

Child Agency in Transnational Migration to Canada:  
How Does the Migration Affect Chinese-Japanese Children’s “Investment”  
in Japanese as a Heritage Language?

カナダへの国際移動における子どもの行為者性：  
国際移動は日中国際結婚家庭の子どもの継承日本語学習「投資」に、  
どのような影響を与えたのか？

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## 1. Introduction

The phenomenon of intense globalization, accompanied by the rise in transnational migrants, has resulted in a marked increase in multilingual families across various geographical regions (Lanza & Curdt-Christiansen, 2018; Lanza & Li Wei, 2016; Li Wei, 2012). The present research explores the relationship between transnational migration and children’s agency (hereafter, child agency) in the context of the overseas learning of Japanese as a heritage language. In consideration of the emerging character of the thematic issue under review, the present research is exploratory in nature. This study analyzes the life story of a Japanese mother, with a particular focus on her observation of child agency as a parent of two Chinese-Japanese children. The participant has resided primarily in China and has experienced a one-year stay in Canada.

The notion of child agency is regarded as an emerging concept, particularly within the domain of Family Language Policy (FLP) (Fogle & King, 2013; King, 2016). FLP, as an interdisciplinary field, encompasses both explicit and implicit language-related decisions and practices within a multilingual family (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009; King et al., 2008; Hirsch & Lee, 2018). While parents are often considered to wield more influence than children in decision-making related to FLP, current FLP research increasingly acknowledges the importance of child agency in FLP development. In this context, child agency is defined as the active role and influence of children in the shaping of parents’ language behaviors and practices (Fogle & King, 2013). The concept of child agency provides a reinterpretation of the prevailing notion in earlier FLP research that parents function as “language policy makers” while children are regarded as “the mere recipients of the FLP” (Wilson, 2020, p. 5).

The present research is supported by life-story narrative data primarily obtained from three types of data sources, including a semi-structured interview with a Japanese mother of a Chinese-Japanese family. The investigation, designed as a case study of FLP research, explores the following research question: What are the impacts of family transnational migration to Canada on the development of FLP in a Chinese-Japanese family, with a focus on children’s “investment” (Norton, 2013; Norton-Peirce, 1995) as a form of child agency in learning Japanese as a heritage language?

## 2. Literature Review of Child Agency in FLP Research

The concept of child agency proposes an alternative viewpoint, asserting that both children and parents function as dynamic and influential agents in the development of

FLP (Fogle & King, 2013; Gafaranga, 2010; Revis, 2019). In this regard, children play a pivotal role in formulating FLP through their “language and identity choices” (Wilson, 2020, p. 5). This section explores insights into child agency from prior FLP research (Section 2.1). Furthermore, it examines research on the sociolinguistic environments surrounding children in intermarried and transnational families, exploring the linguistically ecological contexts of child agency (Section 2.2).

### **2.1 Forms of Child Agency in Transnational Families**

Extant research identifies four primary forms of child agency in practice. These forms include: (1) metalinguistic comments, (2) medium requests, (3) language brokering, and (4) facilitation of parents’ sociocultural integration into the host society. Metalinguistic comments are defined as explicit evaluations of intrafamilial language choice by children, addressing children’s self-identification with regard to ethnicity and the expectations they have for their parents’ language proficiency (Fogle & King, 2013; Revis, 2019; Smith-Christmas, 2016). For instance, in Revis’s (2019) study, a six-year-old Ethiopian child born in New Zealand exhibited reluctance to switch to Amharic, her heritage language, preferring to identify as “kiwi”, a term used to denote a local person in New Zealand (p. 183). This reluctance was attributed to the child’s perception of Amharic as a potential cause of discrimination at school, leading to a perceived threat to her identity.

The medium request has been identified as another form of manifestation of child agency in extant FLP research (Curdt-Christiansen, 2013; Fogle & King, 2013; Gafaranga, 2010; Tuominen, 1999). In this form of agency, children frequently demonstrate resistance to their parents’ linguistic choices by persistently speaking their preferred language, particularly the majority language in the host society, despite parents’ efforts to transition to their native language (Revis, 2019). For instance, Gafaranga’s (2010) study of a Rwandan community in Belgium revealed a shift in language use from Kinyarwanda-French bilingualism to French monolingualism. The analysis demonstrated that unidirectional medium requests emerged as a pivotal factor in this transition. Specifically, younger community members exhibited an indirect yet persistent demand for their adult counterparts to “medium-switch” from Kinyarwanda to French (*ibid.*, p. 241). Furthermore, Tuominen’s (1999) study demonstrated that children in multilingual families in the U.S. predominantly assume the initiative in determining their home language, thereby counteracting parental efforts to pass down their native languages other than English.

The role of children in language brokering has been demonstrated in various contexts, particularly in immigrant settings (Guo, 2014; Revis, 2019; Valdés, 2003). In such contexts, children frequently function as interpreters for their parents within the host society, serving as a bridge by translating the primary language. This phenomenon can be attributed, at least in part, to the increasing development of linguistic and cultural capital that children gain through their exposure to the language and culture of the majority group (Revis, 2019). Furthermore, children can play a pivotal role in facilitating their parents’ integration into the host society by leveraging their own linguistic and cultural capital. As children who have been born and raised in the host society are more likely to use the majority language, they tend to develop a more profound and accelerated understanding of the majority culture (or legitimate culture) compared to their parents

(ibid.). The subsequent section will focus on the facet of children's sociolinguistic experience that is a contextual factor for such child agency.

## **2.2 Children's Sociolinguistic Experience in Transnational Families**

In transnational families, including intermarried families, children frequently find themselves embedded within a sociolinguistic environment characterized by a division between home and other domains, where different primary languages are spoken. In such cases, the language used in the family environment is often designated as a "heritage language". These children often gravitate toward the dominant language of a wider society outside the family domain as they engage with the mainstream education system (Wilson, 2020). The limited use of minority languages, confined to the family environment, coupled with the limited accessibility of educational resources for children in transnational families, poses significant challenges to these individuals in achieving high proficiency in their heritage language, particularly in its official forms. The variability in proficiency among heritage speakers can be attributed to these factors (ibid.).

In the context of "monoglot" language ideology (Silverstein, 1996), the proficiency of heritage speakers can be regarded as "limited" from the perspective of "native" speakers. However, some research proposes an alternative perspective on the sociolinguistic environment of heritage speakers. This perspective posits that heritage language can be regarded as a "contact" variety (Guijarro-Fuentes & Schmitz, 2015; Valdés, 2005; Wilson, 2020). Valdés (2005), for instance, argues that heritage language is defined as "in contact" (Weinreich, 1974) due to its inherent characteristics within a specific sociolinguistic context, wherein different languages are employed in an alternated manner by the same speakers when engaging in communicative activities.

In intermarried families, particularly when implementing the One Parent-One Language (OPOL) strategy, such "contact" situations are particularly salient in the family domain from the perspective of the children. In such socio-linguistically unique environments, child agency can manifest in a distinct manner. However, the majority of extant child agency studies have centered on immigrant contexts, with a particular focus on multilingual families as they navigate processes of integration within the host society. Consequently, a considerable portion of extant research has centered on the discord between parents' expectations and children's agency regarding intrafamilial language selection. For this reason, subsequent exploration of child agency in the context of multilingual intermarried families is imperative to ensure that current and future FLP research can fully capture an expanded form of child agency.

## **3. Methodology**

This study draws upon a life story narrative data set, integrating three sources of data collected from both informal and formal contexts. One type of source is observational, collected during informal group gatherings of Japanese women married to Chinese husbands in China, ranging from 2021 to the present. Another source is formal, and consists of a one-on-one semi-structured interview conducted with a Japanese mother of a Chinese-Japanese family in July 2021, with an approximate duration of 40 minutes.

The primary language used in the interview was Japanese. Third, informal sources are employed in the form of text message exchanges with the mother.

The participant, Ms. T (pseudonym), is a Japanese mother with a Chinese-Japanese family background who has resided in China for over two decades. During this period, the participant also experienced a year-long migration to Canada. She has two teenage Chinese-Japanese children, a daughter and a son who are Japanese nationals. The family resided in Canada, during which time her daughter was enrolled in the fifth grade at an elementary school and her son was in the third grade. According to her self-reported FLP, the linguistic environment in her family prior to their migration to Canada was predominantly Chinese, despite Ms. T's efforts to pursue heritage language education in Japanese. This phenomenon is potentially attributable, at least in part, to Ms. T's high proficiency in the Chinese language.

The selection of Ms. T as a participant was based on her alignment with the predefined criteria, which included a rich life story of bilingual child rearing overseas and transnational migration to Canada. Through her involvement in a community of Japanese women married to Chinese husbands in Beijing (hereafter, Community A), Ms. T and I have become acquainted. This distinctive vantage point has furnished the researcher with access to a rich array of nuanced information. Concomitantly, however, this positionality has given rise to a challenge pertinent to my role as a researcher. For instance, the limited size of Community A has the potential to impede participants' willingness to engage in candid discourse on sensitive, personal matters. This underscores the necessity for a multifaceted approach, incorporating both formal and informal sources of data.

#### **4. Findings and Discussion**

An analysis of the participants' life-story narrative data concerning the FLP development reveals three primary influences of the migration to Canada on child agency. First, Ms. T noted that her children exhibited an enriched sense of acceptance regarding their identities, which encompassed both Japanese and Chinese roots, as a consequence of the migration process. Extract 1 demonstrates these changes in Ms. T's son. In the following extracts, the researcher translated the interview data from Japanese to English.

##### **Extract 1: Influence of Migration to Canada on Children's Perception of Identity**

"[...] There are Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, and many other nationalities there in Canada, as well as local Canadians. People there don't have strong biases based on ethnicity. I think my son has become more comfortable saying, "I'm Japanese," more casually. So, I think my kids have a positive sense of their own identities. This includes their nationalities and their attitudes toward Japanese and Chinese people."

[Interview Data-01, Ms. T, 2021-07-09-9'07-10'13]

As Ms. T's account in Extract 1 indicates, the shift in her son's perception of identities can be attributed to the Canadian atmosphere, which is perceived to be receptive to ethnic diversity. Prior to the migration, Ms. T reported that her children occasionally encountered difficulties disclosing their Japanese roots in school settings in

China. These difficulties are rooted in the intricate political dynamics between the two countries. Assuming the veracity of this observation, it can be posited that Ms. T's son might have engaged in "self-censorship", as defined by Bourdieu (1977, 1991). This hypothesis posits that Ms. T's son's decisions not to actively disclose his Japanese roots before the migration were motivated by a desire to adhere to societal norms surrounding him and avoid topics related to Japan. In such cases, under explicit and implicit societal norms he identified, topics were avoided that could have led to unfavorable consequences.

In this context, the social networks and friendships of the children can be conceptualized as a micro-scale "linguistic market" (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991), which exerts a significant influence on their development of cultural and linguistic norms. Consequently, Ms. T's son strategically adapted his discursive and identity choices in Chinese school settings prior to the migration. Specifically, he opted not to overtly discuss his Japanese cultural origins. This decision was influenced by his surrounding linguistic environment and social context. In this case, the migration to Canada resulted in alterations to the quality of the local linguistic market, owing to changes in social networks and friendships, as well as the transition to a new country.

Second, an original role of an intrafamilial language broker is observed in Ms. T's family, which was assigned to her son, following his heightened acceptance of his Japanese roots in conjunction with other factors. In this new role, Ms. T's son functions as a linguistic facilitator, translating Japanese, a language Ms. T speaks, into Chinese for his Chinese father. Extract 2 presents Ms. T's account of her son's new role.

**Extract 2: The Role of an Intrafamilial Language Broker**

"When we get together, sometimes, I speak Japanese, and my son interprets for his father, my husband."

[Interview Data-02, Ms. T, 2021-07-09-8'25-8'37]

This particular form of child agency has not been adequately examined in previous FLP studies (Section 2.1). This form of child agency, in which a child functions as an interpreter for parents with different first languages, appears to be particularly evident in intermarried multilingual families, such as Chinese-Japanese families, as observed in the present research. In contrast to the language broker role observed in the previous FLP research, the role of intrafamilial language broker is not necessarily manifested for the necessity or practical requirement of parents' integration into the host society. Given Ms. T's fluency in Chinese, the focal point of the new role is the engagement of Ms. T's son in the learning of Japanese as a heritage language in an informal setting.

Third, in contrast to Ms. T's son, transnational migration to Canada has the potential to engender ambivalent consequences with regard to child agency. The decision to invest in learning Japanese as a heritage language is contingent on the child's individual disposition and unique circumstances. Extract 3 illustrates the repercussions of the migration on Ms. T's daughter.

### **Extract 3: Changes in the Composition of the Daughter's Linguistic Repertoires**

“In Canada, her English improved dramatically. Until then, (the hierarchy of my daughter's linguistic repertoires was) Chinese, followed by Japanese and English, with no clear distinction between the latter two. But then, her Chinese and English skills became equal, with her Japanese skills definitely coming in last.”

[Interview Data-03, Ms. T, 2021-07-09- 3'25-3'54]

In Extract 3, Ms. T has articulated that the migration to Canada has led to a change in her daughter's trilingual language hierarchy, encompassing Chinese, Japanese, and English. According to Ms. T, while Chinese was consistently positioned as her daughter's primary language, English increasingly emerged as a more dominant repertoire in Canada in comparison to Japanese. Consequently, Ms. T's temporal reluctance to invest in heritage language education of Japanese in Canada, in the case of her daughter, was precipitated by this change.

## **5. Conclusion**

The present research, which is of an exploratory nature, has investigated the impact of transnational migration from China to Canada on the agency of Chinese-Japanese children. The focal point of this investigation has been the children's investment in learning Japanese as a heritage language. The findings of this research uniquely suggest the following two primary insights in the context of extant FLP research. First, it is imperative to understand the emerging trend of children's investment in learning Japanese as a heritage language in the context of ongoing transnational migration, which leads to constant changes in children's micro-scale “linguistic market” (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991). This phenomenon stands in contrast to the conventional transnational trajectory, which has predominantly resulted in the settlement of individuals in a single foreign nation, such as Canada. Second, this research proposes a novel form of child agency: the role of intrafamilial language broker. Intrafamilial informal learning may play a pivotal role in Japanese heritage language education, particularly in everyday interactions within the family domain.

The present research is constrained by its focus on a single Japanese mother's life story narrative data in a Chinese-Japanese family. In order to ensure an adequate understanding of the diversity of multilingual families' experiences in future research, it is essential to expand the scope of data sources. Such data sources, for example, include the observation of practical family interactions and life story accounts of Chinese-Japanese children who experience transnational migration. Consequently, subsequent research endeavors will contribute to our understanding of the multifaceted quality of FLP and the diverse forms of investment in learning Japanese as a heritage language in transnational contexts, notably in Canada.

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