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# San Francisco Chinatown: Transnationalism, identity construction, and heritage language maintenance

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Sino-Amerikaner sind eine sichtbare Minderheit in San Francisco und tragen merklich zur kulturellen und sprachlichen Zusammensetzung der Stadt bei. Seit der Ankunft der ersten chinesischen Immigranten Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts, befindet sich Chinatown in einer zentralen Lage in San Francisco und kann auch heute noch als "ethnische Enklave" bezeichnet werden. Zahlreiche Institutionen und Organisation sind auf die Bedürfnisse der *community* ausgerichtet und fördern das Fortbestehen der chinesischen Kultur in der Stadt. Sprachlich zeigt Chinatown eine grosse Vielfalt mit Kantonesisch als dominanter chinesischer Sprache und mit Englisch als Sprache des sozialen und wirtschaftlichen Aufstiegs.

Dieser Artikel befasst sich mit der Auswirkung von Transnationalismus auf Sprachwahl und Identität (cf. Vertovec 1999, 2001) und beleuchtet, wie sich verschiedene Einwanderergenerationen in Bezug auf transnationale Beziehungen sowie Beziehungen mit der Mehrheitsgesellschaft unterscheiden. Basierend auf dieser Diskussion wird hinterfragt, wie sich Globalisierung und der Aufstieg Chinas auf den "Sprachenmarkt" (Bourdieu 1979; Blommaert 2010) in San Francisco und auf Entscheidungen bezüglich Spracherhalt und Sprachwechsel auswirken.

## **Stichwörter:**

Transnationalismus, Identität, Spracherhalt, San Francisco Chinatown, Erst- und Zweitgeneration Sino-Amerikaner.

## **1. Introduction**

San Francisco is home to North America's oldest diaspora community, the Chinese American community of Chinatown. Chinatown can trace its beginnings back to the mid-19th century and therefore looks back on a long and on-going history of migration. Two waves of migration are central to the formation of today's Chinese American community. This first wave dates back to the 19th century with immigrants originating mainly from Guangdong province in the south of China and from Hong Kong. The second wave started as a result of economic reforms in China in the 1960s, and as a consequence of improving relations between China and the United States. Following these political and economic changes, immigration from other parts of the Mainland as well as from Taiwan became more substantial.

In the city of San Francisco, Chinatown constitutes what can be described as an "ethnic enclave": a community that is largely isolated from mainstream society and where heritage culture and language are maintained and prosper. This enclave status is further sustained by various kinds of organisations that

cater to the community's specific needs. In Chinatown, these include various businesses, grocery shops, a hospital as well as a library branch. As many of these institutions offer services in Chinese, some inhabitants may choose to circumnavigate engaging with the mainstream society or acquiring the mainstream language, i.e. English. This fact leads to a linguistic situation where Chinese languages are dominant in many domains of everyday life. The most widespread languages are a standard form of Cantonese, as spoken in Guangdong, and a dialect of Cantonese, namely Taishanese. English is generally spoken by the children of the immigrant generation and to a lesser degree by first-generation speakers. Additionally, due to the changing role of China as a political and economic superpower, Mandarin is gaining in currency in the community. Participants in this study either have Cantonese or Taishanese as their heritage language, with the second-generation being English-dominant, whereas first generation participants are still largely learners of English.

The present paper is based on a chapter of my doctoral project<sup>1</sup> on the interplay of language and identity construction in first- and second-generation<sup>2</sup> inhabitants of San Francisco Chinatown. The focus of this article is on the transnational nature of the Chinatown community, as seen both from a historical, as well as from the perspective of current inhabitants of the community. By analysing interview data I collected during several field trips to San Francisco between 2012 and 2014, I aim to investigate to what extent this particular community is transnational, i.e. maintains ties with China – both physical and symbolic, and how transnationalism might affect local language practices, language maintenance, and identity.

Despite its status as minority-majority – 21.4 per cent of San Francisco's population identify as Chinese – the Chinese American community of San Francisco represents relatively uncharted territory with regard to sociolinguistic analysis. This paper is another step towards filling this gap by providing a fresh look at the connection between transnationalism, immigrant generations, and linguistic choices.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the qualitative and quantitative analysis of the variable use of morpho-syntactic features across different speech settings (sociolinguistic interviews and topic oriented discussions), and with different interlocutors (in-group and out-group), this dissertation aims to investigate how first- and second-generation Chinese Americans index ethnicity linguistically, and how they position themselves with regard to matters of language and identity (Edwards 2009; Fought 2010; Fishman & Garcia 2010 provide early discussions on the interplay of language and identity).

<sup>2</sup> Here, generation refers to immigrant generation, i.e. first-generation are those who were born in China and immigrated to the United States, second-generation Chinese Americans are the American-born children of the first generation (both parents), or those Chinese Americans who immigrated to the United States before puberty.

## 2. Transnationalism

In this discussion of transnational Chinatown, I will take the issues raised by Vertovec as starting point and will address the questions he formulated in an article on transnationalism and identity (Vertovec 2001: 577):

- a) How exclusive is transnationalism to the first-generation of migrants?
- b) Will the so-called 'second-generation' [...] also maintain socio-cultural, economic and political ties of some kind (if so, what kind?) with homelands and with co-ethnic members around the world?

And finally,

- c) How do such transnational ties influence an individual's identity and linguistic behaviour?

The present paper thus adds to the increasing research on transnational communities and individuals, a field that has gained currency in the past three decades (e.g., Keohane & Nye 1972; Glick Schiller et al. 1992, 1995; Portes et al. 1999; Portes 2003; Vertovec 2001, 2003). As a result of globalization and internationalisation, migration is intensifying and societies become more and more interconnected. Cross-border practices of migrants may, therefore, increasingly influence communities in sending as well as receiving countries, not least with regard to language practices. According to Glick Schiller et al. (1992:1), the focus of studies on transnationalism is no longer merely on corporations operating across various countries, but on "processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement". Amongst others, these fields can be familial, social, or economic in nature (ibid.). While in 1992, Glick Schiller et al. argued that current transnationalism marks a new form of migration, in a later paper they point to the importance of adopting a historical perspective when investigating globalization and transnationalism to fully capture the reconfiguration of these two phenomena (Szanton Blanc et al. 1995). This is echoed in Portes (2003: 874-875) who states that

[t]he debate about whether there is "anything new" about the practices labelled today transnational appears to have been settled with the recognition that there are abundant precedents in immigration history, but [...] the phenomenon has been give a big push by the advent of new technologies in transportation and telecommunications.

Together with social contexts that are "much more tolerant of ethnic diversity (Levitt et al. 2003: 569), the rapid progress made with regard to the above mentioned technologies means that migrants might "feel encouraged to maintain, if not celebrate, their social and cultural differences that are sustained through ties back home" (Levitt et al. 2003: 569). The present paper adopts a historical approach by providing a description of the development of transnationalism as regards the case of Chinatown (cf. Section 3) and by

investigating how transnationalism is practiced in the community today (cf. Section 4).

In the beginning, scholarship on transnationalism was mostly concerned with first-generation adult immigrants' sustained networks of social connections (Duff 2015: 57) and the ways in which these were "maintained, reinforced, and remain[ed] vital and growing" (Glick Schiller et al. 1992: 11). Glick Schiller et al. investigated the lives of these so-called "transmigrants" (1992: 1) to shed light on how transnational processes shaped and created "fluid and multiple identities grounded both in their society of origin and in the host societies" (1992: 11). More recently, however, the emphasis has been placed

on the mobility of children and youth as well; on virtual and psychological connectedness (and not just physical mobility and interactions); and on multigenerational experiences affecting languages, individuals, and communities in transnational spaces (Duff 2015: 57)

As will be discussed in this paper, Chinese American transnationalism encompasses both physical mobility as well as other means of transnational practices which may

include engagements with popular culture, new digital and other media [...] and interactions with community members (including relatives, near and far) who have their own transnational histories (Duff 2015: 76)

A first description of Chinese American transnationalism is provided by Ong (1993) in her article on flexible citizenship in Chinese diaspora communities. Ong describes transnationals who are characterised by having firmly established bases in both their country of origin and their host country and who are, in general, entrepreneurs who hail from Taiwan or the Mandarin speaking Chinese mainland. Li's (2016) edited volume introduces a more heterogeneous picture of Chinese transnationalism describing overseas Chinese as "superdiverse" (Vertovec 2007),

with individuals of vastly different migration motivations and experiences, different educations and socioeconomic backgrounds and statuses, different occupations, and different languages (Li 2016: 5)

Similar to Portes (2003) and Levitt et al. (2003), Li points to the importance of modern technologies and their affordances for maintaining transnational networks that allow migrants "to enhance their sense of connectedness and diasporic imagination" (2016: 7).

The Chinese Americans investigated in the present study depart from Ong's description of transnationals, as my participants have firm bases in their new "home" country and ties to China that vary both in kind and strength. The San Francisco Chinatown community thus adds to the communities described in Li (2016), providing additional evidence of "the variability and fluidity of identity configurations, linguistic practices and ideologies" (Li 2016: 11) by looking at transnational practices of another specific Chinese diaspora community. My aim is to show that in the case of San Francisco Chinatown, transnationalism

provides an analytic framework that allows to explain how different practices might be linked to different generations and how such practices can have different meanings within, but also across generations.

While transnationalism is not a new phenomenon (see Section 3), its potential effects on the social and linguistic practices in immigrant communities has not yet been analysed in-depth. Adding this framework to the analysis of such contexts might broaden our understanding of sociolinguistic settings in diaspora communities to help us make sense of changing value ascriptions with regard to linguistic choices.

### **3. Transnationalism in Chinatown: A historical perspective**

Ever since the first migrant workers settled in San Francisco, the Chinese have occupied a central location in the city and today Chinatown can still be found in what is almost its original location. To the north, Chinatown borders on the Italian neighbourhood, the wealthy Nob Hill and Russian Hill neighbourhoods lie to the west, the financial district to the east, and the famous Union square retail area to the south; all in all Chinatown covers an area of about 24 blocks and is home to a population of roughly 15.000 people. Similar to other early Chinese settlements in Asia and Europe, Chinatown had often been described as bachelor or sojourner community, owing to the perception that most Chinese migrant workers intended to move back to China as soon as they had earned enough money to make a living in their country of origin. Despite these early depictions, scholars like McKeown (1999a, 1999b, 2001), Hsu (2000) or Li (1999) have described the historical nature of transnationalism in these Chinese communities that were characterised by

transnational institutions, organizations, and personal connections that made migration into a viable economic strategy and stable system for the circulation of goods, people, information, and profit (McKeown 1999b: 317)

Therefore, when taking Vertovec's definition of transnationalism as referring to "multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the border of nation-states" (1999: 447), Chinatown was not simply transnational because it was the product of migration, but because, from the very beginning, various networks facilitating migration and communication between inhabitants of Chinatown and their families and businesses back in China were operating between different hubs in the US, Hong Kong and mainland China.

Chinese American transnationalism has its foundation in the first wave of migration which was caused by the California Gold rush of the 1840s and 1850s. The discovery of gold in America motivated tens of thousands of Chinese men to embark on the journey to San Francisco in the search of fortune, adventure, economic gain, and social advancement. Contrary to the early characterisations described above, most of these men were not bachelors but family men sent abroad by their families for practical economic

reasons. The families that were left behind were key in maintaining the good reputation of these men and it was the parents' and wives' responsibility to take care of the family altar and household in order to secure the family's patriline (McKeown 1999a: 97). The family members that remained in China, on the other hand, were dependent on the income of the migrant family member and as a result of the numerous migrants who needed to remain in contact with those left behind, various institutions facilitating the distribution of remittances or personal letters were established. As mentioned above, these institutions generally operated out of Hong Kong and sustained connections between the United States and the villages in south China. These organisations were often based on kinship, family name, or native place and were not only interested in supporting the migrant workers abroad, but established successful businesses that ensured the constant flow of people from south China to Chinese communities across the world (McKeown 1999b: 100). This network of associations and institutions laid the foundation of the diaspora community that exists in San Francisco today.

Many of the family associations or native place organisations still operate today and continue to support recent immigrants in their transition to the new environment, providing them with assistance in finding jobs or housing whilst offering a familiar environment to older first-generation Chinese Americans and more recent immigrants alike.

#### **4. Transnationalism in Chinatown today**

San Francisco Chinatown presents a special case of ethnic community: As an ethnic enclave, it is in many ways separated from mainstream society which enables members of the community to maintain their heritage culture without necessarily having to travel to their heritage country. Nevertheless, different forms of transnational ties exist across different immigrant generations and it is these ties and their effect on language maintenance or shift that are the focus of this section.

In this paper, questions a) – c) introduced above are addressed based on data from semi-structured sociolinguistic interviews that I conducted with both first- and second-generation Chinese Americans in Chinatown. The 27 interviews analysed here were all conducted in English<sup>3</sup> and lasted between 30 minutes and up to two hours and focused, among other topics, on personal experiences and attitudes with and towards the mainstream and heritage communities, self-identification and language use. All of the first-generation participants have lived in the United States for at least ten years and mostly come from the Taishanese-speaking part of Guangdong province. Three

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<sup>3</sup> The interviews were conducted in English because my doctoral project is situated within the field of variation sociolinguistics with the aim to identify potentially ethnic features in the English used by Chinese American speakers.

female first-generation participants were born in the 1970s, one in the 1960s. Of the men, two were born in the 1940s, two in the 1950s. The second-generation is divided into older and younger<sup>4</sup> to capture how changing attitudes towards Chinese Americans in the mainstream society have affected experiences in the community. All of the older second-generation participants no longer reside in Chinatown but have spent their youth and young adulthood in the community before moving to satellite Chinatowns<sup>5</sup> later in life. Many of the younger second-generation still live in Chinatown and actively participate in the community, some by working in fields that cater to the community specifically. The majority of participants have completed tertiary education. However, it was difficult for first-generation immigrants to find an occupation corresponding to their education and thus many first-generation participants are of a lower socio-economic background. The second generation can be characterised as middle class.

Linguistically, the second-generation can be described as being bilingual. However, while many second-generation participants were exposed to the heritage language<sup>6</sup> either at home or in Chinese school, English is the dominant language for these Chinese Americans. This can be explained by the fact that the second-generation went through the American schooling system. First-generation immigrants also speak English, albeit to a lesser degree. For the majority of second-generation speakers Mandarin is not (yet) part of their everyday repertoire, as will be discussed in Section 4.3. As regards terminology, *Chinese* is used interchangeably with *Cantonese*. In San Francisco, Cantonese still represents the dominant Chinese language and many participants referred to their heritage language as Chinese; only after I had asked for clarification would participants specify and say Cantonese. The distinction between language and dialect is somewhat blurred with regard to languages spoken in China. As discussed in Wiley et al. (2008: 69), Mandarin, or *Putonghua*, is the official language of China and generally the only variety of Chinese recognised, in China, as "language". The remaining regional varieties are customarily referred to as "dialects", or *fangyan* (Wiley et al. 2008: 69). This difficulty is reflected in the participant Heather's description of Mandarin and Cantonese in (1).

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<sup>4</sup> 'Older' refers to second-generation participants who were born between 1920-1959, 'younger' to those born after 1959, or who immigrated after 1965 at an age before puberty.

<sup>5</sup> Neighbourhoods that are predominantly Chinese and that were established once Chinese Americans were able to leave Chinatown and move to more affluent parts of San Francisco.

<sup>6</sup> The study was designed to only include participants with Cantonese (or Taishanese) as their heritage language. While different Chinese and Asian languages are spoken in Chinatown, Cantonese is still the predominant language and this sample thus representative of the general linguistic situation.

## (1)

The way I see it Mandarin is the formal version of Chinese and Cantonese is the layman's kind of version like there's a lot of slang involved like basically Mandarin is spoken as written and Cantonese has a lot more freedom with how your sentence structure and even the words like there're some word that cannot be written out basically and that's how I view it but I found I mean it's similar in the sense that is still the same language (Heather 2nd gen younger, female)

While this issue was not discussed in interviews, I generally asked what languages and dialects participants spoke and usually adopted the terms used by participants in the reminder of the conversation. Table 1 presents an overview of the number of participants per gender and generation.

	First-generation	Second-generation	
		Older	Younger
Female	5	4	6
Male	4	4	4

Table 1: Participants across generations

#### *4.1. Transitional ties across first- and second-generation Chinese Americans*

Transnational ties refer to contacts that immigrants maintain with their country of origin through, for example but not limited to, physical movement between their 'new' home and place of origin or heritage country. This section aims to provide answers to questions a) and b), discussing if transnationalism is exclusive to the first generation, and if it is not, to shed light on the nature of transnational ties within the second generation. With regard to transnational ties all but two of the first-generation participants have travelled back to China between two or four times. This is also the case for the second-generation informants who have either been to the Mainland or, as in one case, to Hong Kong. What is apparent is the different reasons between the generations for travelling to the home country or heritage country. For most first-generation Chinese Americans these trips entailed visiting family members and friends that still live in China and with whom they were in regular contact, mostly through the internet and across all age groups. Also, in one case, a female participant took frequent trips to China that were business related. Furthermore, all of the first-generation participants still consume Chinese media in order to stay informed with current affairs in China; comments (2) – (4) are illustrative of this practice:

(2)

Everyday I read the news in the internet and watch TV news it's really important (Fei 1st gen, female)<sup>7</sup>

(3)

I always concerned with Chinese news, I need the Chinese newspaper almost every day, I'm interested (Jingguo 1st gen, male)

(4)

I read Chinese and HK newspaper, I want to know, when we get together that I have an idea (Tsun 1st gen, male)

For the first-generation Chinese Americans interviewed here, China thus still represents a place they feel attached to and with which they remain connected through various channels, mostly through social contacts, enabled by digital media such as Skype, or the similar Chinese programme QQ.

In case of the second-generation, on the other hand, trips to China were predominantly touristy in nature. In addition to their travels, three younger second-generation women spent longer periods of time in China and these stays were related to their studies. Most informants of the second-generation do not have relatives in China anymore, and if they do, the relation is, in many cases, rather distant. Despite this distance, however, a lot of the second-generation participants have visited the villages their parents have come from and have stressed the importance of exploring their roots. At the same time, as exemplified by statements (5) – (7), they commented on feeling like tourists or even outsiders.

(5)

so you kind of feel like you're a tourist but the same time your interacting with his [the participant's father] friends at like a local level so like you're not completely a tourist; I like visiting but I wouldn't say that I like long-term living there, I'm not used to that kind of lifestyle (Justina 2nd gen, younger, female)

(6)

oh I felt like an outsider even though I look Chinese cos<sup>8</sup> I couldn't speak Mandarin I could speak my Toisan which is the southern dialect but the parts I went to in China were all mostly in the northern part (Carrie 2nd gen, older, female)

(7)

oh I'm a I'm tourist like I wanna experience how that feels I don't wanna like make any relations to anything that I might be from here or whatever (Andrew 2nd gen, younger, male)

Example (5) shows how participants can feel in-between. For this young woman China is a place she connects with through her parents and their

<sup>7</sup> To increase readability, the mark-up used in the transcripts as well as repetitions or hesitation markers were removed from the examples. All names used here are pseudonyms.

<sup>8</sup> The transcripts were not normalised to represent standard spelling but to resemble the participants' pronunciation and style.

friends. At the same time she is aware of her upbringing in the United States and feels that she would not be comfortable adapting to the Chinese lifestyle. In (6), the participant links her sense of distance to language. In Chinatown, she grew up speaking mainly Taishanese and being exposed to Mandarin speaking parts of China made her feel like an outsider. Finally, the male participant in (7) distances himself from China and, to a certain extent, from being Chinese as he claims that he wants nothing to do with China and does not want to be perceived as being from China.

An interesting point that many first-generation Chinese Americans have commented on is the growing economic power of China, a fact that seems to legitimize the re-identification with China and which also influences linguistic choices in families. This is especially emphasised by first-generation female informants with children, see (8) and (9).

(8)

now China is very good many times they send the email to me and say China is good good good here, every month they get more money (Fei 1st gen, female)

(9)

China is very strong in the world so Chinese speak the language if you know Chinese is for your better life I mean you can get a job easily I think so (Chrissy 1st gen, female)

Both participants note how the rise of China seems to positively affect the lives of their friends and family back in China, and speculate that their children might benefit from these changing circumstances if they learn to speak Mandarin. This point will be taken up again in Section 4.3.

The examples provided in this section seem to indicate that transnationalism exists across generations but that it takes different forms for first- and second-generation Chinese Americans, respectively. While first-generation speakers maintain physical and social ties to their country of origin, the second-generation mainly sees China as a place of tourism, rather than cultural identification or authenticity.

#### *4.2 Transnationalism and identity construction in the first generation*

With regard to identity, I aim to analyse the effect transnational ties have on individuals' social identity, rather than on their sense of 'self'. Social identity refers to group membership; a sense of belonging that "may be voluntary or imposed" (Brewer 1991). Traditionally, ethnicity is described as a social group that an individual may or may not feel allegiance to (Edwards 2009: 162). For migrants resident in a country where the mainstream ethnicity is different to their own, transnational ties might affect their sense of belong vis-à-vis the host community, and their community of origin.

As has emerged from the data, for first-generation participants, their old roots in China and the new ones they have laid down in America are involved in how

they construct and perceive their identity. While the second-generation can feel similarly in-between cultures, for the first-generation identity construction is more transnational. In case of the second-generation, identity seems to be negotiated based on a local, Chinatown-oriented model of "Chineseness", rather than on identification with China. Because of these differences in orientation, the focus in this section will only be on the first generation.

As can be seen in examples (10) to (12), these three women define their identity through both their Chinese background and their life in the United States. Even though they have obtained American citizenship, their Chinese roots strongly influence their identity and they all refer to themselves as being Chinese.

**(10)**

I'm still you know even though I'm open I adopt the American style but at the same time I still got 18 years of background from there ... because I was born and raised over there 18 years of background but yet I'm here so like a half-and-half ... I flip-flop too I'm American when it's better for me and I'm Chinese when it's better for me (Kirsten 1st gen, female)

**(11)**

I am Chinese because I am a citizen of America but now almost I'm Chinese ... I never say I'm American I natural say I'm Chinese (Chrissy 1st gen, female)

**(12)**

I always say I'm Chinese, I cannot say I'm American I'm American of Chinese citizenship because I wasn't born here so I can't say I'm American I'm Chinese I cannot change me, you don't have to say it people already see you're Chinese (Sandra 1st gen, female)

Despite the strong ties a lot of my first-generation participants have and feel with the Chinese culture and nation, they have developed different strategies to accommodate their American identity as well, as Kirsten states in example (10). "Flip-flopping" between identities is her strategy of making the most of both cultures and of accommodating her Chinese background and her new home. Sandra's comment in (12), however, shows how she feels that she cannot escape her Chinese identity, even if she wanted to. According to her, her physical appearance is enough for people to see that she is Chinese and this fact prevents her from being able to say that she's American.

For many first-generation Chinese Americans their links to China strongly define who they are and they nurture this part of their identity by keeping up-to-date with political and economic events in China through reading the news and through obtaining information on their country of origin through their family and friends. Having lived in America for at least ten years, however, has also affected their identity and many first-generation participants try to combine the different aspects of their complex identities.

### 4.3 Transnationalism and language maintenance

A central aim of the sociolinguistic interview was to investigate to what extent, in the participants' perception, identity is affected by language and linguistic choices, and vice versa. In many interviews, participants raised the issue of language and identity themselves; however, I further probed the relation by specifically asking if language played a role with regard to the participants' identity. For all participants across both generations, language is a key aspect to their identity construction, however, the connection is not always that straightforward, as shown in example (13).

(13)

Interviewer: And what role or what importance does your heritage language have to you you know is it part of your identity?

Heather: I mean it's [the heritage language] not a part but I have very big pride in it I guess ... yeah I would I'd say like the biggest role it plays is just how my pride in being Cantonese I mean other than that it like doesn't really play a part I'm sorry (Heather 2nd gen, younger, female)

Heather states twice that language does not play a big part for her but, at the same time, claims that she has a lot of pride in the language and that this is related to her being, very specifically, Cantonese. In many instances, the importance of language for an individual's identity was downplayed, only to be stressed later on in the interview. This may suggest that interaction between language and identity operates below the level of consciousness, a point that cannot be discussed here, but that might merit further investigation.

In connection to exterior factors of linguistic choices, like the economic and political rise of China, also affect language maintenance for the participants in this study. Originally, the linguistic market (Bourdieu 2007) in San Francisco Chinatown contained Cantonese and Taishanese, as well as English. The growing importance of China as an international economic player influences the linguistic market in Chinatown<sup>9</sup>. It adds Mandarin, the official language of China, to the linguistic tapestry and thus affects the value of the other languages contained therein.

With regard to language maintenance, many of the first-generation women are willing to give up their native language in favour of Mandarin, hoping that their children will have a brighter future and better job opportunities knowing Mandarin, which is widely spoken in China, rather than Cantonese, which is 'only' a local 'dialect' (14). In (15), Chrissy states that her daughter wants to learn Mandarin as she perceives the official language of Mainland China to be more useful than Cantonese.

<sup>9</sup> While the growing importance of China as a political and economic player on the global stage is likely to affect language learning on a national, as well as a global level, these issues will not be addressed here, as they go beyond the scope of this paper.

(14)

Kirsten: I want them to speak Mandarin to learn Mandarin because that's gonna be the future you know for job and for to in the future it's better for them

Interviewer: Do you want your children to speak your dialect?

Kirsten: No no use ... Just Mandarin but they will know some from me because we speak when I talk to my mum or any family from my side ... I already put her in a childcare centre they speak 90% of the staff there speak Mandarin ... I want her to learn that as really her first or second language (Kirsten 1st gen, female)

(15)

at home I speak Cantonese with them because I want them to learn more language yeah but also I speak Mandarin because my daughter ask me mummy Mandarin is more useful than Cantonese so you you need to everyday talk to me (Chrissy 1st gen, female)

Language is also an important identity marker for the second-generation. Contrary to the first-generation, however, the second-generation is more focused on the local dialect Taishanese and a more standard variety of Cantonese as spoken in the Guangdong province. In this generation, Mandarin is virtually non-existent. With regard to heritage language, the older second-generation strongly identifies through the regional variety Cantonese, or the local variety Taishanese, albeit, as (16) suggests, with somewhat mixed attitudes.

(16)

I think being that I look Chinese I'd better know some Chinese (Carrie 2nd gen older, female)

The fact that in (16), Carrie connects her physical appearance to language competence potentially alludes to expectations in society that Americans of Chinese descent must know Chinese in order to be Chinese. This conflation of language competence with phenotype represents an "essentialist association between proficiency and ethnic authenticity [that] can be very contentious (Duff 2014: 14), which is why I interpret this quote as signalling a rather problematic relation between "Chineseness" and knowing a Chinese language. In example (17), on the other hand, Eileen shows a very positive evaluation of the village dialect.

(17)

we speak to each other in our own dialect, but we love ours we're so proud of ours because there are so many funny slangs colloquialism that we love to throw around, and there's nothing like it in Chinese [=Cantonese] (Eileen 2nd gen, older, female)

For the younger second-generation, knowing Cantonese or the local dialect Taishanese is also very important and something they would like to pass on to future generations, see (18) and (19).

(18)

yeah I really want them to learn Chinese cos I think growing up in like America eventually you'll learn English like at school all your friends will speak English with you but Chinese is not something that you retain or you can learn easily growing up here (Laura 2nd, younger, female)

(19)

I would definitely want to pass it on as much as possible and probably force them to take Chinese school too but you know like definitely wanna pass it on and keep this going cos Cantonese in a way is a dying language also cos then it's not just here it's like China in general there uh Cantonese is becoming less and less important as Mandarin's becoming more and more important so yeah definitely wanna pass it on to you know my future kids or you now yeah (Wesley 2nd gen, younger, male)

Similar to Heather in (13), Wesley (19) emphasises the declining importance of Cantonese in China and links this to his desire to pass on the language to his children. During the interview, both Wesley and Heather commented on the steps the Chinese government has taken in promoting Mandarin in Cantonese speaking parts of China. Heather, especially, showed a high awareness of the issues concerning language policy in China, which might point to her transnational interests and to the importance that language can have in fostering such ties.

Some of the younger second-generation participants are mindful of the usefulness of Mandarin but their interest in the language seems based on a more local San Francisco orientation. Participants who speak Mandarin, and also those who do not, want to keep working with the Chinese community in Chinatown and Sun, in (20), even notices that a shift from Cantonese to Mandarin is taking place.

(20)

I don't speak Mandarin [...] I wished I wish in Chinese school they should have just taught us Mandarin that would have been great, they screwed a whole generation over by making us learn one way and then switched us, more and more Mandarin, a shift that happened as mainland grew economically I think eventually Cantonese is going to be less and less significant, in the business world now it's all about Mandarin (Sun 2nd gen, younger, male)

(21)

Students speak mostly Cantonese although you know I'm picking up quite a few terms in uh Mandarin I've gotten more and more you know northerners Mandarin speaking students at the campus and so I'm learning you know <O>laugh</O> picking up a few words here and there or if they yell at me or scream at me in Mandarin I think I understand quite a bit <O>laugh</O> (Paula 2nd gen, younger, female)

In both (20) and (21), the speakers point to the advantages Mandarin might have on their professional lives and Sun (20) even claims that not teaching the language in Chinese school *has screwed a whole generation over*. In (22), Mandarin is contrasted with Cantonese as Bob stresses that the first is more important on a global level, whereas the importance of Cantonese is diminishing:

(22)

Especially Mandarin's gonna be very important in the future [...] uhm it's the official language of China you know Cantonese I don't know it's important too yeah on a global level's diminishing but, yeah I mean that's what I've, grew up with, that was the first my first language (Bob 2<sup>nd</sup> gen, younger, male)

All the comments provided in this section point to the different values Chinese languages have in the community, and beyond. With regard to the value of Cantonese in general, and Taishanese in particular, the two languages seem to add to the speakers' social capital and to have mostly symbolic value that affects the speakers' identification with the Chinese culture and San Francisco Chinatown community. Mandarin, on the other hand, carries more economic value and is perceived as opening doors to economic success, possibly linked to job positions in China.

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of this article was to shed light on the transnational character of today's Chinatown by, on the one hand, providing a brief overview of its development in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and, on the other hand, by analysing transnational practices of different generations of Chinese Americans.

For the first-generation participants in this study, transnational practices are mostly familial in nature and trips back to China focus on visiting friends and family that still live in the country of origin. These types of ties differ from back-and-forth travel described e.g. in Ong (1993), where frequency is much higher and travel is largely due to entrepreneurial reasons. Nevertheless, I believe that this maintenance of social networks is indicative of the strong connection these first generation participants still feel to their country of origin. For the second-generation, China represents a place they travel to for tourism or to explore their roots. But even for those second-generation participants who have visited the villages their parents have come from, identification with the Chinese culture seems to be grounded in more local, Chinatown-based, rather than transnational practices. While the examples provided in this paper only highlight a small part of transnationalism in Chinatown, I believe that they give some indication of different orientations across different immigrant generations and on the different transnational practices existent within a specific community.

In connection to linguistic practices, my data show that the changing status of China as a global player does have some effect on ideologies about language. Within the second generation Cantonese, historically the main language spoken in San Francisco Chinatown, together with its variety Taishanese, are still the dominant languages. However, as competence in the heritage language wanes, the language(s) seems to have a largely symbolic function, serving as a marker of identification with the Chinatown community, rather

than with a global, transnational Chinese diaspora. Conversely, in the first-generation, Mandarin seems to be gaining more importance with participants in this study claiming that their children will have economic advantage if they know Mandarin, and not Cantonese or Taishanese. These findings resonate with many studies in Curdt-Christiansen and Hancock's (2014) edited volume on heritage language in Chinese diaspora communities. Curdt-Christiansen describes how subjects recognise "the 'commodity' value" of language and the high "market value of Mandarin, indicating the increasing economic power that Mandarin evokes" (2014: 45). In accordance with Li (2016), Setijadi (2016), Li & Zhu (2014), Li and Juffermans (2014), my data support the findings that the status of Chinese languages within a community is changing as a consequence of the rise of China to a political and economic superpower. Following Li's (2016: 9) schematic representation of polyglossia in the Chinese diaspora, Cantonese and Taishanese have high status within the community as medium of everyday communication, whereas Mandarin is a "High variety" both within the community – being used e.g. for political purposes – as well as beyond, where it serves more transnational purposes.

The small-scale study presented here has, to a certain extent, replicated trends found by Louie (2006), who investigated Chinese and Dominican American communities in New York. In her study, Louie found two main trends that differ across first- and second-generation Chinese Americans. Similar to the experiences described here, practiced transnationalism is more prevalent in the first-generation and exemplified through maintenance of personal ties (family/friends), and the consumption of Chinese media; for the second-generations transnational ties are more symbolic, based on an interest in one's own and the communities history and, possible, the consumption of entertainment in Cantonese (Louie 2006: 364). These findings provide answers to questions Vertovec's questions (2001: 577):

- a) How exclusive is transnationalism to the first-generation of migrants?
- b) Will the so-called 'second-generation' [...] also maintain socio-cultural, economic and political ties of some kind (if so, what kind?) with homelands and with co-ethnic members around the world?

While transnationalism is not exclusive to the first generation, the practices across the two generations point to different means of transnational orientation. With regard to question c) on linguistic choices, the present study echoes another of Louie's findings, namely that "[b]ilingual language fluency assumes a critical role in understanding transnational behaviors among the second-generation" (Louie 2006: 366). This resonates with the statements on the importance of language provided in the present study which highlight that competence in the heritage language is, albeit only symbolically in some cases, linked to both transnational as well as local orientations. As Louie states:

[...] second-generation children can engage in transnational attachments, and at the same time, develop ethnic identities that would have little meaning in the parental country of origin, and indeed, to their parents. (Louie 2006: 364)

As mentioned above, transnationalism differs across generations and seems to be more 'practiced' in the first-generation, especially through the maintenance of personal ties with China. The second-generation, on the other hand, shows a more localised, and symbolic form of transnationalism, perceiving China as the source of their cultural roots, while at the same time feeling more comfortable in the American society. What becomes apparent is that for all generations, identification with the heritage or home culture is perceived as valuable and beneficial on a social as well as an economic level. However, perceptions across generations differ with regard to the configuration of language as cultural or economic capital, respectively, with Cantonese and other local varieties mainly serving symbolic purposes. The rise of China has contributed to the positive evaluation of Mandarin as the language for future economic success and the more favourable political conditions between the US and China seem to support the possibility for identification with more than one culture and a focus on ethnic identity cum American mainstream identity, as opposed to total rejection of the former and complete assimilation into the latter. It remains to be seen if the increasing popularity of Mandarin will lead to linguistic tensions, especially with regard to language maintenance. While Mandarin is not yet dominant within the Chinatown community, some participants are worried about the future of their heritage language(s). At the time when data were collected, and presumably today still, the situation of Cantonese and Taishanese in San Francisco Chinatown was relatively stable. Based on the statements made by participants in the present study, it seems likely that several (Chinese) languages will coexist and assume different functions within the community. And while different immigration generations might have opposing opinions as regards the importance of language, multilingualism seems a likely, and favourable, outcome for the Chinese American community in San Francisco Chinatown.

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