Journal of Modern Languages
Vol. 35(2) 2025
https://doi.org/10.22452/jml.vol35no2.8

Preservation of Heritage or Integration for Survival: The Case of a Chinese Mother in Japan

Hiroki Saito
saito.hiroki.y0@tufs.ac.jp
Graduate School of Global Studies
Tokyo University of Foreign Studies
183-0003 Tokyo, Japan
https://orcid.org/0009-0000-4800-2337

Received: 25 October 2025 Accepted: 28 November 2025

Abstract

The study aims at exploring a contested ideology toward heritage language maintenance and social integration based on a one-on-one interview to a Chinese mother in Japan. Through the framework of Family Language Policy, semi-structured interview data were analyzed thematically in terms of language ideology, practice, and maintenance. Findings show that a Chinese mother who raises a daughter in Japan struggles to balance bilingual education between Chinese and Japanese to pass down the former language for heritage maintenance and simultaneously teach the latter language for the successful integration to the destination country. I end this article by providing recommendations for migrant language education in Japan.

1. Introduction

> Excerpt 1:
> "We would like her to speak fluent Chinese. That is our goal. But we have a concern that we do not know what her mother tongue should be."

This excerpt from Yue Li's mother highlights her conflicting ideology in what language she should raise her child in the destination country, Japan, where her mother tongue—Chinese—

education is not readily available. She came to Japan in 2014 to join her husband, who got the job soon after his graduation. Her dissatisfaction with her employment prior to migration reinforced her decision to leave the motherland. She gave birth to her daughter, Yue Li, in her third year in Japan and has been raising her in the destination country since her birth. Even though she visits China with her child regularly, their central lives are in the neighboring nation, Japan.

Having an aging population and a low fertility rate, Japan has now emerged as the twentieth destination for international migration (McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024). Although Japan is a monolithic nation, the migrant population entering Japan is growing every year, notably from East and Southeast Asia, for employment, education, and family. Chinese migrants outnumber the other migrants, accounting for 23% of the total foreign residents in Japan (Immigration Services Agency, 2025). The number of Chinese alone is not considerable compared to Japanese nationals, equating to only 0.7%, yet the number of Chinese migrants today hits the highest record exceeding 850,000 for the first time.

Migration entails various adjustments to deal with social, political, and cultural differences. Among all, linguistic challenges are the most urgent problem migrants must solve since language is the basis of social activities. Migrants should attain proficiency in the destination language as early as possible, or they will be excluded from essential services, employment, and education. In Japan, English has been introduced in public transportation, government facilities, and websites for non-Japanese speakers like migrants and tourists, still, English is not accessible in all spheres, and not surprisingly, the Japanese language has a prominent role in daily life. As such, migrants are facing social pressure to acquire the Japanese language so that they can integrate into the mainstream effectively. Migrant families are not an exception. Parents struggle to ensure their children acquire Japanese for survival while at the same time inherent mother tongue for cultural heritage. In this paper, I shall present the conflict a Chinese mother who has an eight-year-old child experiences and discuss how she navigates heritage language maintenance.

2. Family Language Policy

Spolsky (2004) conceived the idea of Family language policy (FLP), which consists of three components of language practices, ideologies, and management. The first pole refers to “the habitual pattern of selecting among the varieties that make up its linguistic repertoire” (Spolsky, 2004: p.5) or simply language use by family members. On the other hand, language

ideologies may mean beliefs about language itself and language practice. The final component represents direct intervention or efforts to control the language situation or to maintain the heritage language (Curdt-Christiansen, 2013). Each component interplays and influences the development of mother tongue and second language acquisition, not only in immobile families but also in transnational families. However, FLP can be observed more prominently in transnational families since they are likely to face linguistic change as they enter a destination where a language other than their mother tongue is spoken.

Migrant families facing a sociolinguistic change are required to balance the maintenance of their heritage language and the acquisition of the language of the destination simultaneously. Heritage language is often associated with ethnicity, culture, and identity (Francis et al., 2014; Leeman, 2015; Matthews & López, 2019; Wang, 2023). In addition, sharing the language of origin contributes to constructing a harmonious parent-child relationship since they can enjoy the shared cultures and values (Wang, 2023). Another aspect is bilingual proficiency. Thus said, heritage language shall benefit the families even though they migrate to a country where a language other than their mother tongue is spoken.

On the other hand, the language of destination is also essential for navigating and surviving the new life in the destination. Migrants need to take several steps to start a new life before, during, and after migration. Language is one of the key factors motivating people to migrate for a better life. If migrant's repertoire includes the language of destination, it drives migrants to leave the origin country when the destination country is superior to that of the origin country, such as politics, economics, and safety. The attainment of proficiency in languages spoken in the destination benefits migrants in effectively integrating into the mainstream society. The destination language enables migrants to access basic services (e.g., housing, transportation, healthcare), employment, and education. Therefore, migrant parents are inevitably forced to pursue both their heritage language to fulfill psychological needs and the language of destination to secure a comfortable life. Otherwise, they have to sacrifice either cultural heritage or successful integration.

3. Parental Involvement in Heritage Language Maintenance

Parents play a pivotal role in the FLP, especially when children are young, as they are the primary interlocutors for children. On the other hand, as children get older, their social circle enlarges, and parents' intervention becomes so weak that children start insisting on their own agency for deciding what language to speak and how they construct the meaning to express

their feelings and thoughts. In contrast with parents' intentions for implementing heritage language education or sending children to community school, some have to suspend heritage language education due to children's lack of interest in heritage language or strong reluctance in learning heritage language (for example, Jeon, 2008; Little, 2020; Xia, 2016).

Notwithstanding, parents' positive attitudes and intervention for heritage language maintenance create a favorable environment for children to develop their heritage language skills (Park & Sarkar, 2007). Heritage language is a minority language often confined to the home domain in the destination country; thus, migrant children would not have access to the heritage language if their parents were hesitant to speak or educate children in the language. Jeon (2008) found that parents' language ideologies determine the behavior of parents, such as how they implement the language policy. In her study, some Korean migrant parents did not allow their children to learn Korean, and in return, children in the United States did not develop Korean proficiency. Those parents considered Korean as a distraction to acquire a new language, English, and gave up exposing them to the heritage language, Korean. On the other hand, parents who value Korean and English sent their children to Korean community schools so that their children develop Korean language skills. However, even if parents hold positive attitudes toward the heritage language, the outcome is not necessarily favorable in terms of heritage language maintenance. She reported that some second-generation Korean Americans could not develop proficiency in Korean because of both parents' absence, working long hours, and having no time to communicate with children.

4. Methods

This study is a part of ongoing MA research investigating the heritage language maintenance and shift towards societal language experienced by Chinese migrants in Japan. The research investigated 20 parents who currently live in Japan with at least one child through a questionnaire. In total, three Chinese parents participated in the interview session; two of them answered a questionnaire and were interviewed, while one agreed to participate in only an interview session. In this paper, I focused on the case of Yue Li's mother, who participated in both sessions. She was chosen for the current study as she explicitly showed conflicting ideology between heritage maintenance and integration. The names of the participants are pseudonyms.

Yue 's mother migrated to Japan in 2014 at the age of thirty to follow her husband, who had migrated from China to Japan for employment seven years before she joined. Both of them

are well-educated individuals working as university instructors. Three years later, Yue was born and has been raised in Japan since then. She went to a language school before migration and continued learning the language even after the migration. She had passed the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) N1, which is equivalent to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) C1 or B2 level at the time of the interview. However, according to her self-evaluation using a 4-point Likert scale, her language skills, except for reading skill which she marked 4 (Very good), were 3 (Good). In fact, she answered that she was comfortable speaking Chinese done Japanese. Aside from Chinese (Mandarin and Pekinese) and Japanese, she answered that she speaks English and Spanish. However, she did not mention that she speaks Spanish in the interview. Her husband is also proficient in Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese), Japanese, and English. In the interview session, she primarily spoke English and used some Japanese words.

The semi-structured interview was audio-recorded and transcribed via Word and proofread by the researcher. The transcript was thematically analyzed, but it would possibly be coded as more than two themes, as it may contain different themes. I thematized the data based on three aspects of FLP: language ideology, practice, and maintenance.

5. Findings

5.1 Language Ideology

Language ideology is the most influential component in FLP on language maintenance and shift. As mentioned above, parents' positive attitudes toward heritage language would lead to successful heritage language inheritance, making it easier for their children to access materials, programs, and/or opportunities for the development of heritage language. Combined with feasibility, language ideologies determine not only for individuals what language to speak and how to express themselves, but also for a whole family to which language should be a means of communication among them. Ms. Li implicitly disclosed her ideology toward the language of destination, Japanese:

> Excerpt 2:
> I am a kind of a person that if I don't learn the language, I won't go to that country [...] So, I would like to learn the language. So even though I was quite busy in China, I go to a language school, and I even passed Japanese proficiency test.

In this excerpt, she disclosed that it is a "must" for her to acquire the language of the destination even before the migration. In fact, she managed to make time for language learning and passed the N3 in the JLPT, corresponding to the CEFR A2 or B1 level. As she was teaching English at a high school in China before migration, she could speak English as well as Chinese and Japanese. Considering English is a "global language" (Crystal, 2003) and the growing Chinese economy, both languages would help her live in a destination country. However, she was not satisfied with her proficiency at the time of arrival, and it made her put herself at home:

Excerpt 3:

> And at that time, I tried to learn the language a bit, and when I came here, I feel so uncomfortable. So, I confined myself at home, not willing to go anywhere […] I was especially poor at listening. So, I don't want to talk to people because I'm afraid that if I don't understand anything, I feel embarrassing.

She believed neither her mother tongue nor English was enough to live in Japan comfortably. Therefore, she tried to develop Japanese proficiency further, and she had passed the JLPT N1 at the time of the interview. While she valued the proficiency in Japanese for efficient integration, she also clarified the importance of heritage language proficiency:

Excerpt 4:

> I think Chinese (language) is *just* an identity that distinguish me from my competitors. My competitors are native speakers and Japanese teachers, so they think "Oh, your mother tongue is not English, not Japanese, but you are teaching in Japan." So, it kind of made me *special*. […] sometimes I give feedback in Chinese. The students got so excited, "Teacher is Chinese". (emphasis added)

Here, Yue's mother stated that the Chinese language is "just" an identity marker. However, as she continued describing, the empirical example she gave implied that Chinese lent her a sense of pride as a migrant from China. Along with Ms. Li, Yue's grandparents consider that Yue should maintain the Chinese language even though Yue's family lives outside China:

Excerpt 5:

> "And when my father and mother-in-law came, they insisted her "do not

> forgetting her mother tongue". So teaching her pinyin and reading kanji [i.e. Chinese character] and talking to them in Chinese."

Ms. Li's attitude toward the Chinese language is influenced by her parents-in-law explicitly saying to pass down Chinese to their granddaughter, Yue. Some studies on the role of extended family, mainly grandparents, in language transmission documented that they could give negative feedback on their grandchildren's insufficient heritage language knowledge (e.g., Wang et al., 2023). Ms. Li's case follows a similar trend to some extent. She admitted that Yue's grandparents motivated her to teach Yue Chinese. Nevertheless, at the same time, she regrets not being able to teach Japanese more often:

> Excerpt 6:
> "So good thing is that she does not feel reluctant to speak Chinese. The downside is that we do not have much time and energy to train her and to give her an immersion, Japanese learning environment."

Whereas Ms. Li is proud of Yue being receptive to speaking Chinese, this excerpt suggests that Chinese education would hinder Yue's development of Japanese. This illustrates how challenging language transmission is while assuring the acquisition of societal language. On the other hand, she selected *Disagree* for statement 17 in the questionnaire: *Speaking Chinese will negatively affect children's academic achievements*. It suggests that Ms. Li was caught in the middle: preserving heritage and simultaneously ensuring integration. In fact, her ideology toward Japanese and Chinese became so complex that she could not determine how to deal with the language issue when it came to her daughter:

> Excerpt 7:
> "[W]e have a concern that we do not know what her (Yue's) mother tongue should be. Even though we want it to be Chinese. But she spends ten months in Japan (in a year)."

It can be assumed that this conflicting ideology shows her indecisive feelings between identity and practicality. As a migrant who intends to live in Japan for a long term or permanently, Japanese proficiency is essential for education and employment in the future. In other words, Yue needs to acquire Japanese to live in Japan effectively and successfully.

However, the Chinese language is also critical for Yue's identity since Ms. Li regarded language as an identity marker, which makes her feel "Chinese" even in Japan, as shown in Excerpt 4. Even if Yue was born and raised in Japan, it does not deny the fact that she is a child of Chinese parents. The importance of transmitting the Chinese language was also shared by grandparents who live in China. They once told "do not forgetting her mother tongue," to Ms. Li and even taught Yue Chinese by themselves.

These excerpts clarify Ms. Li's language ideology toward mother tongue and the language of destination. In short, she valued Chinese as identity, sense of pride, and heritage, while Japanese is essential for a successful life in Japan. Therefore, Ms. Li had to find a balance between Japanese and Chinese education for her daughter. Her bilingual language ideology guided Yue Li's heritage and societal language education, including which language to use when communicating with Yue and how to teach each language. However, as she has been wavering between heritage preservation and social integration, language education was a central, or critical, if not, issue for Li's family. It should be noted that her language ideology is not necessarily reflected in language practice and management because of various factors like economic, time, material, environmental, and emotional constraints.

5.2 Language Practice

Language use of parents is another continuum that influences the language maintenance and shift of migrant children. If a migrant parent continues using one's mother tongue even after migrating to the destination country, one's child gains constant exposure to the heritage language. Given the technical advancement and concomitantly integrating globe, access to heritage language materials, such as TV programs, videos, and social media posts, became commonplace; yet parents would be the primary and significant source for linguistic inputs, as they may include pedagogical strategies like scaffolding, child-directed speech, and corrective feedback based on the mastery level of a child. However, Ms. Li was against the notion that she and her husband should speak only Chinese when her child is nearby. In the following section, I shall describe Yue's and her language practice.

Ms. Li uses Chinese (Mandarin and Pekinese) as her primary means of communication with her spouse, parents, and Yue; she only uses Chinese when she speaks with her parents, otherwise she uses Japanese along with Chinese. Notably, she spoke Chinese and Japanese to communicate with Yue:

Excerpt 8:

Well, it depends. Usually for daily conversation, it is done in Chinese and if there is a word or expression she cannot pick up, she will ask us what that means in Japanese. But since she already has started a cram school and everything is done in Japanese and also her schoolwork is done in Japanese. So, whenever we do help her with homework and test preparation, we would like to use Japanese.

Here, Ms. Li clarified that Chinese is the primary means of communication with Yue, and Japanese works as a means of education and would supplement the insufficiency of Chinese lexicons. It is noteworthy that Ms. Li mentioned Yue would ask explanation in Japanese when she came across unknown Chinese words and expressions, but not vice versa. This differs from Lee's (2010) study, which documented Japanese preference over Chinese among Chinese parents and children in Okinawa. In her study, 12 out of 20 families used only Japanese to communicate with children, and the number would increase to 19 when including those who used mainly Japanese. On the other hand, half of them spoke mainly Chinese with spouses, which means language shift had already been observed in two generations unlike the present study found. Although she did not mention how often she spoke Japanese with her daughter, it is assumed that she speaks it at least once a week because she teaches her daughter Japanese before a Chinese character test takes place every Wednesday. However, Chinese is a predominant language in her home when considering the following excerpt:

Excerpt 9:

"So anyway, we are not satisfied about her Japanese learning environment because we tend to speak Chinese."

Predictably, migrant parents continue using the language of origin at home since the language is their mother tongue and, in many cases, they are comfortable speaking it than the destination language. Notably, when one expresses one's strong emotion, mother tongue comes first. In fact, Ms. Li explicitly stated that she uses Chinese when she gets emotional. This is consistent with other studies (e.g., Dewaele & Qaddourah, 2015) that documented migrants showed negative emotions (e.g., anger, frustration, swearing) trigger first/dominant language use:

Excerpt 10:

"But you know kids, they upset you. And to express out strong emotions it will certainly turn into Chinese. "

As well as Chinese and Japanese, Ms. Li speaks English with her daughter once a week to teach her the said language. In the questionnaire, she answered that she wanted her daughter to acquire Mandarin, Japanese, and English. She believed English would enable Yue to gain access to better education:

Excerpt 11:

"[W]e started to teach her English. Because we have realized that if you want your child to go to a prestigious junior high school, it is better to start English in an early stage."

This excerpt infers that Ms. Li's language practice is motivated by a strong belief which is language is a driver of educational advancement for Yue. In Japan, English is the most preferred foreign language taught in schools. English has been one of the subjects students need to take in entrance examinations for junior high school and beyond. Although English is not a typical subject required by private junior high schools since English education only starts from grade five, some schools allow students to choose English for the examination. In addition, English is taught in all school levels, even after junior high school. High schools and universities also require English for the entrance examinations. Since Ms. Li was planning to send Yue to a private junior high school, she was urged to teach her daughter English along with Japanese and Chinese.

In Excerpt 7, Ms. Li indicated that Yue's language practice outside the home is far leaning to Japanese since she goes to a Japanese school, private cram school, and dancing class where Japanese is a primary means of communication. It can be assumed that Chinese usage is quite limited, yet Yue has several opportunities to speak Chinese even at school. According to Ms. Li, Yue intermediates communication between a Chinese classmate and a Japanese teacher:

Excerpt 12:

"[T]here is another Chinese kid who speaks not so fluent Japanese, and he could

not understand what the teacher was talking about. So my daughter was listening and translating at the same time."

Although Yue's school once offered Ms. Li that they could employ a staff to provide language assistance for Yue, they have not reached out yet.

5.3 Language Management

Based on language ideology, migrant parents put into practice what they believe to be best for themselves and their children. Each parent employs various strategies for passing down and maintaining the heritage language in the destination country while ensuring one's child acquires the language of the destination. Ms. Li exemplified how a migrant parent manages language education for the next generation.

Japanese Education

As in the excerpts previous section, she taught Yue Japanese, more precisely a Chinese character, every week. She explained her pedagogical method:

Excerpt 13:
"I do dictation with her like the jyuku no [i.e. tutoring school's] textbook. […] Ano tatoeba, syazai toka. Syazai tte kaite kudasai toka. [i.e. For example, "Write 'apology' in Chinese character," something like that.]"

Ms. Li was motivated by a concern about Yue's test score and grade; therefore, she helped Yue learn Japanese and prepare for the exam every Wednesday. As she was planning to send her daughter to a private school that requires the entrance examination, getting a high grade was important for her to determine Yue's educational path. In addition to teaching Japanese by herself, Ms. Li sent Yue to a tutoring school to aid Yue's subject learning. However, she was not satisfied with Yue's Japanese language education and confessed her regret for not giving more Japanese exposure to her daughter at home:

Excerpt 14:
[B]efore sending her to jyuku [i.e. tutoring school], she did poor especially in her kokugo [i.e. Japanese] tests. And I think we are to blame because we do not read her bedtime stories in Japanese and […] to give her an immersion, Japanese

learning environment.

As a language teacher and a mother, she understood the efficacy of parent reading or an immersion in the destination language for her daughter's language learning. Reading books is one of the common strategies employed by parents to expose children to the heritage language. Nishikawa (2011) studied 17 Vietnamese pupils' language proficiency in Vietnamese and Japanese as well as language practice. Although the sample size was small, she found that those who hold higher Vietnamese proficiency tend to be exposed to the Vietnamese language through picture books at their early age. On the other hand, the study also shows that pupils stop reading Vietnamese books as they grow older. It is unclear why they stopped reading, but parents' involvement in language education (e.g., buying and/or reading books) may positively influence children's language development. One of the studies investigating the effect of parent-child reading by Chow et al. (2010) reported that both typical and dialogic reading showed a significant effect on word reading in a second language. Unfortunately, full-time employment prevents her from implementing both strategies. The time constraint also influences Chinese language education.

Chinese Education

Just like Japanese, Ms. Li found Chinese education difficult since her husband and she have no time to teach it due to full-time employment. This is consistent with Liang's (2018) study, where around 40% of subjects reported they had limited time to implement heritage language education for their children. In fact, her answers about the frequency of Chinese language teaching in the online questionnaire were quite low. The mean score for ten questions was 7.2, suggesting that she implements each strategy several times a year for the development of Yue's Chinese proficiency. Although the frequency was not high, Ms. Li believed taking her daughter to China would contribute to Chinese language development:

> Excerpt 15:
> "I make sure that she comes back to China because whenever she goes back, all the other kids will put her in the middle. […] When they start to play, they try to explain the rules slowly with her."

For Ms. Li, taking Yue to China twice a year is valuable since she can experience an environment where Chinese is a lingua franca. Considering Excerpt 14 and 15, it can be

inferred that Ms. Li thinks immersion would benefit her daughter to develop languages. Unlike Japanese, which Yue can be exposed to at school, she has a scarce opportunity to have Chinese immersion unless she goes to China. However, it is not easily attainable to take a child to China while attending a Japanese school. Ms. Li and Yue visit China once a year during the break.

Another strategy Ms. Li used was taking grandparents from China to Japan once a year for three months to help Yue develop Chinese proficiency. Although Yue's grandparents did not join the migration and continued living in China, grandparents substituted the parents' role to teach Yue the Chinese language:

> Excerpt 16:
> "[M]y mother and father-in-law actually put it (Chinese education) into practice. Whenever they come, they bring the textbooks, teaching pinyin and things like that and teaching jyukugo [i.e. idioms]. […] Our strategy is to bring them here (Japan)."

Grandparent childcare is increasingly common in China, driven by socioeconomic changes such as mothers' participation in labour markets (Chen et al., 2011). This can also be seen in a migrant context, notably when both parents are working full-time and have no time to take care of children. Treas & Mazumdar (2004) pointed out that one of the three responsibilities immigrant grandparents take is to pass down the heritage language to grandchildren. However, unlike grandparents accompanying migration, Yue's grandparents reside in China, and thus they stay in Japan only temporarily. Japan and China are geographically close, which may ease grandparents' regular visit to Japan, but still, physical and economic burden constrain the cross-border movement in the long term. In other words, heritage language education by grandparents will be formidably challenging to continue unless they migrate.

Occasionally, Yue takes the initiative in learning Chinese and would ask her parents to translate what she says in Japanese into Chinese. Although she would not necessarily repeat the Chinese translation, her practice shows Yue's interest in learning her heritage language:

> Excerpt 17:
> "When if she wants to learn how to say that in Chinese, she will ask me to say what she has told me in Chinese for her. So, she will listen, but she will not repeat."

This excerpt supports Excerpt 6, where Ms. Li insisted that Yue does not show hesitation in speaking Chinese. Unlike other studies documenting migrant children's resistance or unwillingness in learning heritage languages (e.g., Cho, 2015; Shen & Jiang, 2023), Yue is rather affirmative about her heritage language.

6. Discussion

The current study has articulated that multilingual education is a critical issue hard to manage in migrant households. Ms. Li's narrative illustrates several implications on both heritage language and societal language education:

(i) full-time employment limits heritage language exposure.

(ii) heritage language education is rarely available.

(iii) the government fails to offer enough Japanese language support for foreign-rooted students.

The transmission of heritage language is a role of grandparents: both parents are employed full-time. It reduces the interaction between parents and children, although parents would be the most influential heritage language provider in the destination country. Besides, it hinders the implementation of language transmission strategies contrary to parents' ideologies for passing down the heritage language to their children for identity, family bonds, intergenerational communication, etc. Consequently, full-time employment discourages migrant parents from fulfilling the obligation as a language teacher and relies on kinship, mostly grandparents, or beyond to substitute the role.

Monolingual mindset inhibits introduction of heritage language teaching in formal education: the government emphasizes Japanese language education, and heritage language has been marginalized due to the prevalence of mono-ethnic / -lingual mindset in the society. The number of formal schools providing heritage language education is quite limited (only five formal schools offer Chinese-medium education), while private organizations or volunteers suffer from economic, material, and periodic constraints (Nishikawa & Liu, 2020).

Societal language development can be challenging for migrant families speaking a heritage language at home: mastery of the language of the destination is essential for access to education, employment, and social welfare in the destination country (Borlongan, 2023). The government of the destination provides Japanese language support for migrant or foreign-rooted students at school. Unlike the survey (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science

and Technology [MEXT], 2024) showing 90% of students who need extra Japanese instruction have been gaining support, the current study showed that not all schools can employ a language staff. It arises anxious about the child's Japanese language learning and in response finds another way to facilitate the development of Japanese (e.g., sending child to a private cram school).

6.1 Support for Language Minorities

Japanese language teachers are to be ready to support migrant children whose proficiency in the destination language has not been developed. They are obliged not only to provide Japanese language education but to support subject learning and social adaptation to Japanese society. Needless to say, it is not hard to predict that each child holds different linguistic and cultural backgrounds and Japanese proficiency. In other words, they are in need of various degrees of linguistic support. In the latest data available, conducted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in 2023, 90.4% of students who were born outside Japan and needed language teaching got certain support from the school (MEXT, 2024). However, not every school can provide enough support for foreign-rooted children because of a human resource shortage. When looking at the length of time, 35.7% of schools had been providing less than one hour a week for migrant children (MEXT, 2024). Although a little survey that focused on the influence of the number of hours per week was conducted, the effect of only one hour of Japanese language teaching for migrant children can be questioned.

Another issue is lower high school advancement rates and higher dropout rates among foreign-rooted students. Inui (2008) estimated that fewer than half of immigrant students advance to high school, while 97% of Japanese students entered high school. It is worth mentioning that no national survey was conducted until recently. However, the latest national survey showed that advancement rate among foreign-rooted students who need Japanese teaching has drastically improved, reaching 90.3% in 2023 (MEXT, 2024). Even after they got into high school, a linguistic barrier can be a major issue for foreign-rooted students. According to MEXT (2024), the dropout rate among foreign-rooted high school students (8.5%) is far higher than that of Japanese students (1.1%). Tokunaga (2018) indicated that linguistic barriers, such as reading and writing Chinese characters and/or difficulty in learning academic subjects in Japanese, are one of the reasons that make students drop out of high school.

On the other end, mother tongue education should be equally concerned. It has been widely discussed that cognitive and academic skills in first and second languages are strongly interdependent, suggesting that providing support in L1 and/or mother tongue education would

benefit immigrant children in developing the destination language proficiency. In Japan, support staff who communicate with and translate documents for guardians in their mother tongue are employed. However, the employment ratio of local governments employing them is quite small, that is, only 22.9% in 2023 (MEXT, 2024). Additionally, the primary aim of those staff is to help students learn Japanese, but not their mother tongue. This suggests that the Japanese government focuses on Japanese language learning for foreign-rooted students to be integrated into the mainstream. Indeed, a national survey has been conducted to unpack the situation of Japanese language teaching for foreign-rooted students and to discuss how to extend the support system, but little attention has been paid to mother tongue/heritage language education. Although Japan has extended Japanese language support for foreign-born children to help them integrate into Japanese education successfully, it is also worthwhile to take heritage language education into consideration for cultural preservation.

Minority language education is largely provided by private organizations, individual households, or volunteers. In the case of Chinese education, there are five Chinese schools from kindergarten to high school in Japan, namely Tokyo School, Yokohama Overseas Chinese School, Yokohama Yamate Chinese School, Osaka Chinese School, and Kobe Chinese School. These schools provide Chinese education (e.g., language, culture, and history) as well as teaching Japanese and other subjects (e.g., math, science, and English). Although these schools provide Chinese education, the primary aim has been shifted to Japanese education to prepare students for university entrance (Bai & Yanagimoto, 2020; Ishikawa et al., 2020).

All of these schools are classified as miscellaneous schools; thereby, even if students complete elementary or junior high school at one of the five Chinese schools, some of them may not always be approved for admission to public schools. The educational advancement problem has been a critical problem for students in Chinese schools. After students complete junior high school, they will proceed to Japanese high schools and universities in the end. Since most high schools and universities enforce entrance examinations, immigrant children have to compete with Japanese peers who have been developing academic skills without a linguistic barrier. Thus, Chinese schools have to focus more on Japanese and other subjects than Chinese subjects for the entrance examination. Chinese language teaching remains to be provided, yet the exposure to Chinese decreases drastically (Kobe Chinese School, n.d.).

Whereas the situation has been improved, not all students are able to benefit from the current special consideration measures. Some public schools offer special support (e.g., reducing subjects, extending time, adding *furigana* – Japanese reading aids) for immigrant students at the prefectural level. For example, in Tokyo, which has the largest foreign resident

population, immigrant candidates who have been living in Japan for less than three years are allowed to take the writing exam and oral interview in Japanese or English (Board of Education, 2025). However, eight out of the top ten origin countries of foreign residents in Japan, except the Philippines and the United States, are non-English speaking countries, and thereby English would not match the repertoire of candidates. Other local governments have also relaxed the entrance requirements for foreign-rooted students. However, according to the Voluntary Association to Support Foreign and Returnee Chinese Students in High School Entrance Examinations (2025), students who have resided in Japan for more than three years are ineligible to receive the supportive measure in 21% of prefectures. Furthermore, nearly half local governments do not prepare a different examination for foreign students. Notably in prefectures with small foreign students only offer supportive measures (e.g., reduction of subjects, extension of time, Japanese reading aids, etc.) and do not open a slot for foreign students.

The most critical issue in Japan around heritage language maintenance is the availability of formal language education. Only the five institutions mentioned above provide Chinese medium education. Otherwise, Chinese education is provided by private language schools and community groups; therefore, it would be a responsibility of private organizations, volunteers, and individual households. However, Nishikawa & Liu (2020) pointed out that both formal and informal heritage language education often face economic, material, and spatial problems, such as rewards for lecturers, purchasing textbooks, securing venues for classes, and the lack of materials for heritage language learners and experienced mother tongue teachers. In addition, community language schools are concentrated in areas with a large foreign population. On the other hand, concentration and interspersion of students with foreign roots is observed (MEXT, 2024). Thus, heritage language education is not readily available for children in a scarce foreign population area. In that case, heritage language education is left to individual households, but parents do not necessarily have enough time to teach children heritage languages because of full-time employment. The lack of heritage language teaching facilitates language shift from heritage language to societal language, especially among children who move to Japan in their early lives. Cummins & Nakajima (2011) insisted that migrant children gradually reduce the use of their heritage language and increase societal language usage after the entrance to elementary school.

6.2 Implications

6.2.1 *Strengthen Japanese Language Support for Migrant or Foreign-Rooted Children at School*

The current support system has a space for improvement:

(i) establishing schools or programs to secure enough number of Japanese language teachers or instructors who can support students in need.

(ii) introducing a national-level criterion in evaluating migrant or foreign-rooted children's Japanese language proficiency.

Japanese language teachers for foreign-rooted students may be in charge of several schools at the same time since not all schools, especially public schools, can afford to employ teachers. This would not be because of economic constraints, but rather the shortage of Japanese language teachers. According to the survey by the MEXT (2024), 62.1% of the local governments did not employ or register a teacher or instructor. As a result, nearly half of the local board of education did not build a support system. The most common reason was that no students needed language support; 23.7% answered that they lacked a teacher or instructor who is able to provide support (MEXT, 2024). Therefore, formal schools or programs that train Japanese language teachers should be established.

The other issue is that each local government employs different types of evaluation to decide which students need Japanese language support. Over half of the schools evaluate students' Japanese language ability based on the observation of students' school life, but only 12.7% employed a Japanese proficiency test (MEXT, 2024). In other words, the national-level criterion has not been introduced in most of the schools. There must be a certain criterion that all the schools follow to avoid overlooking a student in need and possible failure in providing language support.

6.2.2 *Establishment of Schools or Programs that Provide Heritage Language Education as well as Societal Language Education for Migrant or Foreign-Rooted Children*

The national level of support focuses on Japanese language development, and programs for heritage language education remain undeveloped. Compared with Japanese language teachers or instructors, the percentage of local governments that do not employ any staff who offer support in students' mother tongue is even greater, reaching 77.1% (MEXT, 2024). Their central obligation is to help migrant or foreign-rooted students learn Japanese, but not to develop mother tongue/heritage language proficiency.

However, mother tongue/heritage language benefits foreign-rooted children,

facilitating identity construction, enabling intergenerational communication, accepting roots and diversity in society, and expanding employment opportunities. On the other hand, failure of language succession would raise negative feelings between grandparents and parents for poor upbringing, and miscommunication among different generations. As discussed earlier, bilingual development without social support is considerably troublesome. In order to ensure successful integration and heritage language development, formal schools or programs offering both heritage and societal language education are needed.

7. Limitations

While the current study has provided insights into how a Chinese migrant negotiates linguistic education between heritage language and societal language for her daughter, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, this study is a case study of a Chinese mother in Japan, and the data used for this study were based on a single family. Therefore, it may not represent the experiences of all migrant families in Japan. Second, the data were derived from an interview and a self-reported survey. Although these provide affluent insights, they are influenced by participants' subjectivity and only depict temporal language ideology, practice, and management, which can be altered as time goes by. Additional methodology, such as longitudinal observation, would enable us to follow chronological change. Finally, this study focused on parents' ideologies. However, it is also important to look at the child's agency in language use and learning. As children get older, their agency, as well as peer influence, would exceed parental involvement, and children negotiate and manage their own language use. Further study could expand the sample size and incorporate longitudinal data to provide a more comprehensive picture of family language policy among migrant families in Japan.

References

Bai, L. & Yanagimoto, Y. (2020). The development of multicultural education and its related factors reflected in historical changes of Chinese schools in Japan —In particular in a case of Yokohama Yamate Chinese school—. *Bulletin of the Tokyo University and Graduate School of Social Welfare, 10 (1-2)*, 121-131.

Board of Education. (2025). Zaikyō gaikokujin seito to taishō no nyūshi ni tsuite [About the entrance examination for foreign students in Tokyo]. Tokyo Metropolitan Government. Retrieved from https://www.kyoiku.metro.tokyo.lg.jp/admission/high_school/interview/guide

Borlongan, A. M. (2023). Migration linguistics: A synopsis. *AILA Review, 36*(1), 38-63. http://dx.doi.org/10.1075/aila22014.bor

Chen, F., Liu, G., & Mair, C. A. (2011). Intergenerational ties in context: Grandparents caring for grandchildren in China. *Social Forces, 90*(2), 571-594. https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/sor012

Cho, G. (2015). Perspectives vs. reality of heritage language development: Voices from second-generation Korean-American high school students. *Multicultural Education, 22*(2), 30-38.

Chow, B. W. Y., McBride-Chang, C., & Cheung, H. (2010). Parent-child reading in English as a second language: Effects on literacy development of Chinese kindergarteners. *Journal of Research in Reading, 33*(3)*,* 284-301. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9817.2009.01414.x

Crystal, D. (2003). *English as a global language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Cummins, J. & Nakajima, K. (2011). *Education supporting linguistic minorities*. Keio University Press.

Curdt-Christiansen, X. L. (2013). Family language policy: Sociopolitical reality versus linguistic continuity. *Language policy, 12*, 1-6. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10993-012-9269-0

Dewaele, J. M. & Qaddourah, I. (2015). Language choice in expressing anger among Arab-English Londoners. *Russian Journal of Linguistics, 19(4)*, 82-100.

Francis, B., Mau, A., & Archer, L. (2014). Speaking of identity? British-Chinese young people's perspectives on language and ethnic identity. In X. L. Curdt-Christiansen, & A. Hancock (Eds.), *Learning Chinese in diasporic communities: Many pathways to being Chinese* (pp. 203–218). John Benjamins.

Immigration Services Agency. (2025). The number of foreign residents in the end of 2024. Retrieved from https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/publications/press/13_00052.html

Inui, M. (2008). Koukoushingaku to nyushi [Advancement to high school and testing]. In K. Shimizu (Ed.), *Koukou wo ikiru nyukama: Osakahuritsu koukou ni miru kyoiku shien* [Newcomers in high schools: Educational support in Osaka prefectural high schools], (pp.29-43). Akashi Shoten.

Ishikawa, A., Kishi, A., & Shibano, J. (2020). Tyuka gakkou ni okeru shinro kaitaku no doukou —Yokohama tyuka gakuin to Yokohama yamate tyuka gakkou wo jireini— [Trends in advancing students pathways in Chinese schools: Cases of Yokohama Chinese School and Yokohama Yamate Chinese School]. *Annual Reports of the Humanities*, 26, 27-49.

Jeon, M. (2008). Korean heritage language maintenance and language ideology. *Heritage Language Journal, 6*(2), 206-223.http://dx.doi.org/10.46538/hlj.6.2.4

Kobe Chinese School. (n.d). Educational policy. Kobe Chinese School. Retrieved from https://www.tongwen.ed.jp/curriculum/

Lee, E. (2010). Chinese as a heritage language in the Japanese context: Perception, attitudes and challenges. *Proceeding of the 16th Conference of Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics*, 161-166.

Leeman, J. (2015). Heritage language education and identity in the United States. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 35*, 100-119. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190514000245

Liang, F. (2018). Parental perceptions toward and practices of heritage language maintenance: Focusing on the United States and Canada. *International Journal of Language Studies, 12*(2), 65-86.

Little, S. (2020). Whose heritage? What inheritance?: Conceptualizing family language identities. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 23*(2), 198-212. https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2017.1348463

Matthews, J. S. & López, F. (2019). Speaking their language: The role of cultural content integration and heritage language for academic achievement among Latino children. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 57,* 72-86. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2018.01.005

McAuliffe, M., & Oucho, L.A. (Eds.). (2024). *World migration report 2024.* International Organization for Migration (IOM).

Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT]. (2024). Reiwa go nendo nihongo shidou ga hitsuyou na jidou seito no ukeire jyoukyou tou ni kansuru tyousa kekka ni tsuite. [Result of 2023 survey about situation of acceptance of students in need of Japanese language teaching]. Retrieved from https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20240808-mxt_kyokoku-000037366_4.pdf

Nishikawa, T. (2011). Heritage language proficiency of the Vietnamese children in Japan. *Studies in Mother Tongue, Heritage Language, and Bilingual Education, 7,* 46-65.

Nishikawa, T. & Liu, J. (2020). Nihon de sodatsu gaikoku rūtsu no kodomo wakamono to keishougo gakusyu. [Children and youth with foreign roots growing up in Japan and heritage language learning]. *Kodomo no Nihongo Kyouiku Kenkyu (Journal of Children's Japanese Language Education), 3,* 18-37. *https://doi.org/10.57412/kodomonihongo.3.0_18*

Park, S., & Sarkar, M. (2007). Parents' attitudes toward heritage language maintenance for their children and their efforts to help their children maintain the heritage language: A case study of Korean-Canadian immigrants. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, *20*(3), 223-235.https://doi.org/10.2167/lcc337.0

Shen, C. & Jiang, W. (2023). Parents' planning, children's agency and heritage language education: Re-storying the language experiences of three Chinese immigrant families in Australia. *Frontiers in Psychology, 13,* 1083813. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1083813

Spolsky, B. (2004). *Language policy*. Cambridge University Press.

Tokunaga, T. (2018). *Possibilities and constraints of immigrant students in the Japanese educational system*: *Background paper prepared for the 2019 global education monitoring report*. [Report]. Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) & UNESCO. Retrieved from https://www.jica.go.jp/Resource/jica-ri/publication/other/l75nbg000010mg5u-att/Background_Tokunaga.pdf

Treas, J. & Mazumdar, S. (2004). Kinkeeping and Caregiving: Contributions of older people in immigrant families. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies, 35*(1), 105-122. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/41603919

Voluntary association to support foreign and returnee Chinese students in high school entrance Examinations (外国人生徒・中国帰国生徒等の高校入試を応援する有志の会). (2025). Gaikokujinseito, Chūgoku kikoku seito tou ni taisuru todoufukenritsu koukou ni okeru 2025 nendo koukou nyūshi no gaiyou. [Overview of 2025 high school entrance examinations in prefectural high schools for foreign and returnee Chinese students]. [Report]. The Support and Communications Centers for People Returning from China. https://www.kikokusha-center.or.jp

Xia, Q. (2016). *Heritage language maintenance and biliteracy development for immigrants' children: A study of Chinese immigrants' family language policy and biliteracy practices* [Unpublished PhD dissertation]. University of Maryland.

Wang, Y. (2023). Speaking Chinese or no breakfast: Emotional challenges and experiences confronting Chinese immigrant families in heritage language maintenance. *International Journal of Bilingualism 27*(2), 232-250. https://doi.org/10.1177/13670069221126043

Wang, Y., Tetteh, V. W., & Dube, S. (2023). Parental emotionality and power relations in heritage language maintenance: Experiences of Chinese and African immigrant

families in Australia. *Frontiers in Psychologies, 14,* 1076418. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1076418