanguaging data are useful because the process of individuals trying to make sense of their world, in this case, language users reflecting on the linguistic performances by themselves as well as the others they are interacting with, is an integral part of the analytical process. From the analyst’s point of view, the principal task is to focus on the way people articulate and position themselves in their metalanguaging, to detect any changes in the course of their self-reflection, themes and links that emerge from the narratives. These data are combined with observations and interpretations by the analyst of naturally occurring behaviour, resulting in what might be described as a double hermeneutic, i.e., “the participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world” (Smith and Osborn 2008). In what follows, we present an account of the three families in turn.

#### *Family 1: A Korean family from China*

The first family we consider here is of Korean ethnic background from China. The Koreans are one of the largest *indigenous* ethnic minorities in China: *indigenous* in the sense that they are not migrants from the Korea peninsula and have always lived within the Chinese borders. In present-day China, many Korean families have connections with South Korea in particular. But these tend to be migrants *from* China *to* Korea rather than the other way round. There are Korean autonomous regions in the three northeastern provinces of China, and large Korean communities in major cities such as Beijing. The Koreans in China are known for their strong sense of ethnic identity; in large cities, they have clearly identifiable settlements; they maintain distinctive customs of food, dress, and marriage; and they have a high level of language maintenance, including literacy. The vast majority of Koreans in China are bilingual in Korean and Mandarin Chinese (Guan 2001).

The family we have studied came to Britain in the 1990s. The parents were professionals in their early thirties. They had one daughter who was born in China and 5 years of age when the family arrived in Britain. They all spoke fluent Korean and Chinese, and the two adults spoke good English. When we got to know the family shortly after they arrived in Britain, they were living and working in the northeast of England. As with most Korean families in China, this family’s domestic interaction was mainly in Korean, with some Chinese words. They were Chinese passport holders and had never been to Korea before their migration to Britain.

Initially, the family’s main concern was the daughter’s learning of English. She attended a pre-school where nobody spoke Korean or Mandarin Chinese. They invested a great deal of time helping the daughter with her English outside school hours, by speaking English to her and

reading bedtime stories in English. They did not send the daughter to Chinese complementary schools as other families from China do, because she already spoke Mandarin Chinese well. The parents also felt that her literacy level in both Korean and Chinese was age appropriate, compared with that of other ethnic Korean children in China whom they knew. The daughter's English developed fast. By the end of the first year at pre-school, she got a Very Good mark for her English. She began to mix some English words in her conversation with her parents. In the meantime, the amount of Mandarin Chinese she used was beginning to decrease.

Two and a half years after the family arrived in Britain, they had a new baby son, which became a key moment for their family language planning. The parents decided that their children should concentrate on using Korean and English, and the grandparents and other relatives in China all urged them to make sure that the new baby should know Korean. They had children's books in Korean sent by their relatives in China. And they displayed Korean cultural artefacts in the house. The birth of the son heightened their sense of being Korean. The parents spoke mainly Korean to the baby and Korean with English words with the daughter. Chinese seemed to have been abandoned. When asked about it, they explained that what they did was not much different from what they would do if they were living in China.

- (1) KM: Father of the family. LW: researcher. The conversations were conducted primarily in Mandarin with some English, as the researcher does not speak Korean.

KM: 我们在家里都是说家里的话，外面就说家外的话。在中国在这里都是一样。  
'At home we speak the 'inside-the-family' language, and outside the family, we speak the 'outside-the-family' language. It was the same when we were in China.'

LW: 家外的话就是汉语，中文。  
'The 'outside-the-family' language is Chinese.'

KM: 是，中文。在这里就是英语。  
'Yes, Chinese. It is English here (in Britain).'

It is particularly interesting to note their use of the term 家里的话, the 'inside-the-family' language, and 家外的话, the 'outside-the-family' language, and the change in what has been designated as the outside-the-family language from Chinese to English.

They also expressed a sense of loneliness amongst those 'from China' in Britain.

(2)

KM: 从中国来的的确很多，而且越来越多。但像我们这样没有。我们是少数民族。  
'There are indeed many people from China (in Britain), and more and more are coming. But there isn't anyone like us. We are ethnic minority.'

They felt that they did not belong to the large and growing Chinese community in Britain. Their desire to maintain a distinctive ethnic identity, plus traditional practices of family interaction, led to the decision to continue speaking Korean with the children.

Another critical moment came when the family took a holiday in South Korea when the son was just over one year old. It was their first visit to Korea. But it proved to be a turning point for the family. It gave them first-hand experience with 'authentic' Korean culture and helped to legitimise their claim as Koreans (see Bucholtz and Hall 2005, for a discussion of cultural and linguistic authenticity in immigrant context). They had now been to places known to all Koreans in Korea and they felt that they could talk about Korea like those from Korea. Shortly after the trip, the family moved to the south of London, and chose to live in an area where there is a large Korean community. From then on, they did not tell people they were from China, but simply

they were Koreans. When we visited them approximately a year after they moved south, they had made lots of friends with Korean families but only one Chinese family. They were interacting almost exclusively in Korean amongst themselves, with occasional words and phrases in English. By then, the son, who was three, did not understand Chinese, and told people that he was Korean. The daughter still understood some Chinese but did not speak it any more. Their neighbours knew them as Koreans, and they introduced us to their neighbours and friends as 'from China'. The parents did speak Chinese occasionally, but did not read Chinese newspapers or watch Chinese television programmes which were readily available. Instead, they had lots of Korean DVDs that they bought from China or Chinese shops in London.

Both children go to a Korean complementary school at weekends. This, coupled with their decision to stop using Chinese in their daily interaction symbolises that they were moving away from their Chinese ties. In the first eight years of their life in Britain, they went back to China three times, each only for a couple of weeks. Recently, the family has begun to visit China more frequently, partly due to the grandparents getting older, and partly because they feel that they have acquired a new identity as Koreans in Britain. They are now British passport holders, and when asked about their ethnicity by strangers, they claim to be 'Koreans' in Britain. We noted that they use or code-switch to the English term *Korean* to describe themselves even when the conversation is primarily in Chinese. They never mention the term 鲜族 or 鲜族人, the terms used in China to refer to the Korean ethnic group. They do not talk about 韩国, the official Chinese term for South Korea, either. The English term provided them with an ambiguous but convenient label, which was particularly useful in constructing a new identity for themselves.

When they were asked specifically whether they thought maintaining Chinese would give them and their children more opportunities now that China is becoming a world economic and political power, they gave the explanation that learning three different languages at once would be too much work for the children. However, it seems clear to us that ethnic identity took priority over other considerations in their family language decisions.

#### *Family 2: A British Chinese family*

The second family we want to discuss is typical of many Chinese families in Britain today. They are a family of 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generations of Chinese immigrants whose grandparents came from Hong Kong in the 1950s and 60s and were originally Hakka speakers. The grandfather who was the first in the family to settle in Britain came on his own in his twenties, and learned to speak Cantonese as a community lingua franca and English for wider communication. He ran a successful catering business before setting up a painting and decorating business. He married a Hakka woman in Hong Kong, who joined him in Britain three years after they got married and two years after she gave birth to their son. She knew Cantonese too but had very little English. We did not study the grandparents directly, although we met them during fieldwork and had conversations about their family history.

The parents and their children - the grandchildren generation of the family - are the main focus of our study. The mother is British-born to Hakka L1 parents, and the father came to Britain with the grandmother when he was around two years old to join the grandfather. The mother and the father learned to speak Hakka at home, Cantonese outside the family within the Chinese community, and English beyond the Chinese community. They went to Chinese complementary schools when they were children and learned Cantonese only. There was, and still is, no Hakka school in Britain. They have two children – one boy and one girl – both British-born. Grandfather passed away when the grandson was 4 and the granddaughter just over 1. This triggered a language shift in the family. Hakka gradually disappeared from the family interaction. During the observation, both grandchildren claimed that they understood some Hakka, but their conversations with the parents were a mixture of Cantonese and a lot of English. The grandchildren attended a Cantonese complementary school over the weekend for a short while, but the parents decided that it would be more useful to learn Mandarin and moved

them to a Mandarin weekend school. The parents picked up some Mandarin from interactions with Mandarin speaker and visits to mainland China. We had extensive discussions with the family over their decision to send the children to a Mandarin school. Here is an extract of a conversation with the mother.

(3) Lydia: The mother. LW: researcher. The conversations were primarily in English with some Mandarin phrases.

LW: So you think it'll be better for them (referring to the children) to learn Mandarin.

Lydia: Because my Mandarin is so bad, 很糟糕, 你都听不懂。

'Very bad. You can't understand it'

LW: 我听得懂。

'I can understand it.'

Lydia: (In Cantonese) 係咪 (Laugh.). I picked it up myself. No Mandarin when I was at Chinese school, you know. No Mandarin. Only Cantonese. And I wasn't even a Cantonese speaker.

'Is that right?'

LW: But you went to a Cantonese school.

Lydia: No choice. I couldn't learn Hakka. But now Mandarin is everywhere.

LW: So you think it's better for the children to learn Mandarin now.

Lydia: Yes, they have the opportunity now. They should seize the opportunity, don't you think? It'll be useful for them.

LW: In what way? Do you want them to work in China?

Lydia: Well, it will give them better opportunities in the future. Even if they are not going to China, they can find a job with Chinese. There are so many Chinese customers now. All the businesses want to work with China.

LW: So they can work here but use Chinese, Mandarin I mean.

Lydia: Yes, Mandarin is the future. China is the future.

LW: 你很乐观。

'You are very optimistic.'

Lydia: Am I? (laughter). I laugh a lot, don't I? (laughter)

Lydia's views reflect the changes to the sociolinguistic hierarchies amongst the different varieties of Chinese: Hakka has always had the status of a minority dialect within the Chinese community in Britain; Cantonese was once a community lingua franca; Mandarin is now the prestigious community language and is fast becoming the new lingua franca. This seems to be the trend in the Chinese diaspora worldwide (Li Wei and Zhu Hua 2010). Different Chinese groups and individuals in different parts of the world respond to the changes differently as Li Wei and Zhu Hua's (2011) study illustrates. In the present case, Lydia has shown a particularly positive attitude towards the changes. It is noticeable that she repeats the word 'opportunity' several times in the short extract. She clearly associates Mandarin with opportunities for her children and for the overseas Chinese like herself. In the meantime, she often used phrases such as 返香港 (return to Hong Kong) in Cantonese, and 回国 (go back to the (home) country) in Mandarin when she talked about her holidays to Hong Kong and mainland China. What is interesting about her use of these phrases is the fact she is British-born, and she does not visit Hong Kong and China often. When she does, it is usually for a very short period of time. For her to use phrases such as 'return' and 'go back' seems to us to reflect a typical diasporic mentality of living in one place and thinking of (living in) another place, feeling a sense of belonging somewhere else, and imagining the prospect of returning to the 'root'. Her positive,



almost romantic attitude towards multilingualism and change is very likely to have been enhanced by her diasporic mentality.

In our conversations with the grandchildren in their early teens, the third generation of the family, they showed no resistance to their parents' insistence that they should maintain their multilingualism and in particular, they seemed to be quite happy to attend Mandarin school at weekends. They have adopted their parents' discourse around learning Mandarin and used the word 'opportunity' on a number of occasions. The grandson in fact took part in a Mandarin Chinese competition organised by the Chinese schools association and won a free trip to China. It further boosted their positive spirits towards learning Mandarin and maintaining a high level of multilingualism.

It was also particularly noticeable that the family kept themselves very busy maintaining a huge and complex network of transnational connections. In addition to the contacts they have with the local Chinese families, they have relatives and friends in Hong Kong, China, the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands and Spain, whom they talk to via Skype every week. They subscribe to Chinese satellite television channels, and regularly buy and read Chinese language newspapers and magazines. They live in a totally connected and highly multilingual world. Their family interaction is highly multilingual, involving constant codeswitching. When we asked them about their multilingual practices, they showed a very 'pragmatic' attitude. The mother, for example, said, 'I say whatever comes to my mind.' When further asked if she shared the view that mixing different languages would confuse the children, she said that she actually felt that it would help them maintaining all the languages.

### *Family 3. Grandparents at loss*

The third family we consider consists of three generations. The parents are professionals, who were the first to come to Britain from China as postgraduate students in their late twenties. Our study focused on the two grandparents, who joined the family when the granddaughter was born about three years after the parents arrived in Britain. The two grandparents are highly educated academics who speak very good English. In fact the grandfather was a university professor of English and the grandmother was a teacher of English at a middle school in Beijing. They were retired by the time they came to Britain. In theory, they should find life in Britain fairly easy as they were already highly bilingual and could communicate with others with little difficulty. There was no specific language learning task for them. However, they felt very unhappy, which prompted us to talk to them in detail and study them as a case. We knew many Chinese families whose grandparents felt isolated because their children and grandchildren were busy with their routine jobs and studies and had very little time for them, and they themselves did not know English to make friends with non-Chinese speaking neighbours. The Chinese community in Britain does not have identifiable, concentrated settlements, and Chinese families tend not to live close by with each other. Although there are community centres in the Chinatowns in large cities, it is not always easy and straightforward to get to them. Moreover, most of the Chinese community centres are run by Cantonese speakers. For those who do not speak Cantonese, socialising opportunities beyond the family can be restricted.

This retired bilingual couple whom we studied used a Chinese expression 百无聊赖( bǎi wú liáo lài ) to describe their existence in Britain. The four characters individually can be translated as 'hundred', 'no', 'chat', 'reliance', meaning 'overcome with boredom'. They felt totally disconnected with the local Chinese community as the majority of the people of their age group were Cantonese speakers and they did not speak Cantonese. In fact, they could not find anyone of similar age with similar background, i.e. retired professionals from China who were bilingual in Mandarin and English. There was no meaningful social support network. When we asked them whether they tried to make friends with local English speakers of their age, they said that the retired English people they knew were only interested in gardening or walking. They themselves were not so interested in such things, and felt little connection with other people. So

the fact that they had the proficiency in the English language did not actually make any positive difference to their life in Britain.

But what really intrigued us was their sense that after a few years in Britain, they felt a 'loss' of their Chinese. They told us that they could not understand what the young Chinese students they came across were saying; they even found some of the Chinese TV programmes hard to understand. We probed them on this topic on several occasions. They reflected on the fast-going changes in the Chinese society today. They found lots of new words and expressions in Chinese incomprehensible. Many were indeed new inventions, media-speak, and net-speak, used primarily by young people. The following exchange, which took place in their children's presence, provides some clue to their sense of the 'loss'.

(4) M: Grandfather; F: Grandmother; J: son of the older couple, in his thirties; LW: researcher:

LW: 您觉得跟他们（指在英国的中国学生）交流很难是吗？

'Do you think it very difficult to communicate with them (re. Chinese students in Britain)?'

M: 对。

'Yes.'

LW: 那是文化差异还是语言问题？

'Is it cultural difference or a language problem?'

M: 文化差异当然也有了。不过真不知道他们在讲什么。

'There are certainly cultural differences. But we really don't understand what they are talking about.'

F: 似懂非懂，音懂意不懂，不知道到底他要表达什么。

'Half understood. Know the sounds, but not the meaning. Don't know what they want to say.'

J: 那你问不就完了嘛。

'Can't you just ask?'

F: 给我解释了，我也不会用。

'I don't know how to use it even if they explain it to me.'

M: 不懂、不会用、记不住。

'Don't understand it; don't know how to use it; and can't remember it.' (The Chinese original form is emphatic, which is partially lost in the English translation.)

J: 你在国内不也一样？

'Isn't it the same if you were in China?'

M: Of course not the same.

J: Why not?

M: 环境不一样，身边各种各样的人都有，看人家怎么用，在什么场合用，慢慢的你就明白了，也会用。和你学英语一样。（对 LW）你说是不是？

Different environment. There are different kinds of people around us. If you can see how others use it, in what context, you can gradually understand it and use it. It's like you learning English. (To LW) Don't you think so?'

Whilst they agreed that generational cultural differences may have some effect on their apparent communication difficulties with the young people from China, they felt that the problems were caused mainly by their inability to understand the language the young people used. And this inability to understand the youth language is connected to the fact that they did not have the exposure to the environment in which they could immerse themselves in the

sociolinguistic practices. Without understanding how the words and expressions were used in context, they themselves would not be able to use them, which frustrated them particularly. The 'loss' they were feeling is therefore not a loss of their language capacity, nor their capacity to ask questions, but a connection with the culture in which the new words and expressions are emerging and used. It is the language as a cultural practice that they felt they have lost, which added to their feeling of isolation in Britain. Even though they had the technical proficiency in both English and Chinese, they could not feel any real benefit; indeed, they feel 'loss' (of Chinese) without gain. The strength of their opinions expressed in the above exchange could also be connected to their heightened linguistic awareness as language professionals. .

The parents, the old couple's children, told us a story, which further illustrates the case. In 2009, the old couple went back to China for a short stay. They had some old friends visiting them one day, and they were catching up with each other's news. In the conversation, one of their friends used the phrase 打酱油 'to buy soy sauce' to describe the daughter of one of their mutual acquaintances. This caused a loud laugh amongst several of the visiting friends who competed in asking further information and offering details of what happened to the young woman in question. The old couple of our study was very puzzled. They knew the literal meaning of the phrase, but they also realised that it was not the literal meaning that was intended in their friends' usage. Their friends had to explain to them that the phrase had by then acquired a new meaning of 'being involved in immoral behaviour'. The experience was quite a shock to the old couple, as it made them feel that they lost what they once knew and knew well, i.e. the 'cultural memory' (Erlil and Nünning, 2008) of linguistic practices.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

As we can see, whilst all three families we have discussed in this article come from China, their migration background and experiences are very different. The issues they face, linguistic and socio-cultural, are also very different. For the Korean family, maintaining, and indeed developing, a distinctive ethnic identity clearly takes priority. They are members of a minority (Koreans) within a minority (Chinese) in the British context. The shared connections between them and the large and growing number of Chinese immigrants from China in Britain are not enough for them to feel content and secure. They have found sufficient commonality with the Koreans in Britain to motivate their identification with that group. It is possible that being in a foreign country has strengthened their desire to make aspects of their identity clearer by aligning themselves with a relatively larger group. Their decision to be Koreans in Britain, as opposed to Koreans from China, goes hand in hand with their decision to maintain Korean within the family, developing their English abilities, and dropping Chinese. It is an interesting case of the complex relationship between language and identity in the context of migration.

For the second family, the main issues they are facing are the impacts of globalization and ongoing social changes within the Chinese diasporic community. As a family of second and third generations of immigrant background, maintaining a high level of multilingualism has enabled them to sustain and expand their transnational networks. Adapting themselves to the ongoing changes by, for example, acquiring new skills in Mandarin Chinese, was perceived by themselves to have given them an advantage. The actual advantage is their capacity to develop new contacts with the Mandarin-speaking mainland Chinese and to acquire information and be part of the cultural flow that is mediated through Mandarin. Perhaps more importantly for this family, though, is the perceived, or imagined, advantage that there would be new opportunities, especially for the new generation, to work in the huge potential market of China-related business.

For the retired couple in the third family, language is more than the knowledge of its structures; it is a cultural practice that requires context and interactions with others. Having the right social network is clearly very important for their everyday life in Britain. In the meantime, losing the direct contacts with the spectrum of language users in China, and with the contexts in which communication occurs, has had an undesirable impact on their cultural memory of the

Chinese language. They feel that the language is no longer theirs as they cannot understand it, remember it, or use it.

Taken together, these families represent the diversity of experiences of the Chinese transnationals worldwide. Like all diasporic families and communities, they travel between memory and imagination. For the Korean family, the emphasis is placed on where they are, rather than where they come from. For the second- and third-generation family, where they are now is also important. But they are more forward-looking and more concerned with their future. In contrast, where they are now is less important than where they come from for the retired couple in the third family. They are more concerned with memory than imagination, although their concern is clearly related to their imagined future consequences of losing the memory (cf. Song, 2010 for a study of Korean families in the US that contains similar themes though from a rather different background).

As we stated at the beginning of the article, applied and socio-linguistic studies of multilingual and transnational families have tended to focus on overall patterns of language maintenance and language shift and paid relatively little attention to the diversity of experiences with multilingualism within the families. Recent sociological and psycho-social studies of migrant communities have highlighted the importance of understanding the experiential foundations of their identities and ideologies (e.g. Levitt and Jarwosky 2007; Falicov 2005). Recognizing the diversity of transnational families and the experiences of different generations and individuals within the families has significant implications for policy, practice, and research. In making social policies and developing appropriate professional practices regarding transnational families, it is important to understand their experiences, histories, imaginations, why they feel the way they feel, and why they do things the way they do. Policies and practices should not be decided on some hypothetical uniform experience of transnational families. In research, bilingualism and multilingualism need to be studied as *experience*, and experiences need to be studied holistically and multidimensionally. Identifying overall patterns and analysing the details of interactional episodes are useful and necessary. But they need to be contextualised within the broader experiences of individuals, families and communities concerned. Whilst we celebrate the benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism, we should avoid romanticising them, or seeing them as universally positive experiences. Bilingualism and multilingualism are a reality in contemporary society. They are also a challenge to us all.

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