

Chinese Heritage Language Schools in the United States

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Chinese heritage language schools were established by Chinese immigrants to support the learning of their languages and cultures. These schools are an attempt by Chinese communities to “keep open the option for their children of identifying themselves on a cultural continuum with their parents” (Bradunas, 1988, p. 13).

History of Chinese Heritage Language Schools

The first Chinese heritage language school was established in San Francisco in 1886. Because Chinese immigrants were segregated in specific neighborhoods at that time, the curriculum was highly traditional, teaching Chinese classics written in traditional Chinese characters. Cantonese was the only dialect of instruction, since the majority of students were from Cantonese areas of China (Pan, 1997). In 1908, a Manchu official toured the U.S. and established more Chinese schools with the help of local community leaders in several cities, including San Francisco, New York, and Chicago. The purpose was to reinforce sentiments of patriotism toward China and to ensure a smooth transition when Chinese Americans returned to China (Wong & Lopez, 2000). As a result of this focus, by the end of the 1920s, there were over fifty Chinese-language schools (public schools and community-based), with most being in the western states (Chang, 2003).

After World War II, the social and political status of Chinese immigrants in the U.S. improved gradually, and interest in learning Chinese declined. The younger generation was attracted to mainstream American culture and made English their primary medium of communication (Lai, 2004), and many parents did not see Chinese language education as important (Wong & Lopez, 2000). Therefore, in San Francisco, although the Chinese population more than doubled from the 1930s to the 1950s, the total enrollment of students in 1957 in Chinese heritage language schools was only about 15 percent greater than in 1935 (1,848 in 1935, 2,144 in 1957) (Lai, 2004).

After the U.S. Congress eliminated the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1965, Chinese immigration increased dramatically. In the meantime, American society was changing. Ethnic awareness among different minorities was heightened, with a revived interest in groups' histories, languages, and cultures. Moreover, China was playing an increasingly important international role (Lai, 2004). All of these factors led to a revival of Chinese heritage language schools. According to Chao (1997), approximately 82,675 students were learning Chinese in 634 language schools across the country in 1996. This number expanded to 140,000 by 2005 (McGinnis, 2005).

Features of Chinese Heritage Language Schools

From the mid-nineteenth century through the early postwar decades, the Chinese American community was overwhelmingly Cantonese speaking, so the majority of Chinese schools in the U.S. taught Cantonese. This began to change after World War II, when the Mandarin-speaking population increased rapidly, especially from the 1970s on. Mandarin gradually superseded Cantonese as the predominant language of instruction in Chinese schools (Lai, 2004). By the mid-1990s, about eight out of ten pupils in Chinese schools were taught in Mandarin; Cantonese remained the language of instruction for only one of every eight students (Lai, 2004). Few schools taught other dialects of Chinese, such as Hakka, Fuzhounese, or Taiwanese, in spite of the large influx of these immigrants. These dialects are of limited use either for communication in business or for scholarly exchanges in society at large.



An unresolved issue for Chinese heritage language schools was whether to teach simplified characters and Hanyu Pinyin, used in mainland China; or traditional characters and the Zhuyin Romanization system, used in Taiwan. On the one hand, traditional characters are still widely used in publications in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and many Chinese-American communities. On the other hand, simplified characters will be increasingly important for communication in the Chinese language with the growing significance of the People's Republic of China in world affairs. Thus, it is likely that both systems will coexist for some time to come (Lai, 2004).

There are two kinds of Chinese heritage language schools: for-profit and non-profit (Chao, 1997). For-profit schools include kindergartens, childcare centers, and tutorial programs for secondary school students. Non-profit schools are usually affiliated with non-profit organizations, such as Chinese-American associations or religious organizations (Chao, 1997). Non-profit Chinese heritage language schools are operated primarily by volunteers consisting of the parents of students enrolled in the schools and students from local high schools, colleges, and universities. Funding for schools comes primarily from tuition and fundraising.

Two national organizations were established to serve these schools: NCACLS (National Council of Associations of Chinese Language Schools) and CSAUS (Chinese School Association in the United States). NCACLS is primarily composed of Chinese heritage language schools established by immigrants from Taiwan, while CSAUS member schools were established by immigrants from the People's Republic of China.

Recently, students who take classes in Chinese heritage language schools can apply to receive credit in some public high schools. According to Chao (1997), students in 92 out of the 102 Chinese heritage language schools in southern California are eligible to apply for credit transfer, but only 28 have been granted credit transfer status; in northern California, 9 out of 87 Chinese language schools have been granted credit transfer status.

Close collaboration between Chinese heritage language schools and the formal education system in the United States points to a mutually beneficial relationship, and articulation is the key (Wang, 1999). McGinnis (1999) proposes putting in place inter-institutional articulation among the various formal instructional settings where Chinese language education is conducted, including K-12 public and private schools, Chinese heritage language schools, colleges and universities, and study abroad programs.

Generally, Chinese heritage language schools are open on weekends or after regular school hours. In *weekend programs*, classes are held three hours a week on Friday evening or during the day on Saturday or Sunday. In general, two hours are devoted to language teaching and one hour to cultural activities or field trips. In *after-school programs*, classes are held in public schools Monday through Friday from about 3:00 – 6:00 PM. Classes include one hour of language teaching; one hour of Chinese culture; and one hour of tutorial lessons in English, mathematics, or other subjects (Chao, 1997). Of the schools surveyed by Lin (1986), 55% held classes on Saturdays, 56% on Sundays, and only 5% on weekday afternoons. Cultural studies might include calligraphy, history, geography, folk dance, singing, chess, origami, martial arts, brush painting, public speaking, drama, cooking, and Chinese silk knots (Wang, 1999).

Conclusion

Chinese heritage language schools have evolved into an organized and influential educational institution with over 100 years' history in the U.S. They have replaced both the college/university and K-12 sectors as the majority provider of Chinese language instruction over the past several decades (McGinnis, 2008).

Search for [Chinese heritage language programs](#) in the Alliance Heritage Language Program Database.

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