# 7 Facing Race

Like other Asian-Americans, most Chinese-Americans experienced race (as a social factor) for the first time after they arrived in the U.S. For those college graduates who arrived from mainland China during the 1980s and 1990s, most had never heard of the Chinese Exclusion Act, nor of the "Yellow Peril." As a result, many of them attribute the disadvantages and discriminations they experience to their lack of high-level English language proficiency, and not necessarily to race. Often without much knowledge of Asian-American or Chinese-American history, for many first-generation Chinese immigrants who arrived in the U.S. during that period of time, the social justice movement in the wake of the killing of George Floyd and the drastically escalated, rampant anti-Asian racism, xenophobia, and violence during the COVID-19 pandemic was their first time witnessing and experiencing social inequity and injustice through the lens of race.

In this chapter, we highlight the sociopolitical nature of heritage language learning and use, through the experience and reflections of an exceptionally thoughtful and articulate college student, Felix, who just returned to the U.S. from a one-year study-abroad program in China which was cut short by the COVID-19 pandemic. Felix is turning twenty-one. He transferred from a public research university to a highly selective private university at the end of his freshman year. At the time of data collection, he was a junior, majoring in history. His mother, Xiaofei, came to the U.S. from China in the late 1980s as a graduate student and is now a professor of electrical engineering in a university on the East Coast of U.S.; his father, Weifeng, also came to the U.S. from China for graduate studies in the sciences but changed his career trajectory afterwards and became a freelance writer for a regional Chinese-language newspaper. The parents met and got married during graduate studies in a small college town in the Midwest, where Felix was born and spent the first two years of his life. Felix is the older of two boys in the family.

## 7.1 Doing Being Chinese-Americans

In the context of discussing features of nonnative speaker interaction (such as a long gap in conversation), Schegloff (quoted in Wong and Olsher, 2000)



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brought up the notion of "doing being" nonnative speakers. The point is to show that the recipient is not interpreting the gap in the way it might otherwise be interpreted or analyzed, but is oriented, among other relevancies, to the categorical membership of the speaker as a nonnative speaker. In other words, nonnative speakers are "doing being" nonnative speakers, thereby making relevant their categorical membership as nonnative speakers. Hence it is the researcher's job to show how both the speaker and the recipient are oriented to the fact that one of them is not a native speaker. Once shown, the researcher then moves to examine the places that seem to invoke that relevant categorical membership. This notion of "doing being" highlights identities as active, collaborative, interactional constructions, rather than static, essentialized traits (Schegloff, 1987). It will serve as a guiding principle as we examine and experience Felix's life vicariously.

### *7.1.1 Where Are You From*

*Chinese* is an umbrella term that encompasses many varieties, including Mandarin, Wu, Min, Xiang, Gan, Hakka, and Yue, each of which includes multitudes of dialects, many of which are mutually unintelligible. These dialects reflect phonological developments from Middle Chinese, a historical variety of Chinese recorded at the beginning of the seventh century (*Qieyun*, a rime dictionary first published in 601). Chinese dialects differ much more in phonology than in morphosyntax. Southern varieties tend to have fewer initial consonants than northern and central varieties, but more often preserve the Middle Chinese final consonants. While all dialects have phonemic tones, northern varieties tend to have fewer tonal distinctions than southern ones (Chen, 1999). Standard Chinese, known in mainland China as *Putonghua* (common speech), is a form of Mandarin that takes its phonology from the Beijing dialect, with vocabulary from the Mandarin group and grammar based on literature in the modern written vernacular.

Felix's family have their origins in Sichuan, a province in southwest China; the Sichuan dialect belongs to the Xiang dialect family. For speakers of non-Mandarin varieties of Chinese, the learning of Chinese as a heritage language in U.S. classrooms (either community-based language schools or 7–16 global language classrooms in middle school, high school, or college) often means that they are learning not the home variety of Chinese, but something new, since it is usually Mandarin Chinese that is taught in the classrooms (Wiley et al., 2008; Wong and Xiao, 2010).

Below is an excerpt from Felix's writing:

*My parents left China for the U.S. to pursue graduate studies before I was born. Some years later, my* yeye nainai [paternal grandparents]*, who lived in rural Sichuan* [a province in southwest China]*, came to America to help care for me*

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*and my brother. They brought with them their Chinese rural habits into our American suburban life. When they realized that we not only own our house but also the piece of land on which our house is built, they decided to do something useful. They planted bamboo trees and turned our backyard into a huge vegetable garden, with tomatoes, eggplants, cucumbers, squashes, and many leafy vegetables. My grandmother never had the opportunity to go to school; my grandfather completed some kind of high school. Their Sichuan-flavored food became my favorite food and their Sichuan-flavored Mandarin Chinese became my first language. At the Chinese language school, I got laughed at because I didn't speak the standard variety (Mandarin).*

*My parents weren't very expressive. The only time I received any praise was when I did well at school. If you had asked me in elementary school what made me a good child, it'd be "doing well in school." I wouldn't even think of "being kind" or any of those other personal traits.*

*I didn't speak much English when I first started preschool. My mom got worried that I couldn't follow the teacher's instructions and might get teased or bullied. So we started to speak English more at home. So, for me, I became self-conscious of my "Chinese-ness" from a very young age. By elementary school, I asked my parents to stop packing Chinese food for lunch. I only wanted PB&J after getting teased for bringing* chayedan [brown-colored eggs marinated with tea and soy sauce] *to class. The other kids, "Why do you eat rotten eggs?" Moments like these made me long to be seen as the American that I am.*

*I was born and raised in America, but this past year, I've traveled to Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Chongqing, and Guangzhou, where the majority of people I was surrounded by look like me and assume I'm a native. At first, that gave me an instant sense of belonging that I sometimes miss in America. In the U.S., when I say I'm from New York and I was born in Illinois, it's never enough. People say, "But where are you really from?" I get annoyed being asked why I can speak English "without any accent."*

### *7.1.2 Real or Fake*

*I have been told that I don't sound "real" and that my pronunciation is too perfect. Maybe if I fake a Chinese accent, I'll sound more real? "Herro, and wercome. I'm yoah fenda. Lemme teach you zis Chinese carchaaa . . ." That's what White people do when they play Asian characters in the movies. Here's the thing. A lot of Chinese immigrants I've met do, in fact, talk like that, because it's hard not to have a thick accent when Mandarin or Cantonese or Sichuan dialect is so different from English. But it's equally true that every single Chinese-American kid born here does not talk like that. Black kids or Latino kids may talk in a certain way with a distinct cadence, but Asian kids just don't have any distinct features. Our accent is imagined! If anything, the thing that*

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*made me weird as a kid was that my English was too perfect. My grammar was too meticulously correct, my words too carefully enunciated – I was the kid who sounded like that corporate voicemail greeting. So in high school I had to learn to add some slurred syllables and street slang to my speech, just to sound like a normal teenager.*

First-generation Chinese/Asian immigrants have the accent that many non-Chinese Americans perceive as distinctly different and displeasing, whether that accent is heard in the streets and restaurants of Chinatown or in the hallways and classrooms of universities. Speakers with an Asian accent evoked more negative affect and required more attention from listeners than did speakers with a standard American English accent (Hosoda et al., 2007). Furthermore, given the long history of interpersonal and structural racism toward Asian-Americans, speakers with Asian accents often experience more stigmatization than speakers with European accents (Smith, 2022). Perhaps as a result, the second generation have decided to wipe away all traces of their race or ethnicity in their speech so they can settle comfortably into their roles as respectable middle-class Americans, not only socioeconomically, but also linguistically. In a sense, it is their way to counteract and transcend the linguistic bias against their families and their ethnic communities.

For Felix, the "correct" accent leads to privilege:

*I remember being on vacation in Florida. I had to translate between my dad and this guy at the hotel, who is from Texas. Both of them were speaking English. One of them would say something. The other would give a blank stare. Only when I said it again did they understand each other. My dad's Chinese accent and that guy's Texan accent were just too far apart from each other. It's like they're speaking different languages. And I had the magic power of speaking the "standard" English, the kind on TV, the kind you hear when you use GPS. When I said something, everybody understood. My dad, who'd spoken English more than half of his life, and that guy, who'd spoken English all his life, both depended on me to understand each other. But the thing is that my dad's English was always considered bad but no one would question that Texas guy's fluency in the English language over that because he is White, and he was born here. That is racist!*

*I mean my parents' Chinese accent is real; I grew up hearing it. Sometimes they speak English as if it were Chinese, mixing "he" and "she" interchangeably, ignoring the conjugation of verbs, and not bothering to make nouns plural. But if I speak like my parents, it would not be real, not after so many years of renouncing it and avoiding it and exterminating any trace of it from my day-to-day speech. After a lifetime of effort, the "GPS voice" is my voice, and the only way to sound "more real" and "less fake" is to put on an accent that isn't mine, be it Texas or Chinese.*

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### 7.1.3 Writing and Race

In an interview study of second-generation Chinese-Australians, Liu (2015) reports that as the research participants grow up, they realize that it is not possible for people with Chinese ancestry to be 100 percent "Australian," no matter how well they speak the English language or how closely they follow the Australian way of life. Their physical appearance sets them apart from the Anglo-Australians at first sight. Consequently, they take on shifted (rather than blended) bicultural identities and perform to the expectations of both cultural groups. Felix came to a similar realization through his schooling and his chosen fields of study. So he took a further step reflecting upon his own reactions and responses to this reality:

*I like to write. Got laughed at in high school. Hey, you are Asian boy, you should be doing math, like all other Asian boys . . . That was tough. My parents supported me. My dad is a writer, so they get it. I just crave writing, getting into my little space, just me and my laptop, and letting my brain fire through all the scrambled words popping up in my head. Letting all of my thoughts out and not worrying about making sense calms me down and fires me up at the same time. It allows me to release pent-up emotions and ideas. It soothes my anxiety. It cleanses me . . . it is hard to explain. When I actually see the words and phrases that are making noises in my head out there on the screen, I can sort out my feelings and decide what I really want to say. Others do sports; I do writing . . . My words are all in English. I have some vocabulary words in Chinese. I can hear them, but definitely cannot "see" them. I did go to Chinese school when I was young and my parents taught us some Chinese at home too. I can understand a lot but reading characters is hard. I prefer to read pinyin.*

*Right now I am majoring in history. But I might change. Maybe I'll double-major in Asian studies. Maybe I'll add a minor in Chinese. I'm taking Chinese language classes and Asian-American culture classes. I learned so much about my own cultural heritage. My parents practice Chinese culture but they don't talk about it that much. And they don't know much about Asian-American history. For as long as Asian-Americans have been in this country, we've been treated as invisible and not belonging here, forever foreigners. You can go all the way back to the 1800s with Chinese railroad workers, to Japanese-American internment during World War II, to the Korean and Vietnam Wars. All this happened before my parents came to America. So they actually don't have that knowledge. And we didn't get to learn this in high school.*

*This semester I am taking a film studies class in the Asian American Studies Department. We are looking at the scarce and inaccurate portrayals of Asian-Americans in television and film. Asians have been the punchline and the stereotype, with only a handful of spoken lines, and we'd be lucky if it was in English. We simply weren't taken seriously outside of playing a waiter or*

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*a nerdy mathlete. I had to learn some things the hard way. Getting called "chink eyes" in high school, I was oblivious to the toxic energy. The truth is, when I was younger, I was laughing along without even realizing how harmful the long-term effect was going to be. This happened in real life, and it happened in the pop culture I heavily absorbed. I just accepted it. Thinking back now, we have been treated as strangers, foreigners, even if we were born and grew up here, in movies and in the media, strange and submissive, always the butt of jokes. It's like we existed just to make everyone else look great. That Asian film class opened my eyes.*

### *7.1.4 Cultural Authenticity*

In Felix's Chinese language class in college, his professor paired each student with a native speaker of Mandarin Chinese, an international student from China. The pairs were asked to meet at least once a week, for at least one hour. After each meeting, the language student was expected to submit a learning log: what language content they had learned from or reviewed with their language partner, what new cultural knowledge they had gained, and what else they would like to learn at the next meeting. Felix felt that while his Chinese language skills may not have improved that much through pair meetings, he certainly gained many new perspectives from his language partner, TK.

Here are some excerpts from Felix's learning logs:

*Interesting that I think I actually fit the Chinese stereotype better than TK! I like Chinese food more than he does (oh well, he thinks the Chinese food served at the dining hall is so bad that he'd rather eat non-Chinese). I'm lactose-intolerant (TK didn't know what it is and didn't know how to say it in Chinese. He said there is no such a thing in China). TK loves cheese (Chinese people hate cheese? Wrong!). I'm totally clueless about sports. TK is obsessed with* 男足 nan zu [China's Men's National Soccer Team]. *He actually hates the team, because they never won a single game! He hates the team so much that he keeps track of all their games and losses, and the records of each and every team member! I check in with my parents pretty regularly, maybe once a week. TK never contacts his parents unless his mom calls him. I am definitely more* 孝顺 xiaoshun [showing filial piety]*!*

*Today I learned the word* 海龟 haigui ["sea turtle"]*, which is a funny way to say* 海归 haigui ["returnees from overseas"]. 海龟 *and* 海归 *are homophones. The Chinese are geniuses playing with homophones. They call foreigners* 歪果仁 waiguoren ["crooked nuts"]*, a homophone of* 外国人 waiguoren ["person from outside country"] . . . *TK likes to talk about big ideas like "democracy" and makes me defend our system. He thinks China's system is better, more orderly and more efficient. He is here to get an American degree and then he'll go home and be a* 海龟 haigui [sea turtle]. *He thinks Chinese will be happier in*

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*China where there is no language barrier and low street crime. TK also taught me the word* 落叶归根 luo ye gui gen [“fallen leaves return to the tree roots”]*, but I don’t think it makes sense, given that so many people move around and make new homes wherever they go . . . Next week I’m going to ask him about his thoughts on the lack of freedom in China.*

*This week we discussed the class topic: education in China. I learned the word* 名牌大学 mingpai daxue [“brand name universities”]*. TK said that while in China, his mom shared with him a* 励志故事 lizhi gushi [“inspiring motivational story”] *from America, about a Chinese cleaning lady in the U.S. The lady worked extremely hard to provide a good education for her son. When her son was young, she pretended that she could read English and sat and read with her son every evening. Years later, the son went to Harvard . . . I had never heard of such a story and won’t be surprised if some crazy person just made it up! Why do the Chinese love* 名牌 mingpai [brands] *so much?* 名牌大学 mingpai daxue [brand name universities], 名牌车 mingpai che [“brand name cars”], 名牌衣服 mingpai yifu [brand name clothes], 名牌包 mingpai bao [“brand name bags”], 名牌 mingpai [brand] *everything?*

## 7.2 Visiting China

Growing up, Felix followed his parents on their annual summer visits to China. But China has always felt somewhat foreign, no matter how many times he has visited. Throughout the years, he has felt a sense of *cultural homelessness* (Hoersting and Jenkins, 2011). And like many other heritage language speakers (see Petrucci (2007) for the contexts of Mexico and Japan, Lee et al. (2023) for the context of Korea, inter alia), Felix has struggled to construct a cross-cultural identity that he can manage in his ancestral homeland (Diao and Trentman, 2021; Jing-Schmidt et al., 2016; Kinginger, 2013). In his words, *during each annual family summer trip there, I felt like a tourist, and deep down, I wanted to be treated as such. I was so proud to be an American.*

### *7.2.1 Both Family and Foreigner*

*Oh yeah, I have faced animosity in China for being American. Right now the U.S.–China relation isn’t that great, with trade war and everything. Chinese state media have been very anti-American. So, there is this Chinese nationalism, calling the U.S. the “enemy,” the same way we call China the “enemy.” During winter break when I was visiting relatives in Chongqing for the Spring Festival* [Chinese New Year]*, having dinner with relatives in a restaurant, a college-age young man that my cousin was dating asked me in Chinese if I was Chinese-American. After I said yes, he switched to English and said “So you are an American, a foreigner.*

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*America is a big bully, very mean to China, you know that, right?!" It was a moment of realization that regardless of where I go, I will always be a foreigner, and depending on the politics of the day, I could also be seen as an enemy.*

### *7.2.2 Changes and Choices*

*When my parents tell us stories about their childhood, it is all about poverty and hardship. The moral of these stories for my brother and me is this: we should be grateful to be born in the U.S., with abundant resources and choices. They say, this country is good for immigrants – just put your head down, work hard, and you can achieve any goal you set your mind to.*

*Every time I visit China with family or by myself, I'd learn more about my family history and witness China's rapid development. We visited my dad's village in the countryside, and he showed my brother and me the small piece of land he had once called home. He often reminds us that during the Cultural Revolution, my* nainai [paternal grandmother] *had to water down a single portion of rice congee every day to feed the whole family. And we visited my mother's family in the city. More than a dozen of us crammed around a table, eating bowls of rice with* hongshaorou 红烧肉 [red braised pork belly]*, while her family recounted painful memories of trauma, political persecution, and suicide during the Cultural Revolution and exchanged happy news about the younger generation, such as college admissions, jobs and salaries, new babies, new cars, and new apartments.*

Throughout the years, the material gap between Felix's relatives' lives in China and his family's lives in the U.S. has narrowed considerably. Villagers in his father's countryside town gradually gained electricity, running water, cars, houses, and cell phones. His cousins in the city no longer needed or wanted clothes, or anything else, from America as gifts. They are doing very well and like the styles in China more. In fact, there was almost no material possession Felix's family could bring from America that they could not already find in China. In terms of material resources, nowadays his young cousins are enjoying practically everything that American young children are enjoying. Yet as their quality of material life improved drastically, their access to information worsened, as the Chinese government tightened internet controls and censorship. And as the pandemic spread around the world, for example, the news that Felix's relatives in China read differed more and more from what his family read in the U.S. In his father Weifeng's words, *this is not a matter of differences in* 语言 yuyan [languages]*, but a matter of differences in* 语境 yujing [language contexts].

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### 7.2.3 *Study Abroad*

In his junior year, Felix participated in a unique study-abroad program, where students may take a year of study at the university's Beijing Center while also holding internships in China to broaden their knowledge of China. The decision to study abroad in China was not an immediately obvious one. *I didn't want to just choose China and miss out on a Europe study-abroad experience, but in the end, China made more sense. China has so many opportunities; I could also visit my extended family and learn more about where my parents come from. Europe I can visit any time after college.*

By chance, Felix and his good friend Brad, a Caucasian student, landed internship positions in international hotel and hospitality, a rapidly growing field, as China is attracting an increasing number of international business and leisure visitors. The job description says that they will work in a range of businesses, from deluxe hotels and boutique inns to renowned restaurants, on a wide range of tasks, including customer service and support, planning, marketing, event management, and more. But in reality, Felix and Brad had a very different experience, from the job description and from each other.

Seeing that Felix speaks English natively and assuming that he must know (i.e., can read) Chinese, his supervisor tasked him with translation assignments – brochures, programs, flyers, reports. When Felix told his supervisor that he cannot read Chinese, his supervisor gave him Google translation versions and asked him to check fluency and to copyedit the English translation. Felix asked to do some "real" work, beyond translation. The supervisor said that he (Felix) is from America, and doesn't know how things work in China, and it's better that he does not do anything "real." All "real" assignments were given to domestic college student interns. Felix said that even though everyone appeared nice to him, he felt that he was sidelined.

Brad, being Caucasian, had a different experience. The supervisor was delighted to have a fair-faced foreigner hanging around because it meant his workplace would appear to have prestige, money, and the increasingly crucial connections (real or not) to businesses abroad. So Brad got invited to go to meetings and conferences that had little to do with his internship and to dinners and lunches to smile at people he didn't know, whenever the presence of foreigners was needed to impress officials and business partners, to secure a contract, or simply to keep up the workplace's appearance of being international. Felix found out later that Brad was not the only one who was asked to do what he called "White guy window dressing." Others who go for such "gigs" tend to be unemployed part-time English teachers from Western countries or other expats looking to earn some extra income.

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## 7.3 Blending the Domestic and the Diasporic

People like Felix and his family are often referred to as "Chinese in diaspora." The word *diaspora* comes from Greek. It originally refers to an ethnic or religious group who originated from the same place but dispersed to different locations. The concept of diaspora has long been used to refer to the Greeks in the Hellenic world and to the Jewish experience, particularly the expulsion of Jewish people from their homeland to Babylonia, as well as the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in the early sixth century BCE. Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, scholars began to use it with reference to the African diaspora, and the use of the term has been extended further since then to apply to many other groups, such as Armenians, Chinese, Kurds, Tamils, and so on. Given the history of the usage, the term, then, has often carried a sense of loss, banishment, and exile; a sense of collective trauma; a connotation of difficulties and disadvantages; and a heart-rending longing to "return" to the homeland, as is the case for Jews, Africans, and others.

Today the connotation of the term has undergone considerable change. It can suggest a positive and ongoing relationship between migrants' homelands and their places of resettlement (Li and Zhu, 2013; Woldemariam and Lanza, 2015). While features such as dispersal from an original homeland, collective memory and myth about the homeland, and boundary maintenance continue to characterize diaspora, the term is now often associated with the notions of *mobility*, *migration*, and *transnationalism*, in the context of the geographic movement of many resources, both human and nonhuman, both physical and figurative. Today, not all diasporas result from expulsion, expansion, or commerce; are associated with colonization, war, and trade; and are imposed on those who move. It is important at this point to make a distinction. As Faist (2013, cited in Canagarajah, 2017: 5) observes, there is a clear distinction between, on the one hand, the "mobile," who have the economic and cultural (including linguistic) resources to travel across borders as they please and who are welcomed and respected wherever they go and, on the other, the "migrants," who are less privileged, who must struggle to be accepted, and whose geographic mobility does not necessarily lead to upward social mobility. For Felix and his family, their diasporic experience over time has placed them somewhere in between, gradually shifting from the "migrant" to the "mobile."

### *7.3.1 From Diasporic to Domestic*

When Felix's parents first came to the U.S. in the late 1980s as graduate students, they experienced much hardship. They each had no more than fifty U.S. dollars in their pockets. On weekends, his father Weifeng worked part-time as a waiter in a local Chinese restaurant to supplement

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his meager graduate student stipend. Both parents spoke English haltingly. Neither of them knew anyone and neither possessed anything more than their talents and dreams. Their studies in graduate school were funded by their university in the form of graduate assistantships (conducting experiments at their advisers' labs) and teaching assistantships (grading undergraduate students' homework assignments). Communication with family back in China was rare. Postal mail was slow and phone calls were too expensive. Visiting home in China was unthinkable then as the airfare was beyond their means. When Felix was born, his then graduate student parents were eligible for the government-sponsored nutrition assistance program that helped pay for baby formula.

Presently, Felix's mother Xiaofei is an accomplished researcher and university professor. She is a full professor and codirector of a research center, the leading author of dozens of academic publications, co-PI of an over one-million-dollar research project on energy conservation systems funded by the federal government, and a member of the editorial board for several key journals in her field. In her spare time, Xiaofei volunteers as a cofounder and mentor for the local Young Women in Science and Engineering Program, providing resources, opportunities and one-on-one guidance for high-school and college female students, many of whom are underprivileged, who aspire to work in STEM areas. She is also the faculty adviser and a mother figure to the Association of International Students from China on her campus (most of whom major in STEM areas). Helping the younger generation of women scientists/engineers and newly arrived international students, she says, is her way of paying forward.

Felix's father, Weifeng, is a well-established columnist with a large readership and considerable impact among first-generation Chinese immigrants in the region who find it easier to access and digest local and national news in the Chinese language. He still practices Chinese calligraphy (a hobby he carried from China) and has learned to love Sunday American football (which he calls by the Chinese name 橄榄球 *ganlanqiu* (olive ball)) and barbeque pork chops on the grill. Both Xiaofei and Weifeng travel back and forth between the U.S. and China frequently, for work and for family visits. Because both are busy, they hired a part-time domestic helper, Jasmine, to help with cooking and cleaning. The helper is a Chinese-Filipina, with no knowledge of Mandarin but some knowledge of Hokkien (aka Southern Min), which Xiaofei and Weifeng do not understand. English thus becomes their lingua franca. To Jasmine, a sojourner, Xiaofei and Weifeng are "Chinese-Americans," the same way she herself is a "Chinese-Filipina." Jasmine's presence further continued the process of the family's shifting toward more use of English at home. In the next section, we will take a look at Xiaofei's language choice and language use more closely.

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### *7.3.2 Language Preference and Cultural Positioning*

In the process from diasporic to domestic, second-generation Chinese-Americans by and large gravitate toward becoming English-dominant (if not English-only) speakers while letting their Chinese heritage language weaken either gradually or drastically. At the same time, the first generation, like Xiaofei and Weifeng, are also using more and more English not only in public but also in private spaces, even though their competence in their first language, Chinese, remains largely intact. Much of language preference is based on the speaker's own positionality, including identity and disposition, which emerges from interactions with others and is linguistically indexed through labels, and linguistic structures and systems (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005; Hughes and Tracy, 2015; Ochs, 1993). In Chinese culture in particular, individuals achieve their identities and positions relationally (Hamamura and Xu, 2015).

In the Chinese language, the plural pronouns 我们 *women* ("we") and 他们 *tamen* ("they") are primarily referential and deictic. They are the markers of collectivity that includes or excludes the speaker or the writer respectively. Below is how Xiaofei refers to the people in her life when she talks (in Chinese) about them in the third person:

- her children: 他们美国人 *tamen meiguoren* (they Americans), as in "These kids are hopeless. They Americans don't understand our Chinese ways,"
- her Chinese-American friends of mainland China origin: 我们中国人 *women zhongguoren* (we Chinese),
- her Taiwanese-American friends: 他们台湾人 *tamen taiwanren* (they Taiwanese),
- her Chinese colleagues in China: 他们中国人 *tamen zhongguoren* (they Chinese),
- White Americans in general: 美国人 *meiguoren* (Americans),
- African-Americans: 黑人 *heiren* (Blacks), and
- Hispanic-Americans: 西班牙人 *xibanyaren* (Spaniards [*sic*]).

When she describes herself (in English), she uses the following labels:

- "Chinese" when introducing herself in multicultural social gatherings,
- "American" in the context of comparing American and Chinese social media, and
- "Asian-American/Chinese-American" during discussions about anti-Asian racism and xenophobia in the U.S.

The transposing of references and personal pronouns not only serves to orient the hearer in terms of perspective (Hsiao, 2011), but also is an effective tool for Xiaofei to position herself differently in terms of her cultural identity and allegiance depending upon her interlocutor. The same can be said about her choice of language as well. For work purposes, Xiaofei speaks primarily English at work, mixes English and Mandarin Chinese when communicating

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with colleagues and students who understand Mandarin Chinese, reads and writes (reports, grant proposals, publications) in English, and gives lectures and conference presentations in English and some invited speeches in China in Chinese. At home, while Xiaofei and Weifeng spoke to each other almost exclusively in Chinese when they were dating and just got married, with the arrival of children and with increased responsibilities at work, Xiaofei now uses both Mandarin Chinese and English at home with her husband, uses much more English than Chinese when talking with her sons at home, and uses English exclusively with their domestic helper. In her leisure life, she watches international (particularly Korean) movies with English or Chinese subtitles, video-chats with her parents (who live in Wenzhou, a city in southern China) at least once a week speaking Wenzhou dialect, follows U.S. news in English, follows news from China in Chinese via the internet, and connects with friends in English on Facebook and in Chinese on WeChat. She constantly translates for her children things Chinese into English and things American into Mandarin Chinese, and for her parents things American into Wenzhou dialect Chinese. Occasionally Xiaofei forgets how to handwrite Chinese characters. She tries hard to keep up with drastically increasing new expressions in Chinese (Liu and Tao, 2012) through WeChat. She finds it much easier to talk about work in English. She has long given up hope of teaching her children Wenzhou dialect, even though she has kept in touch with a couple of friends from the same hometown. The Mandarin Chinese that she speaks is almost always laced with English expressions – *translanguaging* has long become the norm.

In addition to how the speakers wish to position themselves, language preference is clearly also contingent upon how the speakers are positioned by society. Xiaofei taught Felix and his younger brother Chinese and sent them to weekend Chinese language schools when the children were young. But her efforts were met with considerable resistance from her children, who considered learning Chinese a burden. Like many other Chinese language schools, their school is community-based, largely run by parent volunteers. There is no public funding for schools like this and there is no articulation between the curriculum of the language school and the regular K-12 system. While Xiaofei tries to speak as much Chinese to her children as possible at home, in public spaces she wants her children to speak English only. She is acutely aware that, no matter how educated or how accomplished, ethnic Chinese were vulnerable to verbal assaults or even physical attacks during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, even though she herself has not felt "discriminated against explicitly." While she has always taught her children to be proud of their cultural heritage, at this point she prefers that her children hide their Chinese background. She has recently started to learn about Chinese-American history and the history of racism in the U.S., of which she admits that she is very

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"ignorant." She is very pleased that her son Felix is taking courses on Asian-American history in college and is very eager to learn from Felix.

Although Xiaofei has no plans at all to return to China, every trip she makes to China, whether it is a professional or a personal trip, she calls it 回国*hui guo* ("return to [home] country"). When she talks about returning to the U.S. after the trip, she says 回美国 *hui meiguo* ("return to America"). Hence, to her, it is "return" in both directions. When she refers to things Chinese, she uses 那儿 *na-er* ("there") or 国内 *guonei* ("domestic"); to things American, she uses 这儿 *zhe-r* ("here") or 在美国 *zai meiguo* ("in America"). Visiting parents in Wenzhou is 回家看父母 *huijia kan fumu* ("returning home to visit parents"); returning to New York is 回家 *huijia* ("returning home"). When asked where home is, she says, "My family is in New York. My parents live in China. We video-chat every weekend." Hence Chinese-American families like Felix's have made America their home in a way that straddles two countries and two languages.

### *7.3.3 The Freedom and Burden to Choose*

Xiaofei and her husband have made significant strides in the thirty years they have been in the U.S., navigating between the world of their birth and the world of their choice. In Xiaofei's own words, *We made our dream come true. I don't know if this is the "American dream," but it is our dream. We have learned so much and we have gained much "wealth" in every sense of the word.* While many first-generation immigrants might say that all the efforts and hardships are worthwhile because all their immigration experiences have turned into good lives for their children, Xiaofei and her husband do not seem to share that view. They did not come to the U.S. for their children. In their case, getting married and having children in the U.S. was not in fact part of their original plan; it just happened. And since it happened, are they happy with the way their children are?

Xiaofei said:

*Felix has always been rebellious. Once he got into a bad quarrel with me, in front of our guests. Some of our guests changed their plans and needed to stay with us overnight. So I arranged for the guests to sleep in Felix's room and moved Felix's stuff to the living room, thinking that he could sleep on the couch. He came home from a party and got very mad. He yelled, why did you move my things, why didn't you tell me, why you always do that . . . When we were young, my parents moved our things all the time. They never asked us for permission to do anything. They never discussed with us any plans or changes of plans. We never questioned. We never had a problem. We always simply obeyed. But here, Felix, he demands "privacy" and "respect" and yadi yadi yadi. Another time I opened his postal mail by mistake. He got very angry. Whenever he got angry, I got angry, and we would argue. I would yell at him in Chinese and he would*

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*shout back in English. I told him, son, you listen carefully, since you shout in English, I forgive you; if you were shouting at me in Chinese, you wouldn't be my son! In China, no child is allowed to shout at his parents. Oh yes, those couple of years were difficult.*

*About his future? My hopes for him? I don't know. If you asked me that question ten years ago, I could tell you very clearly that I want my son to grow up, speak both English and Chinese nicely, smart and kind, attend the very best college and then maybe graduate school, get a respectable job, marry a nice girl, and have beautiful children . . . But now I don't know. I just don't . . . My cousins' children back in China are doing better than Felix! They go to the very top schools, get great jobs, and they respect and care for their parents! Their Chinese is perfect, of course, and their English isn't bad either – good enough to work for international companies in China . . . You see, soon Felix will be twenty-one, and he still doesn't know what he wants to do with his life. He has already changed his mind about his college major three times. He never had any great aspirations or goals in life. Just live and be free. We are paying very expensive tuition for his education, and I don't know why we are doing this. My husband says, "Let's do it the American way – be patient and give him time to figure out what he wants." American culture spoils children. They always say "independence," "independence," "children need to be independent." That's all well said, but what is the basis of your independence? How can you be independent when you don't know what you want to do in life, what you can do to help your family, what you can do to contribute to society, when you don't even have plans to support yourself? Once Felix brought home some college friends. A couple of them are nonbinary, still trying to figure out who they are; several of them have "undeclared" majors . . . Good heavens! These days young people don't even know who they are or what they want to be. Well, they have to figure out these things by themselves. We have done our best, providing them with resources and setting them good examples. The rest is up to them.*

Felix is dating Christine. They met at the events organized by the Asian Students Association in college. Christine just graduated and is looking for employment in New York City while preparing for law school. She was born to a U.S.-born mother and a Hong Kong–born father in the San Francisco area. Her extended family includes persons of many races: Asian, Caucasian, Black, Hispanic. Her grandparents came to the U.S. from Shanghai via Hong Kong in the 1940s soon after World War II, when Hong Kong was a British colony (Hong Kong was returned to China in 1997). Growing up listening to her grandparents and parents speak Cantonese, Christine has some receptive knowledge of Cantonese but can barely speak it herself. Her Chinese literacy is almost nonexistent (nothing much beyond the capacity to write the characters of her Chinese name, which she keeps as her middle name).

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Like Felix, Christine also tried to create a transnational relationship with her region or country of ancestral origin and to explore how her knowledge of Hong Kong and China may be relevant to her identities (Louie, 2002). She has traveled with her family to Shanghai and Hong Kong a few times and has found that many Chinese traditions that her grandparents (and the Chinatown where she grew up) keep are not practiced in mainland China, not to mention the fact that it is Mandarin, not Cantonese, that is used as the standard dialect in most parts of China. Even Hong Kong is very different from her grandparents' description and memory, in terms of demographics and the varieties of Chinese (dialects) being used today. The "Chinese moral superiorities" that her grandparents take pride in, such as dignity, politeness, modesty, industriousness, deference, are not always easy to identify in the places she visited and the people she met. When in China, Christine is considered an outsider, a "banana" (someone with yellow skin but white inside). She wishes that she had the means and opportunity to learn *some form of Chinese – if not Mandarin, Cantonese would be nice too*. On the other hand, even though American English is the only language Christine is fully competent in and San Francisco is the only place she considers "home," in the U.S. she often receives "compliments" such as "Wow, your English is so good!" "You sound like a native speaker!" As is the case with Felix, when she explains that she is from San Francisco, people will often ask, "But where are you REALLY from?" During COVID-19, she was verbally assaulted by a stranger while taking the subway and was told to "get out and go back to China!" Newer immigrants from China view Christine as an American; non-Chinese Americans see her as Chinese; she insists that she is "American" (because, in her words, *I speak English and nothing else*), or "Hong Kong-American" (but not "Chinese-American") if pressed for a more specific identification. Unlike Felix and his family, due to language and cultural barriers, Christine does not, and is not able to, move easily between the place of her family's resettlement and the place of their origin, either physically or figuratively. Like Felix's family, Christine and her family (including her grandparents) have no desire or plan to "return" to the place of her family's origin, in spite of racism and xenophobia in the U.S. To Christine, Shanghai, Hong Kong, and China belong to the memory and the imagination of her grandparents.

Both Felix and Christine are blessed with immense life possibilities that their families both yearned and fretted over . They are relieved of the burden of survival through their parents' hard work and their own educational success. What are they going to make of the opportunities that have been so arduously sought and obtained? Through introspection and determination, Christine has been trying hard to find and follow her own meaning for success. Reflecting on her developmental path, she said, *I have put so much of my self-worth into achieving the best start in life, and now that I'm here, I'm asking myself, am*

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*I going into law because I want to be a lawyer? Or because I was taught that success means only doctors, lawyers, engineers?*

### *7.3.4 Fashion and Fusion*

Recently, inspired by her Asian friends, Christine has been watching a Chinese period drama called *Palace* (宫锁心玉 *gong suo xin yu*) on YouTube, entranced by the characters' ancient clothing. The costumes were colorful and regal, a cross collar, no buttons, and typically three layers of inner garments and an overcoat embroidered with lotus flowers, cranes, dragons, swirling clouds, and delicate flowers, topped with intricate headpieces. She didn't know what these beautiful clothes were called. Only that they were from some distant past. *When I saw it, I really liked it. They looked fairy-like, dreamy. I was completely drawn by the beauty of these clothes, and then eventually came to understand the culture of Hanfu, and I liked it more and more. I simply like this clothing. It's beautiful. The embroidery, wide sleeves, and loose robes make you look elegant, no matter what your body shape . . . It suits me. And it connects me with my cultural heritage. So why not?*

Hanfu 汉服 (*han fu*), meaning Han Chinese dress, is based on the ancient fashion traditions of the largest of all fifty-six ethnic groups in China – the Han (constituting over 90 percent of the entire Chinese population). The Hanfu craze first burst into public sight about a few years before the COVID-19 pandemic, as an alternative aesthetic standard to the Western-centric tastes. Many regarded the trend as a reflection of China's newfound cultural confidence and renewed commitment to Chinese cultural heritage, made popular in large measure by digital media hype among China's millennials and generation Z. The trend has transcended the local and has gone global. China's Twitter-like platform Sina Weibo reports that #hanfu had garnered over 4.89 billion views as of December 2021. American *Vogue*'s March 2021 issue featured China's Hanfu movement as well (Wang, 2021).

In an ever-faster-trending digital era, for Christine and her Asian-American generation Z friends in the U.S., following this fashion trend and wearing Hanfu has become a way to retrieve and reclaim their Asian-American cultural identity and to resist and combat anti-Asian hate. As an unexpected consequence, following this fashion trend has had some implications for Chinese language learning. Christine is now more interested in learning Mandarin than ever before, for very pragmatic reasons. In order to buy Hanfu at affordable prices, and following the advice of her Asian friends, she shopped on Taobao, a popular online shopping website based in China with everything you need at prices much lower than in the U.S. The challenge is that the website is all in Chinese. For those who cannot read Chinese, ordering from Taobao can be a major headache. In order to overcome this linguistic obstacle, Christine has

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tried some methods to translate a single page or the whole website into English, using Google Chrome Browser and Google Translate, which only give her a rough idea. Some of the text reads awkwardly or seems poorly translated. And when there is a problem with the purchase order, she must seek help from her Mandarin-speaking friends. That has motivated Christine (and Felix, by association) to learn Mandarin Chinese fast and furiously, from a combination of sources, including friends, Rosetta Stone Mandarin courses, and Chinese language movies and television reality shows online. To match the clothing, Christine also got herself a Chinese script tattoo on her arm. It says 梦 *meng* ("dream").

## 7.4 Chinese for Change

Felix was living in Beijing (in the study-abroad program with an internship opportunity) when the coronavirus outbreak began. His cousin's wife, a nurse, was working on the front lines at ground zero of the pandemic near Wuhan. They stayed in contact, as she worked long shifts without enough protective gear, separated from her newborn son and family. His other relatives were under strict lockdown for months, facing pandemic-induced fear and anxiety. Felix's study-abroad program was interrupted. He returned to the U.S. early. Then all his college classes went online and students were asked to leave campus and return home. And then, toward the end of the spring 2020 semester, something happened.

On the evening of May 25, 2020, White Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin killed George Floyd, a Black man, by kneeling on his neck for nine minutes.

### *7.4.1 Letters for Black Lives*

The murder of George Floyd, recorded by bystanders, touched off one of the largest protest movements in U.S. history and a nationwide reckoning on race. This reckoning also highlighted the differences between different generations of Chinese-Americans. The first generation tends to remain politically peripheral; the second generation wants to be engaged. For the first generation, their past experiences in China are having a lingering effect, as Xiaofei puts it:
*It's not that we do not agree that Blacks are not treated fairly in this country. We just want to stay out of politics. There was too much bad politics and political movements back in China. That's why many people left. Being in America should free us from being worried about taking some kind of correct political position. We don't want to get involved in another Cultural Revolution*.

Another reason for the lack of political activism is cultural. Xiaofei's husband Weifeng explains:

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*We Chinese are reticent by nature. We are not used to being vocal. We emphasize harmony, not conflict. When we see conflict, we instinctively try to stay out of it. We mind our own business. I'm not saying this is good, but this is the fact. A key feature of Chinese culture is face, saving face and losing face. It is about smoothing things over, avoiding confrontation and not forcing the issue.*

Complex and sometimes challenging interracial relationships in the U.S. also play a part, as Weifeng continues:

*America is not perfect. But it is more perfect than any other place that I know. Otherwise, there would not have been any chance for success for immigrants like me. Blacks are different; they are not immigrants like us. They have a different history. This is a very complicated matter. The police officer in this case is certainly inexcusable, he certainly committed murder, no question in my mind. But that man also had some bad records. You see, many instances of robberies, thefts, and burglaries in areas predominantly inhabited by Chinese-Americans are committed by persons of dark skin. So how can we expect Chinese-Americans to give strong support for BLM* [Black Lives Matter] *when they feel bullied and harassed by Blacks?*

The younger generation, however, disagrees. Felix:

*We need to educate ourselves and our parents about African-American history and also to learn and acknowledge the history and suffering of Asian-Americans. Our parents don't know much about Asian-American history and they don't understand systemic racism . . . If you want justice, you cannot stay out of this, you have to be engaged.*

Felix is not alone. Second-generation Asian-Americans have taken it upon themselves to initiate discussions with their families about social justice in the form of an open letter, titled "Letters for Black Lives," which first appeared in 2016. In the summer of 2020, a more forceful version of the letter became available online (at https://lettersforblacklives.com).

The letter was written by young Asian-Americans to their parents and other family members to address systemic racism against African-Americans and to let the family members know how Asian-Americans have benefited from centuries of organizing and relentless efforts made by African-Americans and why it is important to build allyship by supporting Black Lives Matter to end injustice against all people of color. The stated goal of the letter is "to listen, support, and amplify the message of Black Lives Matter within our communities." The letter was originally written in English and was subsequently translated, through crowdsourcing, into dozens of immigrant languages, including Chinese.

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Here is the English version:

Mom, Dad, Uncle, Auntie, Grandfather, Grandmother, Family:

We need to talk.

You may not have many Black friends, colleagues, or acquaintances, but I do. Black people are a fundamental part of my life: they are my friends, my neighbors, my family. I am scared for them.

Recently, in Minnesota, a White police officer killed a Black man named George Floyd by kneeling on his neck for almost 9 minutes – ignoring his repeated cries that he was unable to breathe. Two more police officers helped pin Floyd down, while a fourth, Asian officer stood guard and didn't intervene. Floyd is not alone: Already this year, police officers killed Dreasjon Reed in Indiana and Tony McDade in Florida in May, and Breonna Taylor in Kentucky in March. An ex-detective killed Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia in February.

Overwhelmingly, the police haven't faced consequences for murdering Black people, even when there's been extensive media coverage. Imagine how many more incidents go unrecorded or unseen.

This is a terrifying reality that the Black people I care about live with every day.

You might be thinking: We are also a minority. We've managed to come to America with nothing and built good lives for ourselves despite discrimination, so why can't they?

I want to share with you how I see things. I am telling you this out of love, because I want all of us, including myself, to do better.

For the most part, when we walk down the street, people do not view us as a threat. We do not leave our homes, wondering whether or not we will return that day. We don't fear that we may die if we're pulled over by the police.

This is not the case for our Black friends.

The vast majority of Black Americans are descendants of people who were sold into slavery and brought here against their will. For centuries, their communities, families, and bodies were abused as property for profit. Even after slavery, the government has not allowed them to build their lives – it has legally denied them the right to vote, get an education, or own homes and businesses. These inequalities are enforced by police and prisons – which can be directly traced back to White slave patrols and plantations. Black people are under a constant threat of violence that continues today. Their oppression has not ended; it has only changed form.

Black people have not only persisted but also persevered against all odds. They've been beaten by police, jailed, and killed while fighting for many of the rights that we all enjoy today. Even in an unfair system that pits us against each other, Black organizers helped to end unfair immigration laws and racial segregation for us all.

Though there has been progress, this unfair system is still winning. Throughout these hundreds of years, our government is still killing Black people and getting away with it.

I understand that you're worried and scared about the looting and property destruction that you are seeing. But imagine how hurt you would be to see other people express more care for replaceable material objects than for the lives of your loved ones. How hurt you must be to protest like this in the middle of a pandemic. Imagine the exhaustion of fighting against the same state violence that your ancestors fought against.

This is why I support the Black Lives Matter movement.

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Part of that support means speaking up when I see people in my community – even my own family – say or do things that diminish the humanity of Black people. Our silence has a cost and we need to talk about it.

I am eternally grateful for the struggles you have endured in a country that has not always been kind to you. We have been blamed for bringing poverty, disease, terrorism, and crime. You've suffered through a prejudiced America so that I could have a better life.

But these struggles also make it clearer than ever that we are all in this together, and we cannot feel safe until our Black friends, loved ones, and neighbors are safe. The world that we seek is a place where we can all live without fear. This is the future that I want – and I hope you want it, too.

With love and hope,

Your children

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by the author.

https://lettersforblacklives.com/2020/home

https://lettersforblacklives.com/mom-dad-uncle-auntie-grandfather-grandmother-family-c7525176ed14 (retrieved November 11, 2022)

Felix and Christine shared with their respective families this online open letter to initiate some difficult dialogs about the disagreements between the first generation of Chinese immigrants and their children. To ensure that the point of the letter did not get lost, they shared not only the 2020 English version but also its Chinese translation, after they used Google Translate to translate the Chinese version back to English to make sure that the meaning is correct. In so doing, Chinese, their heritage language, was used for truly transformative purposes, in terms of the communicative goals, the modalities, and the speech roles.

When the children were young, it was usually the parents who initiated conversations in Chinese in the private space of home with their children in order to maintain Chinese language and culture, while the children often resisted using Chinese and replied to their parents in English. Now, the children have grown to be adults and it is the adult children who initiate discussions in Chinese, the language their parents tried hard to teach and they themselves tried hard to resist when they were young. Rather than maintenance and preservation, the adult children set their goal to change the views and practices of the members of their families and communities. Switching speech roles with their parents, they are now the initiators, rather than the recipients, of communication in the Chinese language. Furthermore, they have taken the conversation between different generations from private space to the public space. In other words, the younger generation has undergone language-use behavioral change (Markee, 2008) by changing their speech roles in interaction (Young and Miller, 2004) and is using their heritage language to initiate changes in the very household and community that they grew up in, thereby changing the purpose and significance of the heritage language.

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### *7.4.2 Anti-Asian Hate*

Because COVID-19 was first reported in China, because Donald Trump repeatedly and directly blamed China for spreading COVID-19, and because of a long history of racism against Asians and Asian-Americans, violence and racism targeting Chinese-Americans was exacerbated during the pandemic.

Felix:

*When the pandemic reached the U.S., my mom called me to say she desperately wanted to wear a mask outside. One of our family friends had died of COVID in Wuhan early in the pandemic, and my mom was certain the virus was far deadlier than most believed at the time. But she feared being discriminated against as "the Chinese person who has COVID-19." This was when Asian-Americans were being spat on, yelled at in the street, verbally attacked in restaurants for "bringing the virus to America," and physically assaulted in the streets. For the very first time, my parents had fears living in the U.S. They said, no, this is not the America we came to over thirty years ago! They basically didn't go anywhere and just stayed home, working from home and ordering everything they needed online. And, for the first time, my mom told us not to speak Chinese in public, especially not on the subway, and to avoid going out altogether. She was afraid that we might be physically assaulted. My mom is usually very brave. She will stand up in any gathering, Chinese or non-Chinese, to say her piece. But this time it's different.*

Felix did not follow his mother's advice. He and Christine participated in several Stop Asian Hate rallies and brought with them board signs written in both English and Chinese. Felix's parents provided the Chinese translation of the signs Felix and Christine prepared in English, which reads 停止亚裔仇恨 *tingzhi yayi chouhen* (Stop Asian Hate).

In face of mobile cultural capital and fluid fidelities, Felix and Christine are seeking deep bonds to a past (either real or imagined), as they search and shape their identities. In China, they met many who look like them and who might have been like them but were not able to identify with them. Will Felix and Christine be able to find a path toward global citizenry, straddling two worlds, while being rooted in their linguistic and cultural heritage? As they cope with the multiple linguistic codes in the contexts of family, peer groups, and school institutions across the life span, they are engaged in a double process of socialization into given speech communities and of acquisition of literacy as a means of asserting personal meanings that have the potential to transform the speech community. In other words, they have used the Chinese heritage language both to inherit heritage practices and to transform the very practices that motivated CHL learning in the first place. As they are socialized into CHL, they too contribute to the socialization process of the very people who socialize them to use the CHL and give proof that heritage language learning has the potential to transform all parties involved in the socialization process.

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