

## The Impact of English as a Global Lingua Franca on American-born Chinese Families

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the increasing role of English as a global lingua franca and its impact on the familial structure of American-born Chinese families. This study examines the struggles they undergo from reconciling their need to preserve their Chinese culture while acclimating to their English-speaking environment. For example, the growing use of English by the younger generation can create a negative rift in the family dynamic of English-speaking children and parents or grandparents who speak very little or no English. This paper examines the factors of this complex situation via interviews with American-born Chinese, and attempts to identify the reasons why certain American-born Chinese are able to retain their parents' mother tongue. The study poses three questions: Is there an impact of English as a global lingua franca between the youngest generation and their parents? Is there an impact of English as a global lingua franca between the youngest generation and their grandparents? What are the factors allowing the youngest generation of American-born Chinese to retain their mother tongue?

**Keywords:** American-born Chinese, Chinese dialects, Chinese-Americans, English as a *lingua franca*, English as a second language, family generations, family relationship, heritage language, identity, immigration to the U.S., language loss, language maintenance, language shift

### 1. Introduction

The exchange of language is a necessary component to attain quality family relationships. Even though family members can show other family members they care via deeds or physical gestures, words are an invaluable tool for navigating through complex life experiences that affect the family dynamic. Wong Fillmore writes:

Talk is a crucial link between parents and children: It is how parents impart their cultures to their children and enable them to become the kind of men and women they want them to be. When parents lose the means for socializing and influencing their children, rifts develop and families lose the intimacy that comes from shared beliefs and understandings. (Fillmore, 1991, p. 343)

There are varying degrees of talk, ranging from 'small talk' to deeper discussions. Although 'small talk' by itself is not sufficient for attaining quality family relations, some family members have to resort to it because a language barrier prevents them from communicating beyond simple expressions. This affects the family because "when parents are unable to talk to their children, they cannot easily convey to them their values, beliefs, understandings... or what it means to be a moral or ethical person in a world with too many choices and too few guideposts to follow" (Fillmore, 1991, p. 343).

Language shifts amongst generations, not only between parents and their children, affect the family dynamic. For example, families of American-born Chinese often deal

with the repercussions of varying, and many times inadequate, language skills. However, diminished mutual understanding is not the only victim in these cases. The link between language and culture is quite close, and "... most of the culture is in the language and is expressed in the language. Take it away from the culture, and you take away its greetings, its curses, its praises, its laws, its literature, its songs..." (Fisherman, 1996, p. 81). Therefore, if future generations cannot speak their mother tongue, what will happen to their interactions with Chinese culture? In addition, passing cultural values down from one generation to the next will be very difficult with a language barrier, especially because parenting practices can be complex. The results of a study by Jean Cheng Gorman on the parenting practices of immigrant Chinese mothers found that:

Generally, direct confrontation is avoided in all relationships in order to prevent loss of face. These mothers may have been applying this relational principle to interactions with their children. Thus, rather than confronting children on their friendships, mothers sought to convey their feelings indirectly, allowing their children to "save face" and make the "correct" decision "on their own." In turn, the children learned to "read between the lines" and to ferret out the underlying message. (Gorman, 1998, p. 78)

Relations amongst generations can suffer more if the additional complexity of unequal language proficiencies is compounded onto very subtle communication. Yet, cultural and generational values are not the only entities at stake if communication is constrained by language; the language itself is at stake. A case study of Chinese immigrant children's home practices noticed:

...when parents choose to use HL [heritage language] at home and enforce a HL-only policy at home, the children tend to develop more positive attitude toward the language and higher levels of proficiency in the language and they also would more likely to continue to use the language even after exposure to English compared with children whose parents did not make this effort. (Li, 2006, p. 18)

The familial environment is a very strong factor for the younger generations to retain their mother tongue, especially when it has to compete with a more prevalent language, such as English. Fisherman says:

...a new generation does not wait until it goes to school to get its mother tongue. It usually gets its mother tongue at home in the community, in the neighborhood, among the loved ones – the ones shaping the identity of the child. And if that is what your language lacks, then that is a very serious problem indeed if you want to hand it on to another generation as a vernacular. (Fisherman, 1996, p. 88)

Newer generations of American-born Chinese are indeed facing increasing language loss, which can be defined as:

...the result of both internal and external forces operating on children. The internal factors have to do with the desire for social inclusion, conformity, and the need to communicate with others. The external forces are the sociopolitical ones operating in the society against outsiders, against differences, against diversity. (Fillmore, 2000, p. 208)

The youngest generation of American-born Chinese will need to work a lot harder to maintain their mother tongues and, by extension, keep as much as they can of Chinese culture. However, it will be difficult because:

Relative to the first generation, the process of ethnic self-identification of second-generation children is more complex and often entails the juggling of competing allegiances and attachments. Situated with two cultural worlds, they must define themselves in relation to multiple reference groups (sometimes in two countries and in two languages) and to the classifications into which they are placed by their native peers, schools, the ethnic community, and the larger society. (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, 150)

As an American-born Chinese who has lived in an area with a limited Chinese community, retaining and learning about Chinese culture is difficult when, the moment I step outside my family's home, very little reminds and teaches me of my Chinese roots. This study is important not only to see the effect that English as a global lingua franca has on American-born Chinese families, but also to identify the factors that enable them to be as proficient as possible in their mother tongue in order to slow down language loss. Many American-born Chinese feel the futility of attempting to learn their mother tongue, especially if a Chinese community or language partners are not easily accessible. However, discovering the reasons why certain American-born Chinese are able to speak their Chinese dialect proficiently might help guide others.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 The Study**

The primary tool used for this study was an in-depth questionnaire that targeted the youngest generation of American-born Chinese (see Appendix). With this survey, which included many open-ended questions and questions referring to a scale, respondents had greater flexibility to tailor their answers according to their own situations. However, this survey was also constructed with the goal of obtaining as much information as possible without making the questionnaire too long or complicated, which would negatively affect the number of responses returned. In general, the survey questions revolved around language proficiency, the languages spoken by the respondent to various family members and how the respondent felt about Chinese culture. The aim of the survey was to analyze how language proficiency affects family communication, as well as to attempt to identify the factors that account for certain American-born Chinese being able to retain their parents' mother tongue, while others do not. Thus, many of the survey questions are broad in scope to ensure as many factors as possible are taken into consideration. The survey was sent out electronically, in order to save time and resources. The survey questionnaire was initially sent to 35 people, along with an addendum asking that the survey be passed on to others. Ultimately, 27 people responded to the survey. Survey results were analyzed mainly by looking at certain averages and also by categorizing individual surveys based on respondents' answers to questions in order to look for commonalities within a group. Respondents' answers to the open-ended questions were

analyzed as well.

### 3. Results

The quantitative data the survey provided was analyzed according to the following categories: 1) respondents' answers to the question of how important it is to maintain the dialect their family speaks, 2) whether the respondent is the youngest or oldest sibling, and 3) the ease of communication between the respondent and his or her maternal and paternal grandparents.

#### 3.1 Ratings of Language Proficiency

The averages of the entire group, for the questions on language proficiency, are as follows:

Table 1. Average Ratings for Proficiency in English and Conversational Ability

	<b>Mother</b>	<b>Father</b>	<b>Maternal Grandparents</b>	<b>Paternal Grandparents</b>
Proficiency in English for:	3.62	3.89	1.77	1.98
Ability to have conversation with your:	3.89	3.88	2.48	2.71

Respondents were asked to rate family members' proficiency in English on a scale from 1-5, with '1' defined as 'understands and speaks no English,' and a '5' being defined as 'a native speaker of English.' All respondents rated the proficiency levels of their mother and father. There were 24 and 23 responses to the proficiency levels of maternal grandparents and paternal grandparents, respectively. Respondents were later asked to rate their ability to have conversations with those family members on a scale from 1-5, with '1' defined as 'very limited conversation' and '5' defined as 'can talk about anything.' There were 27 responses rating the proficiency of the mother, 26 responses rating the proficiency of the father, 23 responses rating the proficiency of maternal grandparents, and 21 responses rating the proficiency of paternal grandparents.

Table 2. Average Ratings of Own Proficiency in Languages and Importance of Dialect

<b>Own Proficiency in:</b>				<b>Importance of Maintaining Dialect</b>
<b>English</b>	<b>Mandarin</b>	<b>Cantonese</b>	<b>Other</b>	
4.94	2.36	2.47	1.50	3.54

Table 2 is the average rating for respondents' own proficiency in English, Mandarin, Cantonese and any other Chinese dialect on a scale from 1-5, with '1' defined as 'understands and speaks none of X language' and '5' defined as 'a native speaker of X language.' All respondents rated their proficiency in English. There were 18 responses for proficiency in Mandarin, 19 responses for proficiency in Cantonese, and nine responses for proficiency in another Chinese dialect. In addition, survey respondents were also

asked to rate how important it is for them to maintain the Chinese dialect their family speaks on a scale from 1-5, with '1' defined as 'not important at all' to '5' defined as 'extremely important.' Only one respondent, out of 27, did not rate the importance of maintaining his family dialect, stating, "I can't speak it myself so there is nothing to maintain. Not enough people speak [insert name of dialect] for it to have become useful for me."

### 3.2 Question Seven: The Importance of Maintaining Your Family Dialect

There were 26 responses to the question of how important it is for respondents to maintain the Chinese dialect their family speaks. The graph below totals each rating respondents chose on a scale of 1-5, with '1' defined as 'not important at all' and '5' defined as 'extremely important.'

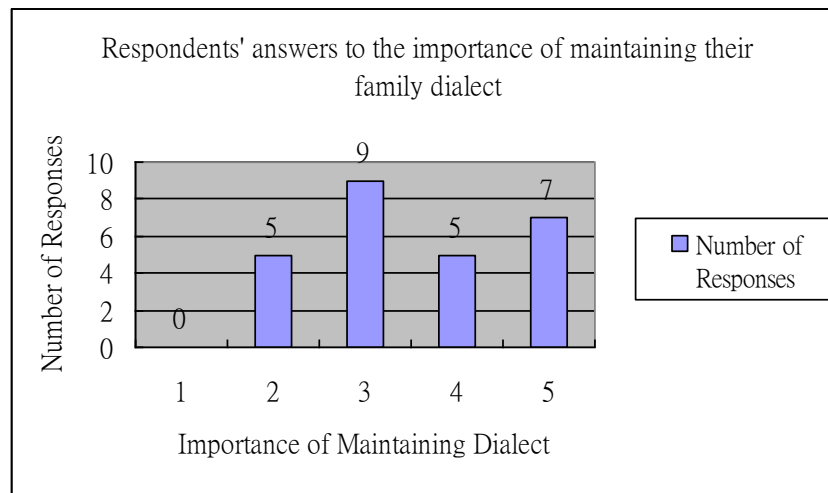


Figure 1. Responses to the Importance of Maintaining Family Dialect

As seen from the data above, no respondents thought that maintaining their Chinese dialect was not important at all. Nine respondents chose a '3,' which was the most common response.

#### 3.2.1 Respondents Who Chose a '2' out of '5'

Interestingly, all five respondents who chose '2' as their answer speak English to their mothers, fathers, siblings, maternal and paternal grandparents. In addition, four out of the five respondents had parents who were both born in the United States. The survey respondent who had one parent born in the United States and one parent born outside of the United States had five generations of family who had lived or were living in the United States, which was the highest number out of all 27 respondents. The table below lists data specifically focusing on the five respondents who chose a '2' out of '5':

Table 3. Averages for Respondents Who Chose a '2' out of '5'

	<b>Mother</b>	<b>Father</b>	<b>Maternal Grandparents</b>	<b>Paternal Grandparents</b>
Proficiency in English for:	4.4	4.6	3.4	2.75
Ability to have conversation with your:	4.8	4.5	3.4	3

The data above is significantly higher than all the averages for the entire group of respondents. With regard to proficiency in English, the differences in the averages of both groups are as follows: 0.78 for the mother, 0.71 for the father, 1.63 for maternal grandparents, and 0.77 for paternal grandparents. Respondents who chose a '2' always had higher averages when asked to rate their ability to converse with various family members. The differences in the averages of both groups are as follows: 0.91 for the mother, 0.62 for the father, 0.92 for maternal grandparents, and 0.29 for paternal grandparents. The differences in the averages, for both questions, were highest for maternal grandparents.

When asked about their language proficiency, the five respondents who chose '2' all listed '5' for English, which is very representative of the survey respondents as a whole. However, when asked about their proficiency in different Chinese dialects, everyone, except one person, either wrote a '1,' meaning they had no proficiency in the language, wrote 'N/A' or left the answer slot blank. When asked to explain why maintaining their family dialect is important or not so important to them, one survey respondent wrote, "my family never bothered to teach me, so I figured it wasn't important."

The sole survey respondent who did not follow this pattern listed a '2' for proficiency in Cantonese, which he learned "from family". His paternal grandmother only spoke Cantonese, which is why he chose a '2' when rating his ability to speak with paternal grandparents. He chose a '5', however, for his ability to converse with his mother, father and maternal grandparents. Even though he rated his Cantonese proficiency at a '2,' he mentioned that maintaining his family dialect is "not important because I do not know how to speak it. I wish I did however."

### 3.2.2 Respondents Who Chose a '3' out of '5'

Nine respondents chose a '3' when asked how important maintaining their family dialect was to them. Two sets of parents, out of nine sets, were born in the United States. Two of the respondents spoke English to all family members asked about on the survey, and are the same respondents whose parents were both born in the United States. The table below lists data about these nine respondents:

Table 4. Averages for Respondents Who Chose a '3' out of '5'

	<b>Mother</b>	<b>Father</b>	<b>Maternal Grandparents</b>	<b>Paternal Grandparents</b>
Proficiency in English for:	3.61	4.17	1.79	2.06
Ability to have conversation with your:	3.72	4.22	2.14	2.5

When compared with the average taken from the responses of all the respondents, the only substantial difference in the category of English proficiency was for the father. The nine respondents who chose a '3' out of '5' had a slightly higher average than the entire group, with a difference of 0.28. Regarding the ability to have conversation with various family members, these respondents' ability to converse with their fathers was the only average higher than the average of the entire group of 27, with a difference of 0.34. The rest of the averages for the group of respondents who chose a '3' were lower than the average for all survey respondents, with a difference of 0.17, 0.34, and 0.21 for the mother, maternal grandparents, and paternal grandparents, respectively.

When asked about their own language proficiency, only one respondent rated her English proficiency below a '5.' Out of the entire 27 respondents, this was the only respondent who rated her English below a '5'; all other respondents rated their English language proficiency as a '5.' This group also contained four respondents who rated their Mandarin proficiency at a '3' or higher. Only two respondents from this group had Cantonese-speaking ability, with both people rating their Cantonese proficiency at a '3' or higher.

### 3.2.3 Respondents Who Chose a '4' out of '5'

Five respondents chose a '4' out of '5.' Only one out of ten parents was born in the United States. There were no cases in which respondents spoke English to all family members surveyed. In addition, none of the respondents within this group spoke English to their maternal or paternal grandparents. The table below lists data for respondents who chose a '4' out of '5':

Table 5. Averages of respondents who chose a '4' out of '5'

	<b>Mother</b>	<b>Father</b>	<b>Maternal Grandparents</b>	<b>Paternal Grandparents</b>
Proficiency in English for:	3.1	4.1	1.0	1.4
Ability to have conversation with your:	2.8	3.4	1.5	1.7

In terms of English proficiency, the average for this group of five respondents was higher than the entire group of respondents just for the father, with a difference of 0.21. The group average for the mother, maternal grandparents and paternal grandparents were lower than the average for all 27 respondents, with a difference of 0.52, 0.77, and 0.58, respectively. In terms of conversational ability with various family members, the averages for this group of five were lower than the averages for the entire group of respondents. The differences in averages are as follows: 1.09 for the mother, 0.48 for the father, 0.98 for maternal grandparents, and 1.01 for paternal grandparents.

When asked about their language proficiency, two respondents stated a Mandarin proficiency of '3' or higher, and one respondent stated a Cantonese proficiency of '3.'

### 3.2.4 Respondents Who Chose a '5' out of '5'

When asked to rate the importance of maintaining their family dialect, seven respondents

chose a '5,' which is defined as 'extremely important.' All parents of these respondents were born outside of the United States. Furthermore, there were no cases of respondents speaking English to all family members asked about in the survey. None of the respondents spoke English to their maternal or paternal grandparents. For the respondents who chose a '5' out of '5,' six out of seven speak a Chinese dialect with their mother, father, maternal grandparents and paternal grandparents. One respondent, out of the six, speaks a mixture of English and Cantonese with her mother. The seventh respondent speaks English with her father and Mandarin with her mother. However, there were only two cases where a respondent mainly spoke in a Chinese dialect with his or her siblings. The remaining five respondents either spoke in English with their siblings or a mixture of English and a Chinese dialect, which happened in one case.

Listed below is the data for respondents who chose a '5' out of '5':

Table 6. Averages for Respondents Who Chose a '5' out of '5':

	<b>Mother</b>	<b>Father</b>	<b>Maternal Grandparents</b>	<b>Paternal Grandparents</b>
Proficiency in English for:	3.25	2.71	1	1.2
Ability to have conversation with your:	4.07	3.29	2.67	3

The average proficiency in English for various family members of respondents who chose a '5' out of '5' were always lower than the average for the 27 respondents as a whole. With regard to English proficiency, the differences in the averages of both groups are as follows: 0.37 for the mother, 1.18 for the father, 0.77 for maternal grandparents, and 0.78 for paternal grandparents. When asked to rate their ability to converse with different family members, respondents who chose a '5' out of '5' had a higher average when rating their mother, maternal grandparents and paternal grandparents. The differences in the averages are as follows: 0.18 for the mother, 0.19 for maternal grandparents and 0.29 for paternal grandparents. However, the difference in the average for these respondents when rating their ability to converse with their father, at 0.59, was lower than the average for all 27 respondents. This difference is most likely due to the fact that, out of the seven respondents, one rated her ability to converse with her father as a '1' and another rated her ability to converse with her father as a '2.' The respondent who chose a '1' to rate her ability to converse with her father did not cite language problems, stating, "my father and I generally speak English with each other. Or else he speaks Chinese to me and I respond back in English." The respondent who chose a '2' to rate her ability to converse with her father also did not mention language problems, and just stated, "I am closer to my mother so I talk to her more." Out of the 26 responses to this question, only three respondents rated their abilities to converse with their fathers as a '1' or '2.'

In terms of language proficiency, all seven respondents had at least one '3' or '4' when describing their proficiency in a Chinese dialect. Only five respondents, out of the entire 27, rated their Cantonese proficiency at a '4,' which is the highest rating in the group. Interestingly, all five respondents believe the importance of maintaining their family dialect is 'extremely important,' choosing a '5' on the scale. Out of the seven respondents



who chose a ‘5’ when rating the importance of maintaining their family dialect, five respondents listed their Cantonese proficiency at a ‘4,’ one respondent listed her proficiency at a ‘3,’ and one respondent had no Cantonese-speaking ability. Overall, nine respondents rated their Cantonese proficiency at a ‘3’ or higher, so only three additional respondents stated that the importance of maintaining their family dialect was not a ‘5.’ However, there was not a clear relationship between respondents’ proficiency in Mandarin and how important they viewed maintaining their family dialect. Only nine out of 27 respondents rated their Mandarin proficiency at a ‘3’ or better. All nine respondents rated the importance of maintaining their family dialect as a ‘3,’ ‘4,’ or ‘5.’

### 3.3 Oldest versus Youngest Siblings

There was one only child, 13 youngest siblings, two middle siblings, and 11 oldest siblings in the group of 27 respondents. The data for the only child and middle siblings were not analyzed because the sample sizes were not large enough. The table below lists the data for respondents who were the oldest and youngest children in their family:

Table 7. Average Data for Oldest and Youngest Siblings

	Own Proficiency in:				Importance of Maintaining Dialect	Ability to have conversations with your:			
	English	Mandarin	Cantonese	Other		Mother	Father	MG	PG
Oldest	5	2.5	2.93	1.4	3.36	4.27	4.27	2.9	2.7
Youngest	4.88	2.1	2.23	1.5	3.67	3.77	3.67	2.27	2.89

\* ‘MG’ stands for ‘maternal grandparents,’ while ‘PG’ stands for ‘paternal grandparents.’

#### 3.3.1 Language Proficiency

The table above lists data regarding respondents’ language proficiency, how important they think maintaining their family dialect is, and how well they are able to converse with various family members. In general, the differences in proficiency for English and other Chinese dialects the respondents knew were slight. The English proficiency rating for the youngest sibling is lower because one respondent rated her English proficiency at a 3.5. There is a larger difference in the Mandarin and Cantonese proficiency between oldest and youngest siblings. However, this is most likely due to the fact that an average was taken of all the ratings submitted to obtain the average proficiency rating of respondents’ language proficiency. If a respondent wrote “N/A” or left the answer slot blank, however, those answers were not taken into consideration. Therefore, the Mandarin and Cantonese proficiency ratings might have been pulled down by the number of respondents who rated themselves a ‘1’ instead of writing “N/A” or leaving the answer slot blank. If those respondents who rated themselves a ‘1’ are not taken into the equation, then there were six respondents who rated themselves a ‘2’ or better within each group. The table below averages the data of the six respondents within each group:

Table 8. Averaged Data for Youngest and Oldest Children

	Youngest		Oldest	
	Mandarin	Cantonese	Mandarin	Cantonese
All Respondents	2.1	2.23	2.5	2.93
Respondents who rated themselves '2' or better	2.83	2.93	2.75	3.7

The data in Table 8 shows the average language proficiency for all and for respondents who rated themselves a '2' or better for Mandarin and Cantonese. The difference in the youngest and oldest siblings in terms of Mandarin language proficiency was quite slight, with a difference of 0.08. What is surprising is that the difference in Cantonese language proficiency increased between the youngest and oldest siblings, with a difference of 0.77.

When asked the question about the importance of maintaining their family dialect, the youngest children rated the importance higher than the oldest children, with a difference of 0.31 between the averages. When asked about their ability to converse with various family members, the oldest siblings had higher ratings for the mother, father and maternal grandparents compared with the youngest siblings, with a difference of 0.5, 0.6, and 0.63, respectively. The youngest siblings rated their ability to have conversations with their paternal grandparents higher than the oldest siblings, with a difference of 0.19.

### 3.4 Ease of Communication between Respondent and Grandparents

The analysis of this data looks specifically at respondents who chose a '1' or a '5' when describing their ability to communicate with their grandparents. Choosing a '1' meant that respondents had 'very limited conversation' with their grandparents, while a '5' meant they 'can talk about anything.' Five respondents chose a '5' when describing their communication abilities with either their maternal or paternal grandparents. No respondent chose a '5' for both sets of grandparents. In addition, seven respondents chose a '1' when describing their ability to communicate with either their maternal or paternal grandparents. Four out of the seven respondents chose a '1' for both sets of grandparents.

#### 3.4.1 Respondents Who Chose a '5'

The group of respondents who chose a '5' shared similar characteristics. For example, all of them spoke the same language to all family members asked about in the survey. In this case, four respondents always spoke English to their family members, while one respondent always spoke Cantonese to his family members. For the respondents who always spoke English, the English language proficiency of their family members was very high. Specifically, all but one parent was rated a '5' in English language proficiency. The one parent who was not rated a '5' was rated a '4.' In addition, all respondents had at least one set of grandparents rated a '3' or better in terms of English language proficiency. The respondent who always spoke Cantonese with his family members rated the English proficiency of his mother and father as a '3' and '4,' respectively. However, he rated the English proficiency of both sets of grandparents as a '1.'

One interesting fact about this group of five respondents is that they all rated their ability to communicate with their mother and father as a '5.' Only two other respondents, out of the entire group of 27, rated their mother and father as a '5.' All except one parent were born in the United States. The respondent whose parent was born outside of the United States has family who has lived in the United States for five generations. Lastly, the proficiency of the language the respondents spoke to their family members was very high as well. All of the respondents predictably rated themselves a '5' in terms of English language proficiency, and the respondent who always spoke Cantonese with family members rated himself as a '4' in terms of proficiency.

### **3.4.2 Respondents Who Chose a '1'**

The seven respondents who chose a '1' also shared many similar characteristics. For example, respondents usually had both parents who were born in the United States or outside of the United States. There was only one case, out of the seven, when a respondent had one parent who was born in the United States and the other parent was born outside of the United States. Also, all of the respondents, except one, spoke more than one language when talking to different family members. More specifically, almost all of the respondents always spoke English to their parents and a Chinese dialect to their grandparents. The only respondent who did not speak a Chinese dialect when communicating with her family spoke English to everyone. This particular respondent rated her ability to converse with her maternal grandparents as a '1' and her paternal grandparents as a '4.' However, she did not cite language problems as a factor in conversing with her maternal grandparents. She explained her '1' rating by saying, "my mom's mom died before I was born, and I don't know if I ever met my mom's dad." Out of the seven respondents, three respondents mentioned language problems somewhere in their survey.

Also, the English proficiency of the mother and father were a lot lower than the group of respondents who chose a '5.' No mother was rated a '5' in terms of her English language proficiency, and only three out of seven fathers had a '5.' In addition, four sets of maternal grandparents were rated a '1' and two sets were rated a '2' in terms of English language proficiency. For paternal grandparents, four sets were rated a '1' and three sets were rated a '3.' The contrast between the English language proficiency levels of both the maternal and paternal grandparents is sharp between the respondents who chose a '1' or '5.' Only one respondent, in the group of five respondents who chose a '5,' rated all grandparents a '1' in terms of English language proficiency. However, four respondents, in the group of seven respondents who chose a '1,' rated all grandparents a '1' in terms of English language proficiency.

The English language proficiencies of the seven respondents who chose a '1' were all rated '5'; however, these respondents were also using Chinese dialects to speak with other family members. Out of the seven respondents, only one respondent rated his proficiency in a Chinese dialect as a '4.' The Chinese language proficiency levels of the rest of the respondents were below a '4.'

### 3.5 Qualitative Data

The purpose of this research was to find a correlation between language proficiency and the strength of family communication. The amount of quantitative and qualitative data is roughly split in half, and the qualitative data sheds more light on the patterns found within the quantitative data.

The respondents that seem to be most constrained in their conversations with their family members, especially with their grandparents, are those who use more than one language to communicate with different family members. These respondents were never equally proficient in all of the languages they communicated in with family members. For example, one respondent spoke Mandarin to all family members surveyed except her sibling. She rated her English as a '5,' but her Mandarin as a '2.' She rated her ability to converse with her Mandarin-speaking maternal grandparents as a '3' because "we both speak Mandarin so we're only limited to my Mandarin vocabulary." However, her paternal grandparents speak Cantonese, so she rated her ability to converse with them as a '2,' writing, "since I can't speak Cantonese and my grandmother speaks Mandarin with an accent, there's a language barrier." Difficulty communicating because of language barriers was common; however, not all of the respondents, who had lower conversational ability with different family members, cited a language problem. For instance, another respondent spoke a mixture of English and Cantonese with her parents, English with her sibling(s), Cantonese with her maternal grandparents, and Toisanese with her paternal grandparents. She rated her Mandarin and Cantonese language proficiencies both as a '3.5,' and her Toisanese language proficiency as a '2.' She was one of the four respondents who rated both sets of grandparents a '1' in terms of ability to converse. However, she wrote that her difficulty conversing with her maternal grandparents was that "I don't see my grandmother very frequently," and her difficulty conversing with her paternal grandparents was because "she [paternal grandmother] has dementia and panic attacks so we only talk about soothing things."

Respondents seemed to cite the language barrier issue more often when explaining difficulties speaking with grandparents; however, they more commonly cited non-language issues when explaining difficulties conversing with parents. Out of the 27 respondents, three respondents rated their abilities to converse with their fathers below a '3,' and three respondents rated their abilities to converse with their mothers below a '3.' No respondent who wrote a '3' or lower cited language issues when explaining their conversational ability with their father or mother. One respondent wrote that for both parents, "I tried to think of past conversations of 'serious' issues I've had with the categories and applied that to the ratings." Another respondent, who chose a '1' when rating his conversational ability with his mother, just wrote that he and his mother "don't get along."

Other respondents, who had greater conversational ability with family members, also accounted for non-language factors. For example, one respondent spoke Cantonese to all family members and rated her Cantonese proficiency as a '4.' She explained her '4.5/5' rating of her conversational ability with her mother by writing, "It's not a language barrier. It's a mother-daughter thing that prevents me from rating it a full 5." In addition, the factors she accounted for when explaining her father's '3.5/5' rating included a: "Cultural barrier, generation gap, language barrier, emotional barrier, etc." One respondent who

spoke English to all of his family members explained his '2/5' rating of his ability to converse with his paternal grandparents by saying,

While I would consider my paternal grandparents to be fluent in English, they speak Hakka most often. More importantly, though, is the fact that they are very reticent people to begin with, so I probably wouldn't have very many conversations with them even if I spoke Hakka.

This example, along with the others before it, shows how other non-language factors can strongly affect communication, even if the language ability spoken between two people is very strong.

A clear pattern that arose from the survey data was that most of the respondents who did not believe maintaining their Chinese family dialect was important spoke English with all their family members, while most respondents who believed maintaining their dialect was extremely important were much more proficient in a Chinese dialect. One respondent who spoke English with all the family members and rated the importance of maintaining her family dialect as a '2/5,' wrote the following about the importance of preserving Chinese culture: "I think knowing at least a little about your culture is important to discover who you are and where you're from. It doesn't mean you have to speak the language and know everything about it though." However, it seems that the low importance she put on maintaining her family dialect was caused more by her lack of proficiency. When explaining her '2/5' rating, she wrote: "I think it's important to know about my culture and be able [to] teach my children, but I really don't know much Chinese. But I will teach them what I know." She was not the only respondent who felt the importance of maintaining a Chinese dialect was affected by whether or not someone was proficient or able to maintain that dialect. A respondent who was proficient in Cantonese explained his '5/5' rating of the importance of maintaining Cantonese by writing that it is the "only real way I can communicate with my parents and other non-English-speaking relatives. It is also a part of my heritage." Most of the respondents who were proficient in a Chinese dialect believed that maintaining their Chinese dialects was important for communicating with non-English speaking family members.

Although a few respondents wrote that language is not pertinent for preserving their Chinese culture, many respondents, usually with a high level of proficiency in a Chinese dialect, believed that language and Chinese culture are very closely linked. For example, another respondent, who speaks Cantonese to all of his family members except his sibling, explained that maintaining Cantonese is important to him because:

Just because my family decided to immigrate to a new country does not mean we should mindlessly assimilate into that new country's culture and simultaneously give up the language(s) of our ancestors. Speaking a non-English language is something to be proud of and something that people should make concerted efforts at maintaining.

Many other respondents agreed with the respondent quoted above. One respondent believed maintaining her Cantonese, which she rated at a proficiency of '4/5,' was extremely important because "I am Chinese American. I must maintain cultural ties to

America and Hong Kong. Language and culture are closely tied to one another.” Furthermore, a respondent who spoke Mandarin with a few family members and rated herself a ‘3/5’ in Mandarin, wrote that maintaining Mandarin is important for her because “I feel like language is one of the few ways I can stay connected to the Chinese culture because I don’t practice any other aspects of it.” The research so far has indicated that those respondents with higher language skills are more prone to believe that language is a key element to keeping their Chinese culture.

Some of the survey questions were designed to ask more general questions, in order to account for all possible factors that could relate to some American-born Chinese retaining their mother tongue. One hypothesis is that if people have a dedicated desire to keep as much of their ancestors’ culture as possible, they will be able to. One respondent, who speaks Cantonese with a few family members and rated herself a ‘3/5’ in Cantonese proficiency, wrote that being interested in one’s own culture needs to be self-initiated. She wrote:

The best way to preserve the Chinese culture is to start within oneself. Since I believe in preserving my Chinese culture, it is easier for me to practice it. I am always curious about my Chinese culture. I ask my family questions about the traditions and myths that Chinese people have. I don’t think you really need to try to preserve a culture. Your curiosity and actions toward a culture will help in itself.

In addition, she added:

The way my family has raised me has made it very important for me to preserve my Chinese culture. I believe the influence of my Chinese culture has kept me grounded. I follow many of the values and traditions that my family has taught me. I am actually more interested in my Chinese culture than the American culture. The idea of being different has really made it special and more meaningful to me.

However, not all respondents thought keeping what they believed to be Chinese culture was necessary. According to one respondent who spoke English to everyone in his family:

Preserving Chinese culture specifically is not very important to me. I think what’s important is to do my best to preserve the values that I believe in, whether they come from Chinese culture, American culture, Chinese American culture or whatever other culture I may admire.

He further explains why choosing the principles he deems best for himself can be chosen from different cultures by writing that it is difficult to preserve Chinese culture. When asked what the best way to preserve Chinese culture is, he wrote:

It’s hard to answer this. I can preserve the values that my parents have passed down to me and in turn pass them along to my children. However, from what I hear, culture in China today is different from the culture that my grandparents and great grandparents knew when they immigrated. With both Chinese culture changing and with Chinese-American culture being quite different from it, it’s hard to say what Chinese culture I would even be trying to preserve.

Furthermore, one respondent who rated herself a '4/5' in Cantonese proficiency mentioned that the best way to preserve Chinese culture is actually "living in Hong Kong -- this includes: working on my Cantonese, caring about HK politics, show biz news, conversing with HK people, staying in touch with youth culture." Sometimes, if respondents do not speak a Chinese dialect with their family members, they have a greater difficulty gaining fluency in that Chinese dialect. For example, when asked about the importance of preserving her Chinese culture, a respondent who speaks English with all her family members, wrote:

It's important. I don't want to lose it, but at the same time I'm very Americanized, and not speaking the language is an additional challenge to maintaining a closeness with my Chinese culture. If I felt I could learn the language fluently at this point in my life, I would learn it. I don't think I would be able to, and furthermore, I wouldn't really have anyone to practice with.

Even though some respondents have very little Chinese influence in their lives, they still feel the need to retain it. For instance, one respondent, who speaks English to all his family members, wrote that preserving his Chinese culture is 'somewhat important' because:

While I identify myself culturally as "American" more than anything else, my "American" identity is, in and of itself, Chinese, too. As soon as I lose my Chinese culture, however small that element of culture may personally be, I lose something of who I am.

Even though the respondent does not want to lose his Chinese culture, he does not feel the need to greatly enhance his Chinese culture. When asked about the best way to preserve Chinese culture, he wrote:

The best way to preserve my Chinese culture is for me to simply acknowledge that it exists. I feel no need to adopt any particularly Chinese customs or otherwise flaunt my Chinese-ness. Aside from the little pressure I get from my family and friends to learn Mandarin, I feel that a simple understanding of my ancestry (maybe through a little bit of research) is sufficient.

Although some respondents felt an internal need to preserve their Chinese dialect and culture, there were external factors which caused respondents to make more substantial efforts, especially with their language skills. Some external factors included having a better edge in the job market, and communicating with and expectations of parents. The wishes of parents seemed to be a common answer in preserving language or Chinese culture. For example, one respondent wrote that preserving his Chinese culture is "not very important because I was born in the U.S. and have never really identified with Chinese culture to begin with, so to me, 'preservation' seems like something for my parents more than for me." In addition, when asked whether maintaining his family dialect was important to him, another respondent wrote:

Without a written language, it will be very difficult to pass the language onto my kids. Since my parents aren't comfortable with the English language, I want my kids to be able to communicate with them. Beyond that, I don't really feel much

of a connection to my language.

The answer of a different respondent also agreed with the idea that parents might have a stronger wish for the youngest generation to retain its mother tongue than the youngest generation itself does. When asked about the importance of preserving Chinese culture, she wrote that “It’s a little important, but not that important. It’s more important to me because I know it’s important to my parents. They’d like my kids to be able to speak Chinese.”

Respondents were asked to explain how they are able to speak their respective dialects. There were nine respondents who listed a ‘3’ or better when rating their Cantonese speaking proficiency, as well as nine respondents who listed a ‘3’ or better when rating their Mandarin speaking proficiency. All respondents who listed a ‘3’ or above in Cantonese speaking proficiency had speaking with family as one of their explanations. The other explanations were “...watching TVB (Hong Kong TV) and listening to HK radio stations online” and “... living in HK this year.” One respondent, who rated herself a ‘3’ in Cantonese speaking proficiency, explained, “I was raised by my grandparents and they only spoke Cantonese. I had attended Chinese school to learn how to write, but it was only for a short amount of time.” Of the nine proficient Mandarin speakers, three respondents learned Mandarin only because of university courses, and did not speak it at home. The other responses explaining Mandarin proficiency were “...Chinese classes at [insert name of college], study in China for a year,” “...trips to Taiwan,” and “went to Chinese school for about 8 years; ... studied abroad in China last year for 6 months.”

#### **4. Discussion**

The purpose of this research was to answer three different questions:

1. Is there an impact of English as a global lingua franca between the youngest generation and their parents?
2. Is there an impact of English as a global lingua franca between the youngest generation and their grandparents?
3. What are the factors allowing the youngest generation of American-born Chinese to retain their mother tongue?

A broad range of questions were asked in order to give respondents as much freedom as possible with their answers. Many patterns were found when the data was analyzed. For example, respondents’ answers to the question of how important it is for them to maintain their family dialect seemed to divide the group by how much they speak English to different family members, Chinese dialect proficiency and their parents’ countries of birth. The data shows that as the importance of maintaining the family dialect rose, the English proficiency of both sets of grandparents declined, respondents’ proficiency in Chinese dialects rose, and the number of parents born outside the United States rose. In terms of ability to have conversations with grandparents, the group of respondents who spoke the most English to various family members had the highest ratings, followed by the group of respondents who mostly spoke a Chinese dialect when communicating with various family members. The group who used a more equal mix of languages, usually English and a Chinese dialect, when communicating with different family members had a



much lower ability to communicate.

The data collection was also analyzed by placing respondents in the categories of 'oldest sibling' and 'youngest sibling.' Although the difference in Mandarin proficiency was slight, the difference in Cantonese proficiency was almost ten times larger than the difference in Mandarin proficiency. One significant factor that could explain this difference is that in the United States, Mandarin, instead of Cantonese, is usually taught in the university setting. Therefore, American-born Chinese with Cantonese as their mother tongue usually learn Cantonese through family, and when oldest siblings are born, they might not have easy access to English speakers when the older generations speak Cantonese. When the youngest siblings are born, however, their older siblings will be learning English in school, which could mean they do not need to speak as much Cantonese in the household.

In addition, analyzing responses based on the ease respondents communicated with their grandparents brought several patterns to light. For the respondents who highly rated their communication with their grandparents (a '5/5' rating), the following patterns arose: grandparents had a high proficiency in the language spoken to them, all mothers and fathers were rated a '5' and respondents had a high proficiency in the language they used to communicate with family members. There were also commonalities among the respondents who chose the lowest rating (a '1/5' rating) when describing their ease of communication with grandparents. For example, six out of the seven respondents spoke more than one language when speaking to various family members. The respondents in this group of six spoke English to most of their parents and a Chinese dialect to all except one grandparent. However, at least five out of the six respondents rated their proficiency in a Chinese dialect a '3' or better. Overall, the English proficiency levels of parents and grandparents of respondents who chose a '1' were much lower than respondents who chose a '5.'

According to the data results, the answers to the questions asked at the beginning of the study are as follows:

*Is there an impact of English as a global lingua franca between the youngest generation and their parents?* According to the data, none of the respondents who chose a '3/5' rating or lower when asked to rate their conversational ability between their parents and themselves cited language problems as the reason for their rating. Therefore, within the respondents surveyed, the use of English, or any other language, did not materially affect the relationship between the youngest generation and their parents.

*Is there an impact of English as a global lingua franca between the youngest generation and their grandparents?* Yes. The majority of respondents' ratings of their conversational ability between themselves and their grandparents were between one and three, out of five. Only three out of the seven respondents who chose a '1' wrote about a language barrier in their survey; however, seven out of the nine respondents who chose a '2' explained their rating by citing a language barrier. Aside from the language problem, rarer reasons that were used included a lack of common interests and personality. The language problem is most obviously shown by the respondents who are juggling more than one language when speaking to their family members. These respondents have a much lower proficiency in a Chinese dialect compared with their English skills, but have to speak Chinese when communicating with their grandparents.

*What are the factors allowing the youngest generation of American-born Chinese to*

*retain their mother tongue?* The most popular sources that enabled the youngest generation to speak a Chinese dialect were family, university coursework, media (radio stations and television) and time abroad in China. Family was, by far, the most common source cited by participants and most crucial for Cantonese speakers. All the respondents with strong Cantonese proficiency (rated a '3/5' or better) had family with whom they spoke to in Cantonese. However, one-third of the Mandarin speakers who were rated a '3/5' or higher did not speak Mandarin with their family members, but solely learned from university courses. While external sources are important, respondents who are more proficient in their mother tongue also share similar viewpoints. For example, many respondents perceive language and Chinese culture to be closely intertwined and also stated that people need to make a determined, personal effort to be able to speak a Chinese dialect.

There were a few weaknesses in this study. The first weakness is regarding the geographic representativeness of the sample size. Over half of the respondents were from the state of Arizona, and the rest of the respondents were scattered across the United States. The place of birth for all respondents is as follows: 16 from Arizona, one from New Jersey, two from Michigan, two from Illinois, one from Ohio, one from California, one from Pennsylvania, one from New York and two from Texas. Although none of the survey questions were related to respondents' physical surroundings, the place they grew up or currently live in could affect their beliefs or language proficiency. One respondent referred to his geographic location when he explained why maintaining Mandarin was important to him. Even though he acquired Mandarin from "school and family", he said that maintaining Mandarin is important because "it's part of my family's history, but having grown up in [state name], I never thought it was one of the most important things in my life."

In addition to the sample size, one question on the survey ('For how many generations has your family lived in the United States?') was not analyzed because many respondents seemed to misunderstand the question. Many respondents believed the question asked which generation they were instead. This misunderstanding was shown a few times by respondents who answered which generation they were, or by respondents who wrote 'one', but had data which made their answer slightly doubtful. The results from this question were not analyzed.

From this study, many interesting questions arose that would be intriguing for future studies. For example, the difference in Cantonese proficiency levels between the oldest and youngest siblings was quite large compared to the difference for Mandarin speakers. The obvious factor is that academic coursework plays a substantial part in the discrepancy. However, to what extent does the classroom play a role in one's Mandarin proficiency, and how effective is the academic setting in fostering a high level of Mandarin speaking compared with the familial environment? Even more pressing, how accessible will learning Cantonese in the United States be in the future, and how will the younger generations be able to maintain or learn Cantonese when many American universities do not offer Cantonese courses and language loss continues as more generations are being born in the United States?

In closing, as an American-born Chinese and listening to other American-born Chinese, I have learned that many people would want to become more proficient in their mother tongues if they could. Inaccessibility to learning a language is quite different from not

desiring to learn the language. And, faced with a very dominant American culture, it is important for American-born Chinese to be aware of the sources they have access to in order to try and become more proficient in their Chinese dialects, as there will be a lot at stake if language loss quickly continues.

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## Appendix-Survey Questionnaire

### Basic Information:

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Place of birth (City, State):
4. Are you the oldest/middle/youngest child?

**Family Information:**

1. Your mother's place of birth (please include city/province):
  
2. Your father's place of birth (please include city/province):
  
3. During your childhood, which language did you *mainly* speak with your:
  - a. mother:
  - b. father:
  - c. siblings (if any):
  - d. maternal grandparents:
  - e. paternal grandparents:
  
4. For how many generations has your family lived in the United States?
  
5. If given this scale from 1-5 (1=understands and speaks no English; 5=a native speaker of English), how would you rate your:
  - a. mother's proficiency in English:     /5
  - b. father's proficiency in English:     /5
  - c. maternal grandparents' proficiency in English:     /5
  - d. paternal grandparents' proficiency in English:     /5
  
6. How would you rate your own proficiency from a scale of 1-5 (1=understands and speaks none of "X" language; 5=a native speaker of "X" language) in:
  - a. English:     /5
  
  - b. Mandarin (if applicable):     /5
    - i. how did you acquire your knowledge of Mandarin (school, family, etc.)?
  
  - c. Cantonese (if applicable):     /5
    - i. how did you acquire your knowledge of Cantonese (school, family, etc.)?
  
  - d. Any other Chinese dialect you can speak (if applicable):     /5
    - i. how did you acquire your knowledge of X language (school, family, etc.)?
  
7. How important is it for you, from a scale of 1-5 (1=not important at all, 5=extremely

important), to maintain the Chinese dialect your family speaks? /5

a. Why is maintaining that dialect important/not so important to you?

8. From a scale of 1-5 (1=very limited conversation and 5=can talk about anything), how would you rate your ability to have conversations with your:

a. mother: /5

i. Which factors did you consider when choosing that rating?

b. father: /5

i. Which factors did you consider when choosing that rating?

c. maternal grandparents: /5

i. Which factors did you consider when choosing that rating?

d. paternal grandparents: /5

i. Which factors did you consider when choosing that rating?

9. What do you think is the best way to preserve your Chinese culture?

10. How important is it for you to preserve your Chinese culture? Why?