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# ARTICLE

# Contesting Standard Language Norms: A Study of Wuhanese Families' Language Practices in the United States in the Post-Pandemic Era

SHI LI

*University of Arizona*
*shili@arizona.edu*

WENHAO DIAO

*University of Arizona*
*wdiao@arizona.edu*

This ethnographic study examines language ideologies and practices in Chinese American families in the U.S. in the post-pandemic era. Our specific focus here is the families' use of a dialect of Southwest Mandarin, *Wuhanhua* (literally, "Wuhan Vernacular"), with their children at a time when Wuhan was marked by stigma due to its association with the initial COVID-19 outbreak. In our ten-month longitudinal study with the three focal families who came from Wuhan, each with U.S.-born children, data were generated from home visits, semi-structured interviews, and audio-recorded family interactions. While the three families shared a prevalent adherence to Standard Mandarin, our results show how the parents' stated ideologies become contested in their everyday language practices. These ambiguities and inconsistencies in the planning and regulation of *Wuhanhua* use at home illuminate the translocal nature of heritage language learning, which is shaped not only by movement between countries but also by connections to specific localities.

## Introduction

This ethnographically oriented study investigates how transnational Chinese American families with origins in Wuhan engage with language practices, place-based identity, and intergenerational relationships in the post-COVID United States. A historic city on the Yangtze River, Wuhan used to be little known outside China despite its geographic significance as a central port with waterways to many parts of the country. Following the outbreak of COVID-19 in late 2019, the city became globally known as the pandemic's point of origin, a traumatizing association that came with stigma for its residents. This troubling connection with the many sufferings and controversies surrounding the pandemic continue to bring uneasiness and distress around their place identity to people who identify Wuhan as their home (e.g., Zhou, 2022). However, little research has explored how people with origins in Wuhan who now live overseas navigate their identity and language in relation to it. This gap is particularly significant given that overseas contexts often present even more simplistic stereotypical

links between Wuhan and the virus. Meanwhile, even less research has delved into the role of language use and maintenance in the post-COVID era among families with origins in Wuhan.

This study, therefore, focuses on language practices in immigrant families in the U.S. who have origins in Wuhan, and especially their use of *Wuhanhua* 武汉话 (literally, "Wuhan Vernacular"), a dialect of Southwest Mandarin, with their children in the U.S. In what follows, we begin with a brief overview of bi/multilingual immigrant families' language practices and policing, as well as the sociolinguistics of place that Chinese immigrants may continue to experience even after their move overseas. We then move on to describe our current study and present our findings. Conducted over a ten-month period in a West Coast metropolitan area in the U.S., our study drew on a range of qualitative research instruments, including interviews, surveys, participant observation, audio recordings, and the collection of artifacts such as photographs (of educational materials, cultural objects, and family activities), videos, and social media posts. Our analysis highlights how the place identity of Wuhan is negotiated and constructed through the focal families' everyday language use in the post-pandemic context; we urge a nuanced understanding of how family language practices may shape and be shaped by place identity, translocal and transnational migration, and intergenerational ties.

## Literature Review

We structure our literature review through three complementary lenses. First, we review research on heritage language maintenance in immigrant families, highlighting central concerns that include language shift, emotional complexities, and the intersection of language with social identities. Second, we explore family language policy (FLP) as an analytical framework for understanding how multilingual families make language decisions, emphasizing language use at home as ideological and negotiated. Finally, we examine the specific context of Chinese diasporic families, establishing how standard language ideology, place-based identity, and post-pandemic trauma may shape Chinese heritage language practices.

### Bi/Multilingualism in Immigrant Families

Immigrant families and their children have been an important point of focus in applied linguistics, leading to a body of research on heritage language acquisition, use, and maintenance. Research has revealed complex but powerful social, cultural, and linguistic pressures that play out in family language use, which can lead to a shift from the L1 to the societal language over one's lifespan (He, 2013; 2025) or across different generations (e.g., Lanza & Li Wei, 2016). While these findings point to the challenging nature of heritage language maintenance, many scholars have also focused on language and identity maintenance by focusing on the children's learning and use of the heritage linguistic variety (Leeman, 2015). Oftentimes these studies investigate the language and identity of children of immigrants in formal or weekend schools learning their heritage languages, such as Spanish (Showstack, 2012), Mandarin Chinese (He, 2004, 2011; Wu et al., 2013), Japanese (Doerr & Lee, 2009; Kanno, 2000), or Korean (Lo, 2009; Kang, 2013; Song, 2019), among others. While this body of research has provided important insights for language educators to design and fine-tune heritage language programs and pedagogies (Beaudrie & Loza, 2023), it invites further questions about heritage language use and identity maintenance in the family setting.

Indeed, heritage language maintenance does not simply involve implementing a decision that has been made prior to a child's birth. Within the family setting, immigrants as (grand)parents may encounter complex negotiations regarding the use of their heritage language (L1) and the societal

language of their adopted country. It is often an ongoing process that evokes many emotions from both parents and their children (Song & Wu, 2024). On one hand, as the heritage language often becomes an indispensable link that connects the child with the parent(s)' cultural heritage (Doyle, 2013), it can be perceived as a responsibility or duty for the parents. Yet too often, it also becomes fraught across different generations within immigrant families, creating negative feelings such as "irritation, regret, guilt, anguish, loss, insecurity, and shame" (Wang, 2022).

To add further complexities, heritage language maintenance takes place in larger societal contexts, and for Chinese American families in particular, this means that language may further intersect with broader geopolitical tensions, the Model Minority stereotype, and anti-Asian sentiment in society, all of which can enter families' calculations of risks and rewards of maintaining a visibly Chinese linguistic identity (He, 2025).[1] As applied linguists continue to explore the dynamics of language shift and maintenance in immigrant families, it becomes clear that their language use is not simply the product of societal discourses. Families play a crucial role in linking individuals with society, where tensions between personal desires and social pressures become exposed, requiring analytical frameworks that can capture these multilayered interpretations and negotiations.

## Family Language Policy/Policing

Families constitute the central arena for heritage language transmission and identity negotiation (Fishman, 1971). Since the turn of the 21st century, the body of research on Family Language Policy (FLP) has grown significantly, providing a new theoretical and methodological framework to examine how immigrant families manage, negotiate, and transmit heritage languages and dialects. FLP is broadly defined as "explicit and overt planning in relation to language use within the home among family members" (King et al., 2008, p. 907). By analyzing how family members regulate and negotiate language use with each other in their everyday life, studies have highlighted the interplay between parents' language ideologies, practices, and management efforts in shaping children's bi/multilingualism (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009; Schwartz, 2010; Spolsky, 2004).

Recent FLP scholarship has focused on the crucial role of language ideology— sets of beliefs about language (Silverstein, 1979)—as the primary underlying force in shaping language practice and management, thereby leading to different FLP outcomes (King et al., 2008; Curdt-Christiansen, 2013; Spolsky, 2012). As pointed out by Smith-Christmas (2016), however, a pro-heritage ideology does not guarantee heritage language maintenance in the family, as oftentimes more than one language ideology is at work. Consequently, FLP becomes a battleground where conflicting intergenerational ideologies, deeply entrenched dominant ideologies, and culturally specific or individual ones compete, resulting in inconsistency between the declared FLP and actual language practices. In Chinese diasporic families in North America, for instance, parents may invoke culturally embedded family values to enforce heritage language use, while children resist from Anglophone frameworks that prioritize individual autonomy and peer belonging, a dynamic Zhu (2008) documents in detail through codeswitching in parent-child conflict talk.

Another prominent ideological force shaping FLP decisions is the market-oriented valuation of language varieties, where some are perceived as more prestigious or socially advantageous than others (Curdt-Christiansen, 2016; Wang, 2017). From a Bourdieuian perspective, language skills constitute linguistic capital, and the recognition or value attached to them forms symbolic capital, which can be converted into social, cultural, and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). Yet this

[1] We return to these Chinese-specific dynamics in greater detail in a later section on Chinese diasporic families, where we examine how dialectal hierarchies and place-based identity structure heritage language practices in transnational Chinese families.

instrumental view of language has limitations: regional dialects may carry familial or emotional significance despite lacking social prestige. Thus, FLP in immigrant families needs to be understood as a more nuanced process involving not just calculated capital returns, but also multilayered emotions in complex contexts (e.g., Song & Wu, 2024). To unpack how such ideological evaluations may operate in everyday interactions, it is necessary to uncover how discursive practices become indexical processes, whereby linguistic features come to be framed as inherently representing social groups or identities (Irvine & Gal, 2000). Understanding the use of a regional variety associated with immigrant (grand)parents' place identity therefore requires examining the link between language and place. We now turn to these tensions and how they may play out in the context of Chinese dialectal hierarchies and place-based identity.

## Sociolinguistics of Place in the Chinese Context

Chinese is a language family consisting of several mutually incomprehensible varieties (e.g., Cantonese, Mandarin). Mandarin, also known as *guanhua* 官话, is spoken in vast parts of northern China as well as the areas where the northern Han Chinese people have migrated into since the Ming Dynasty, such as central and southwestern China, including Wuhan. Within these extensive areas that speak Mandarin, different varieties emerged over time. Today, Mandarin includes several varieties that are usually mutually comprehensible but have their own distinct linguistic differences, including within their phonology, lexicon, and syntax (Li, 2006). Notably, despite these differences between linguistic varieties documented in the research, most speakers in China do not explicitly consider Mandarin to be a linguistic variety of Chinese in daily life. Instead, they typically label it as the equivalent of 中文 *zhongwen* or 汉语 *hanyu* ("Chinese language"), a practice that reflects the ideological normalization of Mandarin as the default Chinese language.

The Beijing-based standard Mandarin, known as *Putonghua* in China (henceforth PTH), has been promoted as the standard for a unified and coherent Chinese identity both within and outside mainland China. With the mass popularization of primary and secondary education, PTH now enjoys prestige to the extent that some scholars argue that it threatens the existence of other regional varieties (Xu, 2021), as families are either prioritizing their children's PTH learning or entirely foregoing the learning of the home linguistic variety (Wong & Xiao, 2010). Outside China, the hegemony of PTH also means that it typically possesses educational and knowledge infrastructure for heritage language transmission, such as formal language programs or weekend language schools in diaspora communities (Wu et al., 2013). Within this broader landscape of PTH hegemony, *Wuhanhua*, as a variety of Southwest Mandarin that is broadly mutually intelligible with PTH, faces pressure toward dialect leveling, a process whereby speakers of mutually intelligible varieties gradually converge toward the standard form (Trudgill, 1986). Like other regional varieties, it lacks institutional support both within China and in diasporic communities, where PTH-based heritage language programs remain the norm.

Yet such leveling pressure can simultaneously give rise to a heightened awareness of linguistic and discursive possibilities to index place (Johnstone, 2010). Even in the case of heritage language education, learners from dialect backgrounds do not simply lose awareness of their different home linguistic practices when PTH is taught as their heritage language in school (Wong & Xiao, 2010; Wu et al., 2013). In fact, research has already shown that English/Mandarin bilingual children can be very keen on acquiring variations between standard and non-standard features while learning Mandarin in the U.S. (Starr, 2016), and these dialect features may continue to be ways that they employ to index their own place identity later in life, even when they use PTH (Diao, 2017).

However, for many Chinese diasporic families from non-PTH backgrounds, this mismatch between what is taught in community or formal schools as their children's heritage language and the actual heritage language that the (grand)parents may use with each other can present additional identity and linguistic challenges (Wong & Xiao, 2010; Wu et al., 2013). Negotiating which variety to use—if different varieties should be used at all—and/or pass on as a heritage language to the children can be ideologically contentious (Leung, 2021). Indeed, Chinese-ness can become even more complex in overseas Chinese communities and contexts, where PTH's dominance and the very ideals about what is Chinese may become contested (Wong et al., 2021). Yet there has been little investigation into the language and cultural maintenance among overseas Chinese of non-PTH heritage. Meanwhile, dialect maintenance often takes place entirely at home, if at all, and adds further complexities to the already daunting task of language and culture negotiations in immigrant families. This also means that the family setting is likely the most crucial venue to research how parents negotiate the use of dialect(s), if at all, with their children.

Furthermore, when a large disaster transpires in a particular place, the immense threat, loss, and pain experienced collectively by individuals and communities can also reshape their linguistic relationship to the place (Carmichael, 2017; Schoux Casey, 2016). Being the first place where the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, Wuhan quickly became associated with stigma and discrimination both within China and globally, traumatizing the many individuals and families who identified the city as a part of their place identity. While prior studies have examined psychological distress and identity dilemmas caused by Wuhan identity during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (cf. Duan et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2021; Zhou, 2022), these works have primarily been situated in public health, psychology, or tourism studies, with little attention to the important connection between language and identity. To explore these dynamics, the current study focuses on families' language practices during a period when Wuhan's global visibility had intensified due to the COVID-19 pandemic's origins in the city, adding new dimensions of complexity to already fraught negotiations around Chinese identity and heritage language maintenance in the United States.

These intersecting dynamics of PTH hegemony, place-based stigma, and transnational FLP negotiations form the backdrop against which the current study is situated. We are guided by the following research question: How do place identity and language ideologies shape heritage language transmission in Wuhanese immigrant families in the post-pandemic era?

# Methods

## Research Context and Positionality

This study was conducted between 2024 and 2025 in a metropolitan area on the U.S. West Coast, a region home to one of the most prominent Chinese diaspora communities. Due to its proximity to the Asia Pacific, the area has a long history of receiving immigrants from East Asia. Many Chinese families, including those of Wuhan origin, continue to move there for professional opportunities in technology, finance, education, and tourism. Diasporic Chinese from Wuhan constitute a relatively small community: the entire Hubei province, of which Wuhan is the capital and the largest city, accounted for only 0.89% of all Chinese emigrants as of 2000 (Liang & Morooka, 2004). Therefore, the chosen research site, with its large and diverse Chinese population, provided the critical mass necessary for purposeful recruitment for the current study.

As the study took place only a few years after the initial emergence of the COVID-19 virus, pandemic-related narratives continued to organize the discourse around Wuhan outside China, including the U.S. Meanwhile, the sense of crisis during the pandemic also led to a heightened

awareness of place identity, including its language and the cityscape, among those who share Wuhan as their origin. For example, several songs were produced in *Wuhanhua* during the city's lockdown (e.g., Tan et al., 2020), bringing childhood memories and pride in both the place identity and its dialect, among both those who resided in Wuhan and the Wuhan diasporas elsewhere.

Originally from Wuhan, Author 1 of this study shared the place identity with the focal participants of the current study and is a fluent speaker of *Wuhanhua*, in addition to PTH and English. As Author 1 was also living in the U.S. at the time, these shared memories of helplessness from watching the pandemic's emergence from afar, as well as the many emotions such as pain, trauma, shock, and pride, allowed her to not only construct rapport with the families but also to position herself as an active participant in the research process, whose own subjectivity and shared experiences were resources for, rather than obstacles to, interpretation. The study, therefore, must be understood as a collective project that involved both the Author and the participants to (re)construct what Wuhan means in the post-pandemic United States.

Both authors bring transnational experiences relevant to this study's focus. Like the participants, the researchers experienced the trajectory of studying abroad from China to the U.S. and, to some extent, the dislocations of COVID-19. The stigma and stress during the pandemic, coupled with the challenges of living transnationally—worrying about family and friends in China while navigating life in the U.S. amid health risks and social exclusion—resonate with the circumstances of the families. As researchers who speak non-PTH Chinese varieties and who have transnational families, we remain attuned to the challenges of maintaining heritage dialects and negotiating language choices in diasporic households.

## Participants

This study draws on data from a larger ethnographic project on language practices and place identity among Wuhanese families in the United States. Author 1 combined purposeful and snowball sampling strategies (Maxwell, 2013), inviting potential participants through personal connections and WeChat alumni groups of two nationally recognized universities in Wuhan, which have extensive networks worldwide, particularly on the West Coast in the U.S., where this study was conducted. Five families participated in the larger study based on the following criteria: At least one parent 1) self-identified as a *Wuhanren* 武汉人 (Wuhanese/a Wuhan person); 2) spoke *Wuhanhua* (Wuhanese/Wuhan Vernacular); 3) was in the U.S. at the time of the study; and 4) lived with their children in the same household.

Of the five, three families were selected for the current study. They had children old enough to use language, shared adherence to PTH as the dominant language in parent-child interactions, and embedded *Wuhanhua* in the family's daily conversations (despite their stated heritage language goals referencing only "Chinese" without explicitly naming *Wuhanhua*). As Table 1 illustrates, all three families had at least one parent who was originally from Wuhan, and all had two American-born children. Parents were typically in their late 30s to early 40s, having spent substantial portions of their lives in both Wuhan and the United States, and held college or graduate degrees. Children ranged from early to middle childhood, representing diverse developmental stages.

Table 1
*Demographic Data of Participants*

| Family | Birthplace | Age Range | Years in Wuhan | Years in the U.S. | Education | Children: Age (Birthplace) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | Yuhan[2] (M): Wuhan, China<br>Yifan (F): Guiyang, China | 35-44 | M: 22<br>F: n/a | M: 14<br>F: 15 | M: Graduate Degree<br>F: College Degree | Child 1: 5 (U.S.)<br>Child 2: 3 (U.S.) |
| **2** | Meilin (M): Wuhan, China<br>Ming (F): Wuhan, China | 35-44 | M: 21<br>F: 22 | M: 22<br>F: 17 | M: College Degree<br>F: Graduate Degree | Child 1: 7 (U.S.)<br>Child 2: 3 (U.S.) |
| **3** | Xinyi (M): Wuhan, China<br>Yuan (F): Wuhan, China | 35-44 | M: 28<br>F: 28 | M: 14<br>F: 15 | M: Graduate Degree<br>F: Graduate Degree | Child 1: 11 (U.S.)<br>Child 2: 7 (U.S.) |

[2] All names are pseudonyms.

## Data Collection

Qualitative ethnographic methods were employed to generate data over the course of ten months. The following five data sources were used in the current study:

(1) Background surveys. These Qualtrics surveys asked the parents about their demographic information and their personal histories of language use.

(2) Interviews. One or both parents from each family participated in two semi-structured interviews (1-1.5 hours each) conducted in *Wuhanhua* or PTH, sometimes with a mixture of English, depending on the family's linguistic choice and comfort. The first interview explored personal backgrounds, family language practices, intergenerational relationships, and place-based identity; the second focused on their life in Wuhan and COVID-19 reflections.

(3) Audio recordings made by the consenting parents of their family conversations. One family provided approximately 80 minutes of self-recorded naturalistic interactions, including mealtime conversations, video calls, homework help, and cooking.

(4) Field observations. During the 10 months, Author 1 conducted biweekly visits to each family, with each visit lasting up to eight hours. During these home visits, the families engaged in a range of activities that included extracurricular classes, school events, shopping, dining out, and day trips. Author 1 kept field notes and voice memos to capture these observations.

(5) Artifacts documented included materials used in the home, such as children's books and educational resources, as well as digital materials like screenshots of social media posts (e.g., WeChat Moments) and online conversations.

## Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). Because most interviews were conducted in *Wuhanhua*, transcription required a two-stage process: an initial pass using an automated speech recognition software, followed by extensive correction and verification by Author 1, who as a native *Wuhanhua* speaker could transcribe accurately and later translate excerpts selected for discourse analysis. Fieldnotes were reviewed alongside transcripts to situate interactional data within the context of their family lives.

Initial coding produced analytic notes and descriptive labels, such as "pride in dialect," "explicit language teaching," and "class consciousness about speech." These notes and labels were used to highlight salient excerpts, serving as preliminary scaffolding for later interpretation (Saldaña, 2016). They were then organized into *organizational categories* (Maxwell, 2013) including "language ideologies," "language practices," or "place-based identity and belonging," among others. Through iterative analysis comparing patterns within and across families, and triangulation using data from multiple sources, these categories evolved into broader themes (or *substantive categories* in Maxwell's terms, ibid.) to address the research question. These themes emerged inductively from the data, and the theoretical framework of FLP informed our subsequent analysis.

As the primary researcher with direct access to all participants and data, Author 1 conducted the coding independently. Author 2 served as an analytical interlocutor, reviewing codes and interpretations as an additional point of triangulation in the analysis.

# Findings

## Yuhan and Yifan

The first family in our study includes Yuhan and Yifan, a couple who had been living in the United States for over a decade, now both working in the tech industry. Yuhan, born and raised in Wuhan, arrived in the United States for graduate school. Yifan also moved to the United States for higher education. Attending schools during the 1990s and 2000s, both grew up speaking regional languages at home: *Wuhanhua* for Yuhan and *Guiyanghua* 贵阳话 (another variety of Southwest Mandarin) for Yifan. Since moving to the United States, both have maintained connections to their linguistic heritage primarily through communicating with family and hometown friends. In professional settings, Yifan primarily used English, while Yuhan worked in a bilingual environment where both PTH and English were used frequently.

The couple had two U.S.-born sons, aged five and three at the time of the study. While Yuhan and Yifan chose to primarily speak PTH with their children, their language use became complicated as the grandparents frequently stayed with them. Since the children's births, Yuhan and Yifan's parents had been taking turns visiting from China, with each set of grandparents staying for six months (maximum duration permitted by visa regulations). During these visits, the grandparents spoke their respective dialects with each other and with their adult children but switched to PTH when communicating with their in-laws and their grandsons. In addition, every summer, the boys traveled to China, splitting their time between Wuhan and Yifan's hometown with their grandparents.

### *Wuhanhua* as Performance of Wuhan

Yuhan and Yifan reportedly had made clear plans for home language use before their children were even born, stating in the interview: "At home, the primary language is Chinese" (在家主要说中文). Yuhan explained this as essential for maintaining connections with family and social networks in China, reasoning that "if (the children) don't know Chinese, they will be completely cut off from that place" (如果不会中文的话，这个地方他们就完全被隔开了). Heritage language maintenance, therefore, is framed as sustaining the language that binds a child with their immigrant parent's heritage (Doyle, 2013), Notably, she did not specify in the interview which variety of Chinese would serve this connective function. This ambiguity became problematic when examined against the family's actual language practices in China. Both Yuhan and Yifan confirmed that when they communicated with family and friends back in China, they used regional varieties exclusively: *Wuhanhua* for Yuhan's connections and the local southwest dialect for Yifan's. Yet at home in the U.S., they primarily taught their children PTH. This created a contradiction: the children were learning PTH with the goal to maintain connections with "that place" in China where, according to their parents' own accounts, their family and friends communicated primarily through regional dialects, not PTH.

Later in the interview, this contradiction became more apparent when Yuhan clarified her earlier statement about the purpose of learning Chinese: "The biggest purpose of learning Chinese is to communicate with your family emotionally. Speaking *Wuhanhua* makes everyone feel particularly close. I think this is the real purpose" (最大的目的就是跟你的家人有情感交流。讲武汉话，大家会觉得特别亲切。我觉得其实这个才是目的). Here, her repeated use of "emotionally" and "feel" indicates that heritage language maintenance is deeply intertwined with the emotional experiences in bi/multilingual families (Song & Wu, 2024), and she explicitly identified *Wuhanhua*, not PTH, as the language of emotional connection for them. Similarly, Yuhan also described speaking *Wuhanhua* as a way to foster emotional intimacy, and emphasized that within her extended family in Wuhan, "almost all the children can speak *Wuhanhua*" (几乎所有的小孩都是会讲武汉话的). This comparison reveals that, despite a deliberate choice to teach their children PTH as a heritage language, she implicitly positioned *Wuhanhua* as the symbol for family and emotional connection.

Additionally, *Wuhanhua*'s emotional importance was further evident in Yuhan's description of her own language use. She described their family's annual visit to Wuhan as "the annual performance of *Wuhanhua* proficiency has come" (一年一度表演武汉话的时候来了). In the interview, she reportedly felt compelled to speak *Wuhanhua* whenever she was in Wuhan, even when addressed in PTH by local shopkeepers. This explicit framing of *Wuhanhua* as performance shows that the dialect use was not just for communicating the referential meaning, but it evoked a sense of place and thus became a performative act of identity (Butler, 1990). While she did not mention if her children had also to learn some *Wuhanhua* phrases to join the performance, the children were often present in these contexts where she used *Wuhanhua* exclusively to index her place identity.

### *"I never thought this was Wuhanhua"*

When the children demonstrated unexpected language abilities, Yuhan's evolving explanations signaled a deeper ideological orientation: one that placed *Wuhanhua* at the center of their linguistic development. This becomes particularly salient in what she referred to as the "我不知道 (I don't know)" episode. Yuhan's older son pronounced the phrase with a noticeably rising tone on 道 (*dao*), which in PTH should end with a falling or neutral tone. Although in *Wuhanhua* "知道 *zhidao*" (to know) is borrowed word from PTH, it can be pronounced with a distinctive rising tone on 道 (*dao*) to align with *Wuhanhua*'s tonal patterns.[3] Yet rather than linking her child's way of speaking to *Wuhanhua,* Yuhan's initial explanation for this deviation from PTH was the influence of English, a language without tones. Eventually, during a family visit to Wuhan where she was surrounded by *Wuhanhua*, she discovered that her child was using tones from *Wuhanhua.*

> Excerpt 1:
>
> 有一次我们去奈尔宝玩，(朋友)就问了他一个什么。(他说)"我不知道"。就是完全的武汉话，完完全全是武汉话。我后来发现这个调子应该就是我妈妈在这里跟我讲话的时候，他听到了。
>
> One day we were at Neobio ((a children's play center)), (a friend) asked him something. (He said) 'I don't know' [*in Wuhanhua*]. And it was in full-on *Wuhanhua*. I mean completely full-on. Later I realized that the intonation must have come from him hearing my mom talk to me when she was here.

As her above statement indicates, even though the phrase contained borrowed lexical features from PTH (知道, "to know"), she described her son as speaking "full-on *Wuhanhua*" (完全的武汉话). The moment of *Wuhanhua* transmission struck her as emotionally profoundly affirming (Song & Wu, 2024); she described herself as being "amazed."

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[3] 知道 (*zhidao*, "to know") is a PTH lexical item. Its *Wuhanhua* equivalent is 晓得 (*xiaode*). The phrase "I don't know" can also be rendered as 我找不到 (*wo zhao bu dao*, literally "I can't find it") in *Wuhanhua*.

Excerpt 2:

我之前从来没有想过这是武汉话！(……) 他就会说 “我不知道”，“我不知道”。我就惊呆了！我就想说，你怎么会讲这个？后来发现，哦，like always he has been saying 我不知道 this way.

I had never thought this was *Wuhanhua*! (…) He started saying [in *Wuhanhua*] ‘I don’t know,’ ‘I don’t know’ [with Wuhanhua tones]. I was amazed! I was like, ‘how come you know how to say it?’ Then I realized, like always he has been saying ‘I don’t know’ this way.

This highly positive emotion was certainly due to her son’s meaningful sociolinguistic alignment with her place identity of *Wuhan*, but its intensity was also because it was unexpected. Despite their belief that they were only transmitting PTH to their children, their children incidentally acquired some *Wuhanhua* features through implicit but regular exposure and imitation because they, in fact, used *Wuhanhua* at home and in other social contexts where their children were present.

After this episode, Yuhan developed a tendency to generalize *Wuhanhua* as a possible explanation to account for their children’s other sociolinguistic knowledge about China. For example, when the father, Yifan, indicated that their children seemed to understand his parents’ *Guiyanghua*, Yuhan immediately invoked *Wuhanhua* as an explanation: the children’s *Wuhanhua* knowledge must have facilitated their knowledge of other similar Southwest Mandarin varieties. Regardless of the accuracy of this explanation, Yuhan’s apparent preference for *Wuhanhua* as an explanation suggested her pride in *Wuhanhua* as the foundation for her children’s broader sociolinguistic knowledge.

This linguistic pride was particularly significant to her at a time when Wuhan has been subject to heightened global scrutiny and stigma because of COVID-19. She recalled the psychological distress she felt while preparing to return to the West Coast in early 2020, after quarantining in another state following her travel from Wuhan, at a time when the outbreak was beginning to spread globally and she felt targeted for isolation.

Excerpt 3[4]:

当时我在机场（……）可能也是我自己想多了吧，就觉得旁边总有人在看我。我又戴了口罩，我是唯一飞机场戴口罩的。你想那个时候，当地的人绝对都晓得，这个地方接纳了么样的一批人。所以大家肯定就……不会主动跟我讲话，也不会主动跟我有眼神交流。可能会看一下，但是不会讲话。

Back then I was at an airport. (…) Maybe I was just overthinking, but I felt people around were always staring at me. I was wearing a mask. I was the only one in the entire airport with a mask. Think about it, at that time, the local people definitely knew what kind of people this place had taken in. So of course everyone would… they wouldn’t initiate conversation with me, and they wouldn’t make eye contact. They might look at you, but they wouldn’t speak.

She chose to stay home for an additional week before returning to the office because “you could feel that everyone didn’t really want me in the office” (你会感觉到大家是不想我去办公室的). Even after completing the extended and self-imposed quarantine, she reported in the interview a

[4] Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent excerpts were originally conducted in *Wuhanhua*.

continued sense of stigma from others around her Wuhanese identity, as she described being looked at "strangely" (奇怪的眼神) and receiving comments such as "Oh, Wuhan!" when others heard where she came from. These recollections of social rejection, isolation, scrutiny, all because of her Wuhanese identity, provided additional layers of her heightened awareness as a person from Wuhan in American and global contexts. In the aftermath of these experiences, her insistence on using *Wuhanhua* to perform her identity, and her strong emotions around *Wuhanhua*'s affective value, emerged as a subtle counter-discourse: asserting the value and power of her regional heritage in the face of sociopolitical marginalization and trauma.

## Ming and Meilin

The second family included Ming, Meilin, and their two U.S.-born children: a seven-year-old daughter and a three-year-old son. Ming was born and raised in Wuhan. After completing undergraduate studies in his home city, he first studied in Europe before relocating to the U.S., where he pursued a PhD and subsequently found a career in technology. Meilin, also from Wuhan, came to the U.S. at 21 with her parents, who had established a family business here. She then completed another undergraduate degree in the U.S., after her first one in China.

Even though Ming's parents were originally not from Wuhan, *Wuhanhua* was frequently used in his family (especially between his mother and himself) and with his local friends. Thus, he grew up fully competent in *Wuhanhua*. Ming and Meilin also spoke *Wuhanhua* with each other but interacted with their children primarily in PTH and English. During visits and video calls, Meilin's parents and Ming's mother followed a similar pattern, using *Wuhanhua* when communicating with their children, but PTH with their grandchildren. Neither child attended Chinese heritage language schools or weekend programs, with all Chinese language exposure occurring at home.

### *PTH as Moral and Good Parenting*

When asked about their home language choices, "Chinese only" (只说中文), Ming said, emphasizing their avoidance of English at home. For them, language choice was inextricably linked to demonstrations of successful parenting, with their daughter's linguistic competence serving as public proof of their educational effectiveness across two distinct yet interconnected spheres: their extended networks in China and their Chinese-American community in the U.S.

During their family's trips to China, "everyone's first question was whether she could speak Chinese" (大家第一句会问她会不会说中文), Meilin recounted. Heritage language maintenance is indeed not only the individual act of a parent or a family; "everyone's first question" underscores it as a common societal expectation and a perceived duty for the parent (Song & Wu, 2024). After their daughter successfully showed her PTH proficiency, receiving praise that "the kid's Chinese is very good" (这个小孩的中文非常不错), the conversation usually would turn into dismissive comparisons with other transnational families whose children "hardly speak any Chinese at all" (几乎就不说中文). The judgment system that placed Ming and Meilin as "successful" parents in managing their transnational connections (Kwon, 2022) while relegating others as "failed" is based on a standard language ideology in which "Chinese" becomes synonymous with PTH, rendering *Wuhanhua* irrelevant to the social evaluation of maintaining the "real Chinese" ethnic and cultural identity.

In other moments, Meilin described how their daughter's Chinese proficiency enabled her to serve as a social intermediary. "They hope to learn (about our lives in the U.S.) through her since they cannot directly ask us" (他们希望通过她来了解。别个不可能直接来问我们), Meilin said. While

their friends and relatives tended to avoid directly interrogating the parents about their American lifestyle, such as income or social status, they often asked the child about her parents' work and her school. The daughter's ability to "handle the questions with complete ease" (非常自如地回答别个) demonstrated not merely linguistic but also social competence: knowing how to handle sensitive questions diplomatically. Her command of PTH transformed what could have been awkward information-gathering into a natural conversation. Again, her performance immediately won the family praises as the "successful" ones, whose transnational children could serve as culturally adept bridges. The assessment process thus evaluates not just language ability but the social sophistication that PTH proficiency has made possible.

The judgement system operated equally powerfully within their Chinese American community. Meilin recounted stories about a child who was perceived to have "failed" to maintain their "Chinese" in the interview. She described people's "contemptuous tone" (蔑视的口气) and explicit comments that equated the lack of PTH with unacceptable parenting: "their family upbringing wasn't very good" (家庭教育没有很好). In another detailed story, she described a boy who would ignore others when addressed in Chinese, refusing to engage in communication altogether. When asked how she made sense of it, Meilin framed this refusal as a sign of deeper cultural resistance, concluding that the child and the parents had rejected their ethnic and cultural Chineseness entirely:

Excerpt 4:

他的小孩已经对中国文化有一种偏见或者不好的抵制情绪，压根就不愿意说中文。然后第二个，整个家里的教育环境……他的父母也没有跟他说中文，也只跟他说英文。也就是说他的父母是承认，你丢弃中国文化，是他愿意接受的。

Their child has already developed a certain bias against Chinese culture, or even a negative resistance to it, (to the point where he) simply refuses to speak Chinese. The second issue is the home environment… his parents don't speak Chinese with him either. (They) only use English. In other words, his parents acknowledge and willing to accept the abandonment of Chinese culture.

She went on to attribute these outcomes to the parents, as she described them as wannabe "bananas,"[5] a pejorative term that positions an Asian person as betraying their ethnic and racial roots if they become assimilated into what is believed to be the cultural whiteness.

Excerpt 5:

他想融入这个美国社会，就把自己当成一个美国人，就像我们说的，当一个香蕉人一样。就想完全跟中国不搭界，或者跟中国文化……摆脱以前的这种……旧的这种思维呀，或者是旧的关系。

They wanted to integrate into American society, to see themselves as an American, just like we say, to become a 'banana.' (They) wanted to completely cut ties with China, or with

[5] A slang term used (pejoratively) to describe an East Asian person who is perceived as being "yellow on the outside, white on the inside." In this case, it means someone is ethnically Chinese but culturally or behaviorally westernized.

> Chinese culture… to break free from those old ways of thinking… and from old relationships.

Thus, the discursive binary presented here: American versus Chinese, betrayal versus loyalty, which frames heritage language and identity maintenance not as a choice, but as a moral imperative. This moral framing reflects a broader ethnolinguistic ideology in which one's competence in the heritage language becomes the litmus test for ethnic belonging (Leeman, 2015).

The harsh evaluations of other people's parenting were based primarily on language maintenance, and became a source of social pressure for Meilin. However, her goal for heritage language maintenance in her own family revealed striking contradictions that illuminate further complexities. On the one hand, she used these same evaluative standards and expressed genuine disapproval of families who failed to maintain PTH (or any other Chinese variety) in their homes, equating that with the loss of the Chinese cultural identity and something morally shameful (Wang, 2022). On the other hand, when pressed about her own family's heritage language maintenance, her stated goals were remarkably minimal: "even just a 'hello' or simply 'thank you' (哪怕只有一个你好，或者简单的谢谢) would suffice, as long as it was a *polite response* (礼貌回馈)." What she deemed as acceptable for her own children was clearly a compromise: just enough to get by in everyday interactions so that they did not have to be labeled as having betrayed their cultural roots or the parents seen as "bad parents." Yet to her, there was no difference between *Wuhanhua* or PTH. Throughout the interview, she simply referred the heritage language as vaguely "Chinese" (*zhongwen* 中文), without specifying which variety it should be, or if that mattered at all.

These linguistic choices took on heightened significance within the post-pandemic geopolitical climate surrounding their Chinese identity in the United States. The COVID-19 pandemic's origin in Wuhan has intensified the scrutiny of Chinese individuals and families in the U.S., and the political discourse of exacerbated U.S.-China economic tensions and the trade war added further layers of complexity to their language choice. When asked whether they hoped their children would identify as Chinese (*zhongguoren* 中国人), a term that could encompass ethnic, cultural, and national identity, Meilin revealed the careful risk calculation underlying their family's identity framing. She began by highlighting China's power, which discursively gave the Chinese heritage culture and identity strength:

> Excerpt 6:
>
> 可能这些人总会认为中国并不是那么强大，或者觉得中国蛮槐（差），但现在中国其实不是那个样子了。中国反而还蛮强大也蛮现代，而且也是一个蛮好的一个国家。所以说我不认为她跟别个说我有中国人的血统，或者我是中国人，我觉得一点都不那个。
>
> Some people might still think that China isn't that strong, or they see China as pretty bad, but that's not really the case anymore. China is actually quite strong, quite modern, and a pretty good country. So I don't think there's anything wrong at all with her telling others that she has Chinese blood or that she's Chinese (*zhongguoren*).

However, she immediately modified this stance with an acknowledgement of geopolitical tensions and the racial stigma that they create:

Excerpt 7:

现在我们生活在国外，这里的人排华，或者是这里的人跟中国打仗了，那我还是对这个有所保留。因为你不要激起别个对你的气愤啊，而是根据国情或者政治形势而定的，对不对？

Now that we're living overseas, where people may be anti-Chinese or even at war with China, I would still be somewhat cautious about this. You don't want to stir up others' anger toward you. It really depends on the national climate or political situation, right?

Meilin's concerns resonated with many Chinese American families' experiences at the time (He, 2025). This strategic positioning, balancing cultural identification and political caution, shows how their family navigated an environment where any affiliation to China, ethnic or linguistic, may trigger hostility (Diao et al., 2024). Under such circumstances, their emphasis on minimal Chinese goals—basic phrases like "hello" and "thank you"—conveyed their wish for connecting to cultural heritage and pragmatic politeness, but not to the extent of inviting unwanted scrutiny. In doing so, their language choices became a means of maintaining cultural ties while minimizing racial markedness.

Throughout Excerpts 6 and 7, moreover, Meilin notably did not mention the stigmatization of Wuhan at all; instead, to her the stigmatization was towards China as a whole. In the stigmatizing discourse around COVID-19 in the U.S., Wuhan and China became so interconnected that they were symbolic of each other; the stereotyping of Wuhan cannot survive by itself in the U.S., because the Chinese cultural discourse of place is not accessible to most Americans. Instead, the stereotyping could only take place in the form of racial and linguistic profiling of Chineseness (Diao et al., 2024). Meilin's quotes about the pandemic, therefore, provide further context for her beliefs in the moral obligations to raise her children as ethnically and culturally Chinese in post-COVID U.S.

## ***Below the Radar: Implicit Language and Identity Transmission***

Yet beneath Ming and Meilin's stated goal of maintaining "Chinese" as the heritage language for their children, in which Chinese became interchangeable with PTH, lay a more complex linguistic reality that the parents themselves seemed unable to fully recognize. Despite living overseas for over two decades, Ming and Meilin continued to use *Wuhanhua* with each other and their parents. At the parental level, then, multidialectalism remains resilient: the couple has maintained an intimate connection to their local variety, even in a context where nonstandard forms received neither institutional support nor social recognition (Wong & Xiao, 2010).

According to their own estimates, the conversations between parents comprised over 70% of household talk, constituting what they believed to be a *Wuhanhua*-dominant environment at home. Given this rich dialectal input, Ming expected that his daughter would "naturally" pick up the regional variety. However, he encountered what he perceived as a puzzling phenomenon, "I'm quite surprised that even though we clearly speak *Wuhanhua*, she somehow learned PTH." (这也是让我蛮惊讶的。明明我们讲的是武汉话，但她居然学成了普通话). From his perspective, the dominance of *Wuhanhua* in their household should have automatically resulted in dialectal rather than PTH competence. In his interview, his children's lack of *Wuhanhua* was therefore because of the "cartoons" that they were watching. The parents deliberately sought out PTH-dubbed shows on Netflix for their children as a way for heritage language and identity maintenance, selecting content that would provide exposure to both PTH and Chinese culture, while also providing entertainment. But Ming

simultaneously believed that these shows that they had chosen for heritage language maintenance also undermined their *Wuhanhua* use at home, creating a scenario where the PTH input in the media cancelled out the effect of the parents' frequent *Wuhanhua* use when their children were present.

However, while *Wuhanhua* indeed dominated adult-to-adult communication in their home, parent-child interactions occurred primarily in PTH. When helping with homework, giving instructions, or engaging in casual conversations, both parents instinctively shifted to PTH. The switch to PTH when talking to their children was so normalized that neither adult even realized that it was happening. Visiting grandparents followed identical patterns, switching to PTH when they were communicating with their American-born grandchildren, despite using *Wuhanhua* with their own children. This shift occurred not only in person but also during video calls, where the same alternating language use unfolds across generations.

Meanwhile, transmission of *Wuhanhua* features did in fact also take place, but in the form of PTH communication. The daughter's speech, for example, consistently exhibited characteristic Wuhan phonological patterns, which could not have been acquired through cartoon exposure. The merger of the retroflex and alveolar sibilants (/ʈʂ/, /ʈʂʰ/, /ʂ/ and /ts/, /tsʰ/, /s/), stereotypical of southern speech in general (Diao, 2017; Starr, 2016), along with the r-l merger in her pronunciation, reflected systematic influence from dialectal input. Moreover, she also incidentally acquired a few *Wuhanhua* expressions, such as 来不赢 (can't make it in time), 见不得 (can't stand), and 吃不得 (inedible), revealing structural influence from *Wuhanhua* grammar and lexicon in their PTH use at home. All these features indicate that the children's PTH was to a large extent taught by the parents rather than the cartoons (which would contain only standard PTH features without any Wuhan influence). Their daughter acquired a hybrid Mandarin variety that infused *Wuhanhua* phonological and lexical features into the PTH system. As the parents continued to demonstrate their place awareness and features while using PTH in the diasporic setting, their children acquired *Wuhanhua* features despite the pressures for dialect leveling towards PTH (Johnstone, 2010).

Thus, even though Ming and Meilin's daughter could not engage in conversational *Wuhanhua*, she nonetheless acquired dialectal elements. Her Mandarin use, while broadly identifiable as PTH, occupies a position along the fluid spectrum of Mandarin in which varying degrees of nonstandard, place-colored features coexist with the standard norm (Starr, 2016). This transdialectal repertoire linked her to her parents' place identity while also enabling her to navigate the broader Chinese-speaking contexts in both the U.S. and China.[6]

## Yuan and Xinyi

Yuan, Xinyi, and their two American-born sons (aged seven and eleven) were the third family in this study. Yuan described himself as "born and raised on the soil of Wuhan" (土生土长的武汉人). His entire educational journey, all the way through doctoral studies, unfolded in the city. Upon finishing his PhD, he immigrated to the U.S. in 2016. Xinyi, too, lived in Wuhan until completing her PhD, and joined Yuan after he moved overseas.

Their linguistic backgrounds reflected different pathways within Wuhan's diverse social landscape. Raised in the historic heart of Wuhan, Yuan spoke *Wuhanhua* with family, friends, and schoolmates throughout his upbringing, with PTH reserved only for formal occasions. This *Wuhanhua*-dominant environment continued until graduate school, when he worked in a research

[6] It should be noted that the above observations pertain specifically to the daughter. Given their son's age of three at the time of the study, it was not possible to determine whether he would acquire similar patterns of dialectal feature transmission.

laboratory with students from diverse regional backgrounds. There, PTH became the common academic language, and it was also where he met his future spouse, Xinyi. Meanwhile, Xinyi grew up in a compound with many military families from different parts of China, where PTH was the lingua franca both in her community and within her own family. When she attended a civilian elementary school, she acquired *Wuhanhua* from her peers. However, she felt that her *Wuhanhua* was not sufficiently fluent. Even though she and Yuan were both from Wuhan, they typically used PTH with each other.

## *Competing Identities of Being Wuhanese*

A Wuhan native, Yuan grew up in the historic hub of Hankou with working-class neighborhoods, bustling markets, and busy docks for trading. This working-class association contrasted with the Wuchang area, where some of China's most prestigious universities and local government offices are located, which evoked feelings of scholarship and refinement. The linguistic landscape mirrors these divisions, as Yuan observed that in Wuchang, "a lot of people don't speak *Wuhanhua*" (很多人都不说武汉话) but PTH instead. Yet Yuan's criteria for who could count as authentic locals still showed the saliency of *Wuhanhua*. He repeatedly referred back to his upbringing "in Hankou's small alleyways" (汉口小巷子里) where "nobody couldn't speak *Wuhanhua*" (不会说武汉话的基本上就没有) as a typical experience in the city, though he also recognized what he had experienced in Wuchang as a co-existing linguistic reality. Yuan's relationships with his family and many friends were exclusively in *Wuhanhua*, and in his interview he cited his friends' mocking him for using PTH: "And now you're putting on this fake PTH with me?" (你还跟我搞个弯管子[7]). Even during college, when he met many people from elsewhere, he helped teach *Wuhanhua* to his college roommate from Jiangsu. Many years later at the time of this study, Yuan still attributed that roommate's success in securing employment in Wuhan after graduation to the "big advantage because he could speak *Wuhanhua*" (那是个 big advantage，因为他会说武汉话).

However, during graduate school in Wuchang, a pivotal incident crystallized his awareness of these hierarchies: A lab mate reminded him that he spoke too loudly and should lower his voice. In describing the comment in the interview, Yuan interpreted it to mean his Hankou way of speaking was too working-class and inappropriate in this "refined" academic setting. He further noted that the Hankou people were often perceived as "more vulgar" (更土), with their speech reminiscent of "delinquent girls" (小太妹) or "hooligans" (地痞流氓). These associations linked Yuan's dialectal heritage not only to social inappropriateness but also to class inferiority, prompting a lasting habit of self-monitoring. These ideological associations even conditioned how he used language to parent, as he chose to discipline his children in English exclusively: "There are a lot of bad words in *Wuhanhua*… Even in Wuhan, I hardly ever say those words. So I just feel that in that situation (of disciplining the kids), it might be a bit better to speak English" (在武汉话里面有很多不好的词……我在武汉都不怎么说这些词，我就觉得在那样的情况下，跟他说英文可能好一点点). By speaking English, he distanced himself from the coarseness that *Wuhanhua* indexed, becoming a harsh parent without slipping into the profanity that *Wuhanhua* might trigger.

During the pandemic, Wuhan and *Wuhanhua* to Yuan became more than just a place associated with his upbringing or socioeconomic class. Returning to the U.S. from Wuhan just one week before

[7] *wanguanzi* 弯管子 is a term in *Wuhanhua*. It literally translates to "bent pipe" or "crooked tube". Figuratively, it is used to describe something that is not standard, very awkward, or unauthentic, specifically referring to the way a person speaks.

the city's lockdown placed him under unexpected scrutiny. He documented his journey through social media posts, initially unaware that his association with Wuhan could already provoke concern among others. When a parent from his children's school noticed his posts and informed the teacher, Yuan was advised by the latter to not advertise his Wuhan origin and stop sharing these updates. Similarly, his co-workers urged him to stay home, while signs advocating mask use were posted throughout his workplace.

Even though Yuan followed the advice and censored himself on social media by avoiding talking about his recent trip from Wuhan, he interpreted these incidents as merely a sign of people's concern about Wuhan as the epicenter of the pandemic, rather than discrimination against people with Wuhan origins. Over time, his relationship with his Wuhanese identity further shifted to be a source of pride: Wuhan and COVID became his "favorite topics" (最爱谈论的话题) that he eagerly shared with new acquaintances: "I would readily tell them about what I experienced and saw in Wuhan" (我会主动讲自己在武汉的见闻和经历).

In comparison to Yuan's multilayered relationship with Wuhan and *Wuhanhua*, the mother Xinyi had a much simpler experience. She was raised in a residential compound with many military families (including her own family), where her parents had already abandoned their own dialects and used PTH as the lingua franca. She never felt that the Wuhan identity would imply any knowledge or competence in the local dialect: "I have never thought it this way" (我是从来没有这个想法的). For her, being "born and raised in Wuhan" (武汉生，武汉长) would be both adequate and sufficient to claim the Wuhan identity. As Xinyi's perspective framed Wuhan merely as her place of birth rather than her linguistic identity, she also used PTH as the dominant variety at home both as a child and now as an adult with her own children.

### *Wuhanhua: An Alternative Path*

Yuan and Xinyi's household interactions also manifest their dynamic and evolving relationship with Wuhan. Their interactions occurred mostly in PTH and English, including intergenerational conversations during family visits and video calls from China. Their two sons also used PTH or English in all family interactions: with each other, their parents, and visiting grandparents, regardless of the linguistic variety they were addressed in. Even though Yuan's parents spoke Wuhanhua with each other and to the couple, Yuan and Xinyi always responded only in PTH, a reversal that even Yuan found to be "strange." In his words:

> Excerpt 8:
>
> 有时候很奇怪，就是他们跟我说武汉话，我会跟他们说普通话，有时候视频的时候。因为比如说我现在在家里面，跟他们都是说普通话，然后突然接个视频，你要我突然一下子说武汉话，好像就觉得有点（……）就有点不太习惯。
>
> Sometimes it's very strange: when they [my parents] speak Wuhanhua to me, I'd reply in PTH… Because I speak PTH with my family at home all the time now. So if a video call comes in and I have to suddenly switch to Wuhanhua, it just feels a bit (…) I'm not used to it (anymore).

However, even though PTH and English dominated daily communication in their household, *Wuhanhua* took place as a curated activity. In a self-recorded video call with Xinyi's parents in Wuhan, a casual family chat evolved into a classroom-like dialect lesson led by Yuan:

Excerpt 9:

Grandma: 回不回去？回不回来？
Are you going back? Are you coming back?
Child: 不会说。
(I) don't know how to say (it).
Yuan: 不会说？不回，今年冇得时间回去。说。
(You) don't know how to say (it)? (Say you're) not coming back, (because there's) no time to go back this year. Say it.
Child: 要比赛。
(I) have a competition.
Yuan: 要比赛。老娘一个人回去。会不会说啊？老娘一个人回去。
(I) have a competition. (Say) mom is going back alone. Can you say it? Mom is going back alone.
Child: 老娘一个人回去。一个星期。
Mom is going back alone. [In PTH] One week.
Yuan: 哎，回去一个星期。我们就待这里。
Yeah, (she's) going back for one week. We'll stay here.
Grandma: 待这里。老娘一个人回去。
(You'll) stay here. Mom is going back alone.
((Yuan laughed.))
Child: 回去一个星期。说得很不顺。
Going back for one week. (My Wuhan) speech is very choppy.

In this excerpt, Yuan carefully scaffolded the child's responses, modeling complete sentences and eliciting repetition from the child. The episode concluded with the child's evaluation of his own performance in *Wuhanhua*, "very choppy." This entire episode transformed *Wuhanhua* from an everyday vernacular into an object of conscious learning and assessment. The structured, lesson-like interaction further evolved into a site for the redistribution of the ideological link between Wuhan and *Wuhanhua* later during the call. Yuan gave metapragmatic comments that distinguished between the Hankou accent (which he described as authentic) and other Wuhan accents. In doing so, Yuan socialized the child into what linguistically counted as *Wuhanhua* and the ideological link between *Wuhanhua* and the Wuhan identity.

In this very call, the children's reactions also show how *Wuhanhua* became a medium for deliberate performance of their heritage place identity to the grandparents. In the following excerpt, the elder son enthusiastically announced his intention to "perform" his *Wuhanhua* skills to his grandparents. Note how the father corrected the child's pronunciation of the verbal classifier 下 from /ɕia/ in PTH to /xa/ in *Wuhanhua*.

Excerpt 10:

Yuan: 家公爹爹回来了。家公爹爹。
[in *Wuhanhua*] Grandpa's home. Grandpa.
Child: 表演一下 **/ɕia/**……
[in *Wuhanhua*] (Let me) do a little performance…
((Child pronounced "a little"一下 as /i**ɕia**/ in PTH.))
Yuan: 表演一下**/xa/**。表演一下**/xa/**。
[in *Wuhanhua*] Do a little performance. Do a little performance.
((Yuan corrected the pronunciation of "a little" /i**ɕia**/ to /i**xa**/ in *Wuhanhua*))
Child: 表演一下**/xa/**。
[in *Wuhanhua*] Do a little performance
Yuan: 表演一下**/xa/**。
[in *Wuhanhua*] Do a little performance.
Child: 表演一下**/xa/**说……我的武汉话技术。
[in *Wuhanhua*] Do a little performance…of my *Wuhanhua* skills.

The father, Yuan, corrected the son several times here and insisted on their use of a Wuhan lexicogrammar feature that audibly contrasted with PTH. Even though everyone present could understand /ɕia/ and the child used /ɕia/ more naturally, /xa/ became constructed as a phonologically recognizable symbol that indexed Wuhan and could not be replaced by /ɕia/ in this episode.

Furthermore, the child's explicit announcement to "do a little performance" in *Wuhanhua* showed how the dialect changed to an emotionally meaningful milestone that could bond children with their families, like children's singing a newly learned song or playing an instrument for their families. Although *Wuhanhua* lost its practical usefulness in these interactions between the grandchildren and the grandparents, its indexical link to Wuhan transformed it into a tool for emotional bonding (Wang, 2022), turning heritage dialect practice into a shared family memory.

This was not the only occurrence in the family in which *Wuhanhua* was performed and preserved as a family memory. The father Yuan recorded a few other videos of the children performing these dialectal recitations and shared them online, cultivating a shared digital album that showcased the preservation of the Wuhan identity in his family. In addition, Yuan also created other learning opportunities for *Wuhanhua* by collecting nursery rhymes and local operas. In and through these performative moments, *Wuhanhua* remained a part of their family life that was lived, performed, and celebrated, even though it was not the family's intended target for their children's linguistic repertoire for communication.

The children also participated in the celebration of *Wuhanhua* in the family. During the recorded call with the grandparents, for example, one kid disrupted their family's PTH-dominant communication pattern by demanding the use of *Wuhanhua* from his parents and grandparents. Below is the excerpt:

Excerpt 11:

((Grandma and the parents were talking in PTH about shopping groceries online.))
((20 seconds later))
Child: 说武汉话！

[in *Wuhanhua*] Speak *Wuhanhua*!

The child asserted himself as an active participant in family language policy and policing here by demanding they use the dialect. The moment demonstrates children's agency and possible role in maintaining the heritage language and place identity.

## Discussion

The three transnational families in this study demonstrated strong adherence to standard language ideology in their language planning, consistently prioritizing PTH over *Wuhanhua* in parent-child communication and associating PTH as the language of a unified Chinese cultural, racial and ethnic heritage for their children. PTH competence was sometimes treated as the singular indicator of "good parenting" when they interacted with their families and friends in China, with their interviews referencing a sense of moral obligation as ethnically Chinese parents. These patterns point to both the significance and the hegemony of Mandarin in Chinese diasporic communities these days. While researchers have indicated that children from dialect families may experience identity and linguistic mismatch (Wu et al., 2013), what we uncover here is an organic process in which the parents were actively preferring PTH over their dialects in their family language policies and practices. These insights reveal another dimension of cultural assimilation that Chinese immigrant families in the U.S. may experience (He, 2025): To them, assimilation is simultaneously aligning their own and their children's language with both the Anglophone society and their ethnic communities' lingua franca.

Despite using PTH predominantly, the families navigated the role of *Wuhanhua* in heritage language transmission through markedly different approaches. Yuhan and Yifan demonstrated competing and unresolved ideologies: while Yuhan explicitly valued *Wuhanhua* for emotional intimacy with family in China, the couple taught their children PTH, creating contradictions between stated goals and actual practices. Dialectal transmission occurred unconsciously through ambient exposure, leading to Yuhan's surprised discovery that her son had acquired *Wuhanhua* features. Similarly, Ming and Meilin prioritized PTH consciously while transmitting *Wuhanhua* features unconsciously. In contrast, Yuan and Xinyi's approach was deliberately performative: rather than using *Wuhanhua* in daily communication, they curated structured "dialect lessons" during video calls, positioning *Wuhanhua* as cultural heritage to be documented and celebrated rather than a medium for routine family interaction.

Across these different approaches, performativity emerged as a common thread across all three families. Yuhan explicitly framed her *Wuhanhua* use during Wuhan visits as "performance" (表演), positioning dialect competence as a display of authentic place identity. Ming and Meilin's presentation of their daughter's PTH competence to relatives and friends functioned as performative evidence of successful parenting and cultural maintenance. Yuan's curated dialect lessons staged *Wuhanhua* speaking as an educational performance worth being documented. These patterns suggest that heritage language practices in these transnational families operated not only as communication but also as performative acts constructing family identity and cultural legitimacy across different social contexts.

In addition, all three families experienced moments in which they engaged, either implicitly or explicitly, in the transmission of *Wuhanhua* and the place identity of Wuhan, despite a complete lack of institutional support for such transmission. These moments were intensely emotional (Song & Wu, 2023) but not negative, as some previous research indicated (Wang, 2022). Rather, because *Wuhanhua* transmission was often incidental in our findings, the children's ability to use or understand it often

became pleasant surprises, even triggering parents' improvised teaching of *Wuhanhua* in a classroom-like manner (as in the case of Yuan).

These observations bring more nuance to the previous research on heritage language maintenance and its identity and emotional implications. As heritage language maintenance is inherently associated with transnational migration (Kwon, 2022), for too long, scholarly attention has been focused on the categorical identities of "nation" and "nationality" without sufficient attention to other aspects of identities that may be associated with the heritage. Despite the parents' prevailing orientation towards PTH as their primary home language, multidialecticism remained resilient (albeit marginalized) in our findings. This illustrates the complex and dynamic nature of the heritage language and identity as not just a transnational but also a translocal phenomenon: heritage language transmission in these families is not simply about maintaining a national or ethnic linguistic identity, but also about preserving the indexical link between language and a specific place that PTH alone cannot carry. These observations call for further investigations into how immigrant families organize their linguistic and social lives around not just their ethnoracial heritage but also their place-based identities and more.

Finally, examining how the standard language ideology and monoglossic ideology linking language to national/ethnic identity organized linguistic practices in these Wuhanese families (who arguably were at the forefront of cultural and racial stigma at the time of our study), brings important nuances to family language maintenance in the multilingual turn (Ortega, 2013). Regional varieties and discourses about place (Johnstone, 2013) remain a vehicle for emotional intimacy in these transnational Chinese families, even when the very place such linguistic practices may index is associated with stigma globally. While our study was situated in the post-pandemic context when Wuhan was globally associated with COVID-19, the families' language choices were not uniformly shaped by pandemic-related stigma. Rather, the pandemic served as a backdrop that heightened awareness of place identity more broadly. For one family, it meant increased pride in their place identity, while for the second it became another factor in their strategic risk calculations of identity and social lives. For the third, the pandemic renewed their appreciation for emotional connections through dialect and place. The varied responses suggest that disaster or stigma do not condition family dialect practices in predictable ways, but rather these practices are connected to families' multifaceted histories to place, as well as their ideologies and family dynamics. Our hope in sharing these stories here, therefore, is not just promoting more scholarly attention to the interplay between the local and the global in the family setting, but also to awakenings and negotiations of linguistic heritage in the context of disaster, disease, and trauma.

Our study is not without limitations. While the linguistic focus here, *Wuhanhua*, has been selected because of the historic context of the study, it is a dialect of Southwest Mandarin and can often be mutually comprehensible with PTH. The children's incidental learning of certain features of it, therefore, may have been facilitated by the fact that they could still access its meaning while overhearing their parents' use. Given the many diverse sociolinguistic varieties that Chinese diaspora families and communities may use (e.g., Cantonese), it is not clear to what extent such incidental learning may take place with other varieties that are not mutually intelligible with PTH. Moreover, the focal families in our study never questioned their ethnic, racial, or even national Chineseness, which may not always be the case (Wong et al., 2021). In addition, though the audio-recorded family interactions allowed us to explore how these families' relationship to Wuhan and *Wuhanhua* was (re)negotiated in their family discourse, we were only able to gather those recordings from one of the three focal families (Yuan and Xinyi). In their case, these recordings were often used to highlight *Wuhanhua*, to the extent that it became performative (i.e., the recorded dialect lesson). While moments like those underscored how the very presence of our research instrument became seen as a means for the family to construct their sense of place in relation to their shared family memory, it is intriguing

to wonder what they would have done apart from this context. With these observations, we also urge future researchers to further explore different methodological possibilities to document transnational families' complex language experiences and identities.

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