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Identity Development of Heritage Language Learners in the Study Abroad Context: A Literature Review from the Chinese Heritage Language Perspective

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Abstract

Study abroad (SA) programs often underrepresent minority students, including heritage language learners, and overlook their unique needs. This study provides a critical literature review on the identity development of Chinese heritage language learners (CHLLs) in the SA context, a significant yet underexplored topic compared with more commonly studied heritage languages, such as Spanish and French in the field. While identity plays a crucial role in SA experiences, studies on CHLLs remain limited and are often constrained by small sample sizes, limited program types, and overgeneralized CHLL group categorizations. Given the distinct challenges of CHLLs, including linguistic diversity and sociopolitical factors, this review underscores the need for more comprehensive and controlled research. A deeper understanding of CHLLs' experiences will offer insights into the complexity of identity negotiation in heritage language learning and contribute to more inclusive SA program development.

Abstract in Mandarin Chinese

出国留学（SA）项目往往低估了少数群体学生的参与，包括语言传承学习者，并忽视了他们的独特需求。本研究提供了一项关于中国语言传承学习者（CHLLs）在留学背

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景下身份发展的关键文献综述，这一话题在该领域中相较于西班牙语和法语等较为常见的语言传承研究，仍然是一个重要但被忽视的领域。尽管身份在留学体验中扮演着至关重要的角色，针对 CHLLs 的研究仍然有限，且通常受限于样本量小、项目类型单一和对 CHLL 群体类别的过度概括。鉴于 CHLLs 面临的独特挑战，包括语言多样性和社会政治因素，本综述强调了进行更为全面和受控研究的必要性。深入理解 CHLLs 的经验将为语言传承学习中的身份谈判复杂性提供见解，并有助于推动更具包容性的留学项目发展。

Keywords

Chinese heritage language learners; heritage language education; identity; study abroad

1. Introduction

Under the impact of globalization and the internationalization of higher education, studying abroad began gaining significant momentum in the late 20th century. Every year, hundreds of thousands of students worldwide leave their homes to participate in a temporary educational sojourn in a foreign country. In the United States, the number of college and university students studying abroad has increased approximately fourfold since the 1990s (Institute of International Education, 2024).

The proliferation of study abroad programs has been attracting increasing research attention across disciplines. In the field of applied linguistics, particularly in second language acquisition, studying abroad is typically conceptualized as language immersion in a native speech community, integrated with formal classroom learning, for “foreign” language learners—often Anglo-American, middle-class students—who have no personal or familial connection to the target language or culture (Kinginger, 2013). However, this conceptualization overlooks an important fact: for some learners, the target language may not only be spoken in a foreign destination but also used in their own homes (Diao, 2017).

According to the Institute of International Education, the percentage of non-White U.S. students studying abroad increased from 15.7% in 2000/2001 to 33.6% in 2022/2023. Among them, Hispanic and Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander heritage students constitute a significant portion, comprising 36.3% and 28.6% respectively (IIE, 2024). With the increasing ethnic and racial

diversity of U.S. students studying abroad in recent years, Study Abroad (SA) research has begun to focus on Heritage Language Learners (HLLs)—students who have an ethnolinguistic affiliation with the target language or culture and exhibit varying proficiency in oral or literacy skills (Shively, 2018).

Beginning with comparisons of linguistic development between foreign language learners (FLLs) and heritage language learners (HLLs), a few SA studies on HLLs are now shifting their focus to learners' socialization and identity, which play significant roles in their SA experiences. In particular, the concept of identity, employed in many fields as an "anchoring" tool for analyzing related social phenomena, has been closely connected to HLLs' SA experiences, given their ethnolinguistic affiliation. However, research on HLLs' identity in the SA context remains underexplored and is mainly limited to a few commonly taught foreign languages in North America, such as Spanish and French. Little research has examined this issue in less commonly taught foreign languages such as Chinese, despite the fact that Chinese is the most spoken language in the world and that the Chinese community in North America is the largest overseas Chinese community outside Asia. Since both the population of Chinese heritage language learners (CHLLs) in North America and the number of CHLLs studying abroad in China are rapidly increasing (IIE, 2024), it is essential to develop a deeper understanding of their experiences to design SA programs in China that are inclusive of all students and maximize desired learning outcomes. Therefore, this article seeks to provide a preliminary literature review on CHLLs' identity development in the SA context, highlight the scope of current research on CHLLs, and offer directions for future SA practice and research.

Given the subject of this study, the following pages start with an overview of current SA research, followed by a brief introduction of existing SA research regarding HLLs in general and the topic of identity in particular so as to provide a context to locate CHLL research in the SA field. A critical review of current research about the identity issue of CHLLs in SA constitutes the core of this study, with a highlight of the trends and gaps in the literature and some implications and directions for future research.

2. Overview of Study Abroad Research

The activity of studying abroad, "broadly defined as an academic experience that allows students to complete part of their degree program through educational activities outside their country" (Sanz & Morales-Front,

2018, p. 1), can be traced back to the Grand Tour in the 17th century. This tour was a hallmark of aristocratic education for the British nobility, designed to broaden the horizons of young family members through exposure to European cultural legacies such as language, art, and geography (Gore, 2015).

Though it has a long history, studying abroad received little scholarly attention until the early 1990s (DeKeyser, 1991; Freed, 1995; Lafford, 1995). Since then, according to Sanz and Morales-Front (2018), research on Study Abroad (SA) has yielded only about one hundred publications on the various effects of studying abroad. Among these, one-fourth are journal articles; another fourth book chapters in edited volumes dedicated to the topic, such as Freed (1995) and DuFon and Churchill (2006); and the remainder monographs published in recent years, such as Doerr (2019), Isabelli-García and Isabelli (2019), Kinginger (2009, 2010), and Savicki et al. (2015).

It has long been assumed that studying abroad, as a combination of formal classroom learning and immersion in the native speech community, invariably creates the best environment for second language acquisition (Freed, 1995). Influenced by this widely held assumption, many teachers, students, administrators, and parents believe that students studying abroad will make the most progress and ultimately achieve mastery of the language they are learning. However, this belief has been questioned since the 1990s, when Freed called for "carefully controlled" and "in-depth" research to investigate the actual linguistic impact of studying abroad rather than merely describing its overall benefits, as previous publications had done (Freed, 1995, p. 5).

Following Freed's (1995) seminal volume, a number of researchers began conducting empirical studies on the linguistic impact of study abroad (SA) by contrasting the SA context with the traditional foreign language classroom, i.e., the at-home (AH) context (e.g., Guntermann, 1995; Lafford, 1995). These studies examine various aspects of language skills, including oral fluency, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, dialect features, pragmatics, listening, and writing. However, they often overlook both individual differences and contextual variations within SA programs that interact to shape learners' linguistic development (Sanz & Morales-Front, 2018).

Since the early 21st century, SA research has shifted its focus to both learners' individual characteristics and program variables that account for differences in SA learning outcomes. Increasingly, researchers are investigating a wide array of variables related to learner characteristics (e.g., motivation,

gender, age, national identity, personality traits) and contextual factors (e.g., program length, course types, extracurricular activities, living arrangements, tasks, and assessments) to better understand learners' linguistic and personal development in the SA context (e.g., DuFon & Churchill, 2006; Grey et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the excessive emphasis of research on comparisons of language learning outcomes between SA and AH groups has been questioned in recent years. Although it includes control groups (i.e., the AH group), the SA vs. AH comparisons lack experimental randomization since the SA group are not randomly selected but self-selected to participate in a SA program (Marijuan & Sanz, 2018). Therefore, some SA scholars have attempted to conduct other types of learning outcome comparisons, such as within-subject or longitudinal studies demonstrating learners' linguistic development before and after studying abroad, comparison between SA programs of different lengths, of different levels of proficiency, of different curriculum approaches (i.e., language-based vs. content-based), and of different student populations (e.g., second language learners vs. heritage language learners) (Marijuan & Sanz, 2018; Sanz & Morales-Front, 2018). These attempts take into account individual characteristics and program variables, and "have the potential to help disentangle the role those internal variables and external variables play in language and intercultural development" (Marijuan & Sanz, 2018, p. 189).

With the shift of research focus, a variety of research methodologies and theories have been applied in the SA field. Sanz and Morales-Front (2018) summarize that there is no "SA theory" and that the field of SA is a research base that relies on a variety of borrowed theories and methodologies. As an offshoot of Applied Linguistics in general and Second Language Acquisition in particular, the SA field was at first dominated by cognitive theory that attempts to explain learner's differential results of immersion by the role of learner's cognition, and it now flourishes by sociocultural theory that emphasizes the roles of learner's social interaction and identity in their SA experiences, experiential learning educational frameworks that encourages reflections on experience to develop new knowledge and way of thinking, as well as postcolonial and critical discourse perspectives that highlight the negative impact of "commoditization" and "exoticization" of SA (Marijuan & Sanz, 2018).

Methodologically, quantitative studies have analyzed a wide range of internal (i.e., individual differences) and external variables (i.e., program characteristics) as predictors of language improvement abroad. For instance, Baker-Smemoe et al. (2014) quantitatively examine which of the following

variables predict language gains: gender, age, personality, social networks, intercultural sensitivity, and amount of second language use. Qualitative studies have analyzed these same types of variables as constructions, such as the social construction and interpretation of identity and gender associated with themes found in the data (e.g., Diao, 2017; Du, 2015; Jing-Schmidt et al., 2016). Other studies employ mixed methods that use both quantitative and qualitative data to elucidate each other. (e.g., Du, 2018; DeKeyser, 2010; Taguchi et al., 2016).

With advances in technology in contemporary societies, SA research tends to go beyond the approach of test-based data exclusively used in its early stages and moves to employ multiple techniques within the same study. More novel techniques from the fields of psychology and neuroscience, such as eye-tracking, response time, and event-related potentials, are adopted to quantitatively investigate the cognitive processes of language learning and use (for a more detailed review of the technology being used in the SA fields, see Marijuan & Sanz, 2017). Other new technological resources such as blogs, online surveys, e-journals, and social media are also employed, especially in non-cognitively oriented studies that qualitatively address questions related to learners' motivation, attitude, identity, and intercultural competence. With the help of new technologies, SA research methodology has greatly improved some important limitations that have long been criticized by SA scholars, such as lack of randomization, small samples, generalizability of findings, and coarse tasks implemented failing to detect subtle changes in language and personal development (Kinginger, 2009; Sanz & Morales-Front, 2018).

Overall, as language development is a complex phenomenon encompassing various linguistic aspects (e.g., pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, pragmatics) and psychosocial variables (e.g., motivation, attitudes, aptitude, identity), the theoretical approaches and research methodologies to investigate SA are hence complex and varied, and more SA scholars have chosen a multidimensional approach to SA. However, the very complexity of SA leads to the fact that the findings generated by SA research are essentially mixed, even contradictory. These inconclusive findings, along with the rapid development of novel technologies, socioeconomic challenges of globalization and internationalization of higher education, and an explosion of new varied SA program designs and diversity of SA participant population, leave the SA field many questions to be explored and answered.

3. Identity and Heritage Language Learners

As mentioned above, since the beginning of the 21st century, Study Abroad (SA) research has focused on the sociocultural context, which impacts and shapes language learning. This social turn in SA theory and research puts an emphasis on learners' individual differences, such as identity and social interaction in their SA experiences. In particular, the study of identity has drawn much attention from scholars in second language learning since learning a new language involves new ways of being, and it provides a fruitful arena to study identity that can be instantiated in discourse (Leeman, 2015). Unlike traditional essentialist views that perceived identity as a static entity that individuals have, social constructivists conceive of identity as a multidimensional, multifaceted dynamic construct that is no longer fixed but instead is shifting and shaped by the sociohistorical contexts in which political ideologies and power relations come into play (Leeman, 2015). From a poststructuralist perspective, identity is also regarded as a "negotiation of difference" and "a contested site of struggle involving challenges to one's habitus" (Kinginger, 2013, p. 341). Situated in such a poststructuralist account of identity, Block (2007, p. 27) defined identity as follows:

> [identities]as socially constructed, self-conscious, ongoing narratives that individuals perform, interpret and project in dress, bodily movements, actions, and language…identities are about negotiating new subject positions at the crossroads of past, present, and future. Individuals are shaped by their socio-histories, but they also shape their socio-histories as life goes on. The entire process is conflictive as opposed to harmonious, and individuals often feel ambivalent.

For Block (2007), the negotiation of identity often takes place in contexts such as the SA setting, where unequal power relations and unfamiliar sociocultural practices exist, thus challenging and destabilizing individuals' identities. In the SA immersion environment, the learner's identity is mediated to strike a new moral and emotional balance, a "third place" in which the past and the present "encounter and transform each other" in the "presence of fissures, gaps, and contradictions" (Block, 2007, p. 864). This negotiation of identity in the SA setting can generate negative feelings such as discomfort, anxiety, and ambivalence, but it can also yield positive outcomes such as empathy, intercultural awareness, and global civic engagement (Kinginger, 2013), which, in turn, spark discussions on the design and implementations of SA programs.

In documenting the rise of identity as a construct in second language acquisition, Block (2007) also interpreted identity in terms of traditional demographic categories such as nationality, gender, and social class. Based on Block's categorization, Kinginger (2013) offered a more detailed list of identity categories best represented in the SA literature: national identity, foreigner identity, gender, linguistic identity, age, and ethnic identity. Among them, linguistic identity has particularly attracted augmented interest from SA researchers and practitioners in recent years due to the rapid growth of heritage language (HL) education in North America since the 1990s. According to Block (2007) and Kinginger (2013), linguistic identity can involve several dimensions, which include expertise in language use, affiliation with users of the language, and language inheritance. The latter dimension, language inheritance, focuses explicitly on research regarding the experiences of heritage language learners (HLLs) studying abroad.

Leeman (2015) noted that the recent rise of heritage language education in the U.S. could be attributed to several main factors: one is the significantly increased immigration that has led to a large percentage of residents speaking languages other than English at home, accompanied by trends in the U.S. toward recognizing linguistic rights and valuing multilingualism; the other is the increased federal need and support for developing advanced language proficiency in critical languages to meet U.S. national interests, understood as security and international competitiveness (e.g., since the first Gulf War in 1991). Although non-English languages such as Spanish, Chinese, and German have been used for centuries as the medium of instruction in schools run by religious institutions and local communities in U.S. history (Fishman, 2001; Wang, 2008), it was not until the 1990s that heritage language education became a distinct subfield of applied linguistics and language pedagogy (Valdés, 2005). Meanwhile, the emergence of the new label and category "heritage language learner" has gone hand in hand with the establishment of heritage language education as a field of study (Leeman, 2015).

For the term "heritage language learner," there are various definitions and interpretations in research, primarily depending on whether the focus is on the language itself, individuals' linguistic proficiency, their social status, or even a combination of these factors (Leeman, 2015). For instance, in Canada, heritage languages refer to "languages other than the official languages (English and French) or Indigenous languages" (Duff & Li, 2009, p. 4), while the construct of heritage language learners gives greater weight to "the sociopolitical status of a

given language or to the collective rights and needs of the speakers of that language as a group" (Leeman, 2015, p. 103). On the other hand, the definition constructed by researchers focusing more on educational policy and curriculum design generally pays more attention to linguistic proficiency and cultural affiliations (Leeman, 2015). Therefore, when examining the topic of "heritage language learners" (as well as "heritage language learners of a particular language"), it is unavoidable and fundamental to clarify its definition and context. Meanwhile, it is noteworthy that the term "heritage language learner" is not simply an objective category but rather a social construct of identity, primarily conceptualized by researchers, educators, and school administrators rather than by heritage language learners themselves (Doerr & Lee, 2013).

When discussing the category of heritage language learners in the context of study abroad, SA researchers generally tend to emphasize linguistic proficiency and cultural connections to define them. Kinginger (2013), for example, described a heritage language learner as a student "with some degree of communicative ability in the language and a familiar or cultural affiliation to the language" (p. 349). For this study, heritage language learners in the SA setting are conceptualized as SA participants who have an ethnolinguistic affiliation to the target language or culture, with a range of proficiency in oral or literacy skills (He, 2016; Diao, 2017).

SA research on heritage language learners mainly focuses on two aspects: (1) comparisons of linguistic development and learning outcomes between non-heritage language learners and heritage language learners, who are regarded as having linguistic and cultural advantages in their SA experiences (e.g., Draper & Hicks, 2000; Davidson & Lekic, 2012; Wilson-Oyelaran, 2006); and (2) qualitative studies on the psychosocial factors relevant to heritage language learners, such as motivation and identity (e.g., Beausoleil, 2008; Miyahira & Petrucci, 2007; Mukesh Gandhi, 2010). Since heritage language learner is constructed as an identity, identity has become central to heritage language educational discourse. As Marijuan and Sanz (2017) observed, examining identity helps explain the extent to which heritage language learners benefit from the SA immersive experience—particularly in a heritage language-speaking country—in terms of both language development and personal growth.

Although identity is a fundamental theme in HLL discourse, it is only recently that researchers have begun to explore HLL's conception of themselves and how their identities are constructed, performed, and represented in the SA setting (e.g., Beausoleil, 2008; Moreno, 2009; Parra, 2016; Petrucci, 2007; Quan et

al., 2018; Shively, 2016). Furthermore, the current SA study on the issue of HLLs' identity is still underexplored, and it is limited to only a few commonly taught foreign languages in North America, such as Spanish, French, German, Russian, and Japanese. According to Leeman (2015), secondary and postsecondary heritage language courses in the U.S. first appeared in Spanish. As the most commonly spoken non-English language as well as the most commonly studied foreign language in the U.S., Spanish has dominantly become the primary target language of research in the SA field (e.g., Burgo, 2020; McLaughlin, 2001; Moreno, 2009; Parra, 2016; Quan et al., 2018; Shively, 2016; Shively, 2018). Little research has considered the identity of HLL in less commonly taught foreign languages such as Chinese, although Chinese is considered the most widely spoken language in the world, and the Chinese community in North America is the largest overseas Chinese community outside Asia.

Due to the influx of Chinese immigrants since the 1980s, Chinese has rapidly become the second most spoken non-English language in the U.S. over the past decade (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). With China's emergence as a global economic superpower in recent years, the number of Chinese language learners in American post-secondary institutions has expanded rapidly, making Chinese the second fastest-growing language in language learning (Wong & Xiao, 2010). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, China was the seventh most popular SA destination for American students (IIE, 2024).

Given this trend, studies on Chinese language teaching and learning—whether as a foreign or heritage language—can no longer be overlooked. According to McGinnis (2008) and Wang (2008), Chinese heritage language education in the U.S. dates back to the 1800s, when community-based schools provided Chinese as the medium of instruction for Chinese immigrants and their children. Since Chinese heritage language education has existed for centuries—and given the rapid increase in both the population of Chinese HLLs (CHLLs) in North America and the number of CHLLs studying abroad in China (IIE, 2024)—it is essential to understand CHLLs' experiences in SA contexts. Such an understanding will help address CHLLs' concerns and facilitate the design of SA programs in China that are inclusive of all students and maximize desired learning outcomes.

4. Literature Review on Identity of Chinese Heritage Language Learners in Study Abroad

4.1. Defining the Term of Chinese Heritage Language Learners

Before examining the current literature on identity issues among Chinese heritage language learners (CHLLs) in the Study Abroad (SA) context, it is crucial to discuss and clarify the term "Chinese heritage language learners". Since Chinese language programs in North American schools and universities generally offer Mandarin—the official and standard Chinese language in China—most current studies on CHLLs in both heritage language (HL) education and SA contexts adopt an all-inclusive approach. These studies often assume Chinese to be a singular language (i.e., Mandarin) and broadly define CHLLs as individuals who have had exposure to Chinese outside the formal educational system (typically in their home or community), with varying levels of proficiency in oral or literacy skills (e.g., He, 2006; Wu, 2008). This study employs this common definition of CHLL for discussion. However, this definition, as shown below, risks overgeneralizing a diverse population and overlooking its sociolinguistic complexity and heterogeneity.

4.2. SA Literature on Chinese HLLs

For this literature review, studies on Chinese heritage language learners (CHLLs) were identified using the keywords "study abroad" and "Chinese heritage" across the following online databases: ERIC, JSTOR, FRANCIS, Scopus, ProQuest Educational Journals, Linguistics & Language Behaviour Abstracts, and China Academic Journals (CAJ, CNKI). Additionally, the scholarly journal Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad, which focuses exclusively on study abroad research, was consulted via its online open access. Given the author's linguistic resources and geographical location, only publications written in English or Chinese within the North American context were considered. This search process identified eight potentially relevant studies (see Table 1 on the next page for a summary of existing SA literature on CHLLs).

Given the nature of this study and the limited number of relevant works available, a qualitative analysis was predominantly adopted to provide a comprehensive understanding of the domain and to offer in-depth insights for future research. Furthermore, as this study focuses on the identity of ethnic minorities—a social construct that shifts and varies across time and contexts—

a qualitative approach is particularly well-suited for examining its processes and dynamics (Maxwell, 2012). This method also facilitates the "inclusion of participants' differences in beliefs, values, intentions, and meanings, as well as social, cultural, and physical contextual factors that affect causal relationships" (Mertens, 2015, p. 238). The qualitative analysis was conducted by identifying similarities and comparing themes across the sample.

The search for SA literature on Chinese HLLs reveals that, in recent years, several studies have begun to specifically address identity issues among Chinese HLLs studying abroad in China, although the number remains small. The three following works are particularly noteworthy: Ding (2015), Jing-Schmidt et al. (2016), Diao (2017), and Du (2018). However, Ding's (2015) case study on the interaction between language learning and CHLL identity could not be included due to its unavailability for future publication. Therefore, this literature review focuses on the remaining three studies.

TABLE (1)

EXISTING SA LITERATURE ON CHILLS IN NORTH AMERICA

Author (Year)	Participants (Number)	Country of Heritage	Research Questions	Theoretical Framework	Instruments
Van Der Meid (2003)	L1 English speakers vs. HLLs of Asian languages (Chinese, Japanese, Korean) SA group: 78 AH group: 75	China, Japan, Korea, India, Vietnam, Thailand, others	- Factors influencing study abroad participation	N/A	Questionnaire, Interview
Le (2004)	American college students studying in China (Total: 133) Non-Asian: 76 Non-Chinese Asian: 20 Chinese-background: 37	The Chinese background group does not have any differentiation in individual family backgrounds and regions	1. What are the motivations, beliefs, and anxieties toward learning Chinese among the three subgroups? 2. What factors contribute to their motivations, beliefs, and anxieties?	- Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) - Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)	Survey

Moreno (2009)	HLLs (*N* = 17): Spanish (7), Hebrew (1), Tigrinya (1), French (1), German (1), Korean (1), Cantonese (1), Mandarin (4)	For CHLLs: China (2), Hong Kong (1), Taiwan (2)	- What are HLLs' motivations for studying abroad and their beliefs about HL learning? - How do they talk about themselves as HLLs in the U.S. and abroad?	Discursive Psychology	Interview, Written Email Reflection, Blog Entries, Focus Group
Ding (2015)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Jing-Schmidt et al. (2016)	CHLLs studying in China for one year (*N* = 4)	China with various dialect backgrounds	- How do CHLLs view and approach study abroad in their ancestral homeland?	- Theory of Communities of Practice - Self-Categorization Theory	e-Journal
Diao (2017)	Non-Standard Mandarin speakers studying in China for at least one semester (*N* = 3)	China (1), U.S. (1), Middle East (1)	1. How do speakers of transnational Mandarin become aware of the culturally embedded concept of Standard Mandarin? 2. How do they negotiate their non-standard accent and reinterpret its meanings while in China?	Language Socialization Theory	Audio Recording, Interview, Survey, Questionnaire, Field Observation
Du (2018)	African American (*N* = 2) and Chinese American college students (*N* = 3) studying in China for one academic year	Southeast Asia (1), China (2)	- Is the experience of ethnic minority American students in China similar to that of White Americans? - If not, how are their experiences different, and what are	N/A	Proficiency Test, Questionnaire, Audio Recording

			possible explanations?		
Comstock & Kagan (2020)	HLLs (N=11): Yoruba (1), Egyptian Arabic (1), Chinese (3), Korean (2), Russian (4)	The Chinese background group does not have any differentiation in individual family backgrounds and regions	- Examination of the intercultural competence and identities of HLLs studying abroad	Intercultural Competence Level 3	Pre-departure Survey, Post-departure Survey, Interview

4.2.1. Sociolinguistic Complexity of Chinese Heritage Language Learners

As mentioned before, most current studies on CHLLs in both heritage language education and SA contexts assume Chinese to be a singular language (i.e., Mandarin). This all-inclusive approach of defining the CHLL overlooks an important fact: many Chinese immigrants and communities in North America do not speak Mandarin at home or in their community; instead, they speak Cantonese or other Chinese dialects that are mutually incomprehensible. While Mandarin is based on the Northern dialect, overseas Chinese diasporas primarily originate from Southern China, where six other major linguistic varieties of Sinitic languages are spoken: Yue (e.g., Cantonese), Min (e.g., Taiwanese), Wu (e.g., Shanghainese), Gan, Hakka, and Xiang (Diao, 2017; Wong & Xiao, 2010). According to the U.S. Census Bureau's (2019) report on Chinese diasporas, in Canada, for instance, 35% of Chinese speakers use Cantonese at home, while 40% report speaking "Chinese" without specifying a dialect, and only 23% speak Mandarin.

In their study on identity development in the ancestral homeland from the perspectives of Chinese heritage language learners (CHLLs), Jing-Schmidt, Zhang, and Chen (2016) employ narrative inquiry to examine the lived experiences of four CHL students from four cohorts of advanced Chinese learners participating in a year-long study abroad (SA) program in China. These four participants were all born and raised in the U.S. and speak different Chinese dialects at home: one uses Taiwan-based Mandarin, one uses Beijing-based Mandarin, and the other two speak Cantonese. Although the study acknowledges individual differences in home language use, it primarily presents CHLLs' perspectives on American-ness and racial invisibility in the local community without delving deeper into the impact of linguistic variety on

identity development. Similarly, Du's (2018) study of three Chinese American college students studying in China for one academic year categorizes all three CHLLs as a homogeneous group and highlights the same issue of racial invisibility discussed by Jing-Schmidt et al. (2016).

In contrast, Diao's (2017) study provides an analysis of CHLLs' experiences and negotiations with different linguistic varieties, dialects, and accents. Following Duff's (2015) suggestion of conceptualizing languages such as Spanish and Mandarin as "transnational languages"—languages that are not only spoken in one foreign country but also among overseas diaspora communities—Diao (2017) uses the term "speakers of transnational Mandarin" rather than "heritage language learners" to illustrate the sociolinguistic complexities of Chinese languages. However, rather than focusing on learners' use of Mandarin and other Chinese dialects such as Cantonese, Diao's study largely examines the use of accents between standard Mandarin and non-standard Mandarin found in Chinese diaspora families and communities (e.g., Taiwan-based Mandarin in the U.S.) that deviate from Beijing-based Mandarin standards. By collecting data from three focal participants through mixed methods such as audio recordings, interviews, surveys, language awareness questionnaires, and field observations, Diao finds that transnational Mandarin speakers with intimate family and community ties in Chinese diaspora communities may not be limited to those of Chinese heritage but also come from other ethnic backgrounds through a range of connections, such as interracial dating/marriage and childcare services. Thus, Diao calls for a reconsideration of the conventional definition of CHLLs, which typically excludes transnational Mandarin speakers of non-Chinese heritage.

When researchers, educators, and administrators categorize both Mandarin and dialect speakers under the same broad label— "Chinese heritage students" or "Chinese heritage language learners"—their construct of "Chinese" may not align with students' actual home language. As Leeman (2015) pointed out, such constructed labels "erase the geographic, social, and stylistic variation that they encompass," making them inadequate for understanding the experiences of heritage language learners and their relationship to the language of study (p. 108). Accordingly, for Chinese dialect speakers whose linguistic or cultural affiliation may not be represented by Mandarin, and even for transnational Mandarin speakers of non-Chinese heritage, their "Chinese" identity development becomes more hybrid and complex when studying abroad, necessitating more careful and thorough investigation in research.

4.2.2. The Relationships Between Heritage Language Learning and Identity

Diao (2017), Du (2018), and Jing-Schmidt et al. (2016) all shed light on both the racial and political racialization dimensions involved in the negotiations of identity in the study abroad (SA) context. Since the conception of identity is multifaceted and complex, the exploration of identity in SA research requires a multidimensional approach. Many scholars in heritage language education contend that heritage language learning fulfills not only linguistic needs but also identity needs (Carreira, 2004). Therefore, research on identity in the SA field, especially within post-structural and post-colonial frameworks, has often assumed a linear relationship between identity and heritage language learning and primarily conceptualizes identity development as a variable of language development (Block, 2007; Jing-Schmidt et al., 2016; Kinginger, 2009, 2013; Tong et al., 2019; Tong & Tsung, 2023). However, Jing-Schmidt et al. (2016) and Du (2018) find that CHLLs' identity development and subjective experiences are not necessarily aligned with language development as measured by test scores. While Du (2018) shows that factors such as personality, prior cross-cultural experiences, expectations, and language proficiency interact in complex ways to influence students' identity development and SA experiences, Jing-Schmidt et al. (2016) argue that language learning is merely one aspect of students' SA experiences. They suggest that students should not be viewed solely as language learners but more holistically as whole persons whose identity development is influenced by a wide array of internal and external factors "specific to the given spatial, temporal, social, and emotional contexts of SA" (p. 798).

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, identity is often viewed from a post-structural perspective as a "negotiation of difference" co-constructed between the self and others (Kinginger, 2013, p. 341). Thus, identity development involves two dimensions: self-identifications that CHLLs claim for themselves and the identities ascribed to them by members of the host country (Shively, 2016). In the existing literature on CHLLs, most studies focus only on the self-identifications that CHLLs claim for themselves but lack investigations into the views of members of the host country. For instance, Jing-Schmidt, Zhang, and Chen (2016) primarily use the self-narratives of CHLLs to examine identity construction; Diao (2017) quantitatively and qualitatively analyzes data collected from interviews, surveys, and questionnaires to interpret CHLLs' perspectives on identity; and in Du's (2018) research, although it examines the theme of how the concept of self is viewed by the Chinese people, the theme is

presented and reflected through the lens of CHLLs rather than directly from local people and communities. The perspectives of members of the host country provide another lens through which to explore identity development more comprehensively. Different views from CHLLs and local people may help fully reveal contradictions and tensions that challenge and destabilize individuals' identities during the process of identity construction. Therefore, the absence of views from local people and communities should be considered a direction for future research on the identity development of CHLLs.

Overall, the current SA studies on the identity development of CHLLs, including Jing-Schmidt et al.'s (2016) research, suggest that identity development and subjective experience are not necessarily aligned with language development as measured by test scores. It is proposed that identity in SA should not be narrowly subsumed under language learning but rather viewed more holistically. Diao's (2017) case studies show that Mandarin speakers with intimate family and community ties in diaspora Chinese communities may not be limited to those with direct ethnolinguistic affiliations; they may come from a range of ethnic backgrounds, and their relationship with Chinese diasporas may take various forms, including not only ethnolinguistic heritage but also interracial dating/marriage or childcare services. Diao (2017) also emphasizes the need for applied linguistics to reconsider terms such as "heritage language learners." Du's (2018) study provides additional evidence that studying abroad is complex and highly individualized, with even students from the same ethnic groups having different experiences. Factors like personality, prior cross-cultural experiences, language proficiency, expectations, and self-identification interact in complex ways to influence students' SA experiences.

4.3. Research Gaps and Future Directions

In addition to the controversial definition of Chinese Heritage Language Learners (CHLLs) and the lack of views from members of the host country, the existing literature also presents other research gaps and promising research areas. First, small samples are usually used in these studies: for instance, Jing-Schmidt et al. (2016) include only four CHL students in their study, and both Diao (2017) and Du (2018) focus on three students. Furthermore, the samples used in these studies are most convenience samples, not selected randomly or by other rigorous procedures, which can display an insufficient approach to statistical analysis and yield inflated claims of significance for the results (Rees & Klapper, 2008; Kinginger, 2009). To address the problem of small sampling, SA

researchers usually call for a need for large-scale studies (Kinginger, 2009; Rees & Klapper, 2008). However, compared with other study abroad (SA) programs worldwide, relatively low participation in study abroad in China, especially in year-long programs, usually leads to small samples in SA studies on CHLLs. One potential research direction that might be promising to provide more samples is short-term SA programs.

As Sanz & Morales-Front (2018) point out, most evidence in SA research comes from traditional semester- or even year-long programs. The literature on CHLLs examined in this study mostly conducted research through either one semester (Diao, 2017) or year-long programs (Du, 2018; Jing-Schmidt et al., 2016). However, according to the Institute of International Education (2020), the most popular SA programs among U.S. students are short-term programs as well as internships and service-learning programs. Given the possible affordability issues or the pressures of completing an academic degree within a specific time frame, more and more students are hesitant to participate in a year-long SA program (Isabelli-García & Isabelli, 2019). As a consequence, it might be difficult for researchers to recruit more students to participate in the long SA programs for their SA studies. Some SA researchers have thus noted the emergence of short-term programs and called for more research attention to this promising area (Isabelli-García & Isabelli, 2019; Sanz & Morales-Front, 2018). As short-term SA programs are flourishing in North American post-secondary institutions, it is fundamental to study this type of SA program that meets the needs of students in contemporary societies.

Although this article focuses on publications written in English or Chinese within the North American context, it is noteworthy that Australian scholars have also begun examining the identity development of many Chinese heritage language learners in short-term study abroad programs. Tong and Tsung (2023) present a case study of 34 Chinese heritage language learners (CHLLs) from an Australian university, spanning different proficiency levels, who participated in a short-term SA program in China. Building on the team's previous research (Tong et al., 2019), which expands Benson et al.'s (2012) three-dimensional framework of L2 identity development by identifying themes more relevant to heritage language learning, this study employs the same framework while adopting a narrative approach to highlight individual differences. However, its scope is limited to the linguistic dimension of learners' experiences in understanding CHLL identity development.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, SA programs for Chinese language instruction in China have struggled to fully resume. While some post-secondary institutions have reinstated their programs, others—particularly in the U.S.—have expressed concerns about the political climate and academic freedom in mainland China, prompting a shift from Beijing to Taipei. This relocation has introduced uncertainty about the future of SA programs in China. However, it also opens new avenues for investigating the identity development of CHLLs in other Chinese-speaking communities.

Nevertheless, the relocation of Chinese language programs to Taiwan and other Chinese-speaking communities introduces new variables in CHLLs' identity formation. More studies on the use of accents between standard Mandarin and non-standard Mandarin, as well as the differences between Mandarin and other Chinese dialects, are needed to better understand how linguistic diversity shapes CHLLs' experiences in contexts of study abroad.

The linguistic environment in Taiwan, for instance, differs significantly from that of mainland China, where Standard Mandarin is heavily promoted as the national language. In Taiwan, Mandarin coexists with other linguistic influences, including Taiwanese Hokkien and Hakka, which may affect CHLLs' perceptions of linguistic authenticity and belonging. Similarly, study abroad programs in Hong Kong or Singapore expose CHLLs to multilingual settings where Cantonese and English play dominant roles, further complicating their identity negotiation process.

Additionally, sociopolitical factors influence how CHLLs engage with their heritage language. In Taiwan, the evolving discourse on national identity may challenge CHLLs' assumptions about Mandarin as a cultural anchor, leading them to re-evaluate their connection to the language and their sense of belonging in a broader Chinese-speaking world. The relocation of SA programs to diverse Chinese-speaking communities also raises questions about linguistic legitimacy—whether CHLLs perceive their Mandarin as "authentic" or "deficient" in different cultural contexts, and how local speakers respond to their linguistic backgrounds.

Future research should explore CHLLs' linguistic and identity development across various Chinese-speaking regions to address these complexities. Comparative studies examining CHLLs' experiences in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore versus those in mainland China could reveal nuanced patterns in identity construction, language confidence, and cultural

integration. By broadening the scope of SA research, scholars can gain deeper insights into the multifaceted experiences of CHLLs and help educators design more inclusive and adaptable study abroad programs.

5. Conclusion

Educational institutions, as fundamental ideological sites where linguistic norms are prescribed (De Costa, 2016; Diao, 2017), along with their study abroad (SA) programs, often underrepresent minority students and overlook their unique concerns and needs. To promote a more inclusive and equitable SA experience, further exploring these students' experiences is crucial.

This preliminary literature review highlights a significant gap in SA research on Chinese heritage language learners (CHLLs) compared to more commonly studied heritage languages such as Spanish and French. While identity plays a critical role in heritage language learners' SA experiences, studies on CHLLs remain limited. Moreover, CHLLs face distinct challenges in SA contexts due to sociopolitical factors, linguistic diversity, and the relative newness of systematic research on this population. The strong link between Mandarin and cultural nationalism in China, combined with varying regional dialects and sociopolitical concerns, shapes a unique identity negotiation process. Additionally, the post-pandemic relocation of Chinese language programs to Taiwan, as well as other Chinese-speaking communities, introduces new variables in CHLLs' identity formation, further distinguishing their experiences from those of Spanish and French heritage language learners.

Existing research on CHLLs in SA contexts is often constrained by small sample sizes, limited program types, and overgeneralized participant groups. While these studies provide valuable individualized insights, they also highlight the need for more carefully controlled, in-depth research that accounts for the heterogeneity of this diverse population and the complex relationship between identity and heritage language learning. A more comprehensive understanding of CHLLs' SA experiences will enable educators and program administrators to develop more effective language and culture curricula, fostering a more inclusive approach to studying abroad.

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