New York City English and second generation Chinese Americans

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Chinese Americans are using New York City English to negotiate identities

Chinese Americans in the United States and in New York City

Chinese Americans are the earliest Asian immigrants to the U.S. The first wave of Chinese immigrants came to the U.S. as early as the 1840s. Many of them were peasants from the Guangdong Province in Southern China who moved to California as railroad workers. The influx of Chinese immigrants during the 1860s and 1870s was severely restricted for about sixty years as a result of the growing anti-Chinese movements in California, which culminated in the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. Not until 1965 did Chinese immigration begin to grow steadily again, when the Immigration and Nationality Act eliminated 'national origins' as a basis for distributing immigration quotas and set an annual immigration quota of 20,000 from any given country. The number of Chinese Americans continued to surge after the governments of the People's Republic of China and of Taiwan liberalized their emigration policies in the 1970s. According to the 2006 American Community Survey (ACS) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006), Chinese Americans now constitute 1.2 percent of the entire U.S. population and are the largest ethnic group among Asian Americans. Many post-1960s Chinese immigrants seek new immigration gateways beyond California and settle in states like New York, New Jersey, Texas, Illinois, Maryland and Virginia. As of 2006, 13.4 percent of Chinese Americans in the U.S. reside in New York City (NYC), making it the most popular city for Chinese Americans (followed by San Francisco, with 4.5 percent) (Shinagawa & Kim, 2008).

The population of Chinese immigrants in NYC prior to the late nineteenth century trailed behind major Western cities. It only began to increase significantly after the 1880s (see Table 1) when anti-Chinese movements in the Western cities compelled many Chinese immigrants to move to Eastern areas such as NYC. Similar to other early Chinese communities in the West Coast, the pre-1950s Chinese community in NYC was composed predominantly of middle-age, single, male sojourners as a result of the continuous campaign in the U.S. to curtail Chinese immigration by prohibiting Chinese

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doi:10.1017/S0266078410000167

Table 1: Chinese population of the United States and New York City, 1870 – 2000

Year	New York City	United States	
1870	120	63,199	
1880	853	105,465	
1890	2,559	107,488	
1900	6,321	89,863	
1910	4,614	71,513	
1920	5,042	61,639	
1930	8,414	74,954	
1940	12,753	77,504	
1950	18,998	117,629	
1960	36,503	237,292	(Wan, 1978: 35)
1970	69,324	435,062	
1980	124,372	812,178	(Zhou, 1992: 84)
1990	238,919	1,645,472	(U.S. Census Bureau, 1990)
2000	357,243	2,432,585	(U.S. Census Bureau, 2000)

laborers from naturalization and from bringing their wives and children into the U.S. In 1940, for instance, the male to female ratio in NYC's Chinatown was 603 males to 100 females (Zhou, 1992: 34). During this exclusion period, the number of American-born Chinese (ABCs) remained small. The ratio of women to men in the Chinese population began to reach parity after the Second World War. The more balanced sex ratio in the post-1965 Chinese population led to an increase in two-parent-families (Yuan, 1974), setting off a gradual increase in the number of American-born Chinese and changing the mentality of the Chinese immigrants from that of sojourners to that of settlers (Zhou, 1992). Since the continuous presence of Chinese-American families only became more significant after the 1970s, there are fewer Chinese Americans who belong to the second or subsequent generations in NYC than in the Greater San Francisco area (Hall-Lew & Starr, this issue). In 2000, about 24 percent of NYC's Chinese population was American-born, with the majority of them belonging to the second generation.

The post-1965 immigration streams have diversified the Chinese population in the U.S. and in NYC. While earlier Chinese in the U.S. speak *Yué* Chinese such as Taishanese and Cantonese, newer immigrants speak many varieties of Chinese, including Mandarin, Min (such as Taiwanese and Fuzhounese) and Wu (such as Shanghainese). Additionally, the newer Chinese Americans in NYC are no longer confined to settling in the historic Chinatown of Lower Manhattan. Many moved to new satellite Chinatowns in Flushing and Elmhurst in Queens and Sunset Park and Bensonhurst in Brooklyn. Better-off Chinese immigrants even bypassed Chinatowns for more middle-class neighborhoods.

Although Chinese Americans set up Chinese heritage language schools as early as 1848 to preserve the heritage language and to promote a sense of ethnic identity among their American-born children (Chao, 1997), there is strong evidence that language shift to English is taking place rather rapidly within the Chinese communities across the U.S. Data from the 2006 ACS show that while only 34.1 percent of first generation (i.e. foreign-born) Chinese Americans reported speaking 'English very well', the percentages rise dramatically for those who are American-born (i.e. second generation and beyond) or born overseas but arrived in the U.S. before the age of 16 (i.e. the 1.5 generation). 70.4 percent of the 1.5 generation and 93.8 percent of the American-born Chinese Americans reported speaking 'English very well'. Additionally, only about 27.6 percent of the ABCs were estimated to speak their heritage language at home. Taken together, these estimates suggest that the rate of shift from Chinese to English is accelerating. Jia (2008) finds that even for first generation Chinese Americans, their Chinese language skills continue to decline with increasing English immersion. Rapid language shift to English means that many ABCs speak English as one of their native languages, if not the only one. This raises interesting sociolinguistic questions concerning the characteristics of the English spoken by ABCs and how ABCs utilize varieties of English to construct and negotiate differences with respect to each other and vis-à-vis the larger social structure.

The absence of Chinese Americans within American dialectology

Despite the increasing presence of Chinese Americans in the U.S. and the rapid shift to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078410000167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

English among the American-born generations, there exists very little work that examines the phonetic and phonological characteristics of English as spoken natively by Chinese Americans (for an exception, see Hall-Lew, 2009). This is in part because the English practices of Chinese Americans do not fit the traditional distinctiveness-based approaches to American English and ethnic minorities that focus on describing those linguistic features that set the English of an ethnic group apart from some unmarked or standard norm, typically associated with the white majority (Bucholtz, 2004). Members of Asian American groups who speak English natively are considered by scholars and speakers alike to *not* have an ethnically distinctive variety of English. Instead, under the prevalent 'model minority' stereotype, American-born Asians are often seen as linguistically and culturally assimilated to, and therefore, non-distinct from, middle-class white norms. First-generation immigrants, on the other hand, are assumed to speak English with a foreign accent. Recent studies on the English practices of Asian Americans have challenged these bifurcated assumptions and have demonstrated that Asian American youths, despite the absence of ethnically distinctive English varieties, still exploit a whole gamut of English resources for identity construction (Bucholtz, 2004; Chun, 2001, 2004, 2009; Reyes, 2005; *inter alia*). These resources range from the appropriation of phonological, lexical and grammatical elements from African American English to the adoption and/or the mocking of some stylized foreigner's accent associated with Asian immigrants. Focusing on the use of these non-mainstream forms of English, this body of work shows that Asian Americans do not necessarily share the same social and ethnic orientation nor desire to speak the 'unmarked' form of American English. In fact, even the notion of the 'unmarked American English requires closer scrutiny. As Benor (2010: 177 fn. 6) notes, the 'unmarked' form of American English can be defined locally to incorporate regional dialect features. NYC, for instance, is associated with its own regional dialect. The 'unmarked American English' for many New Yorkers, including Chinese Americans growing up in NYC, would therefore contain local dialect features. Studying the use of regional dialect features by Chinese Americans in NYC, thus, offers a unique opportunity to examine how regional features of English may form a part of their sociolinguistic repertoire and may be utilized by them to do identity work.

Early descriptions of English in New York City

The English spoken in NYC and its surrounding metropolitan area (hereafter New York City English–NYCE) is perhaps one of the most recognizable regional dialects of American English. It has been extensively studied and described in early dialectological works (Babbit, 1896; Hubbell, 1950; Thomas, 1942; *inter alia*). It is also the subject of Labov's (1966) landmark work, *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*, which laid the foundation of urban sociolinguistics. This early work on NYCE was done at a time when immigration from non-European countries to NYC was at a low point and with the assumption that immigrants of European descent assimilated culturally and linguistically to the local norms of the earlier settlers within a few generations. As a result, there was a bias in these studies towards sampling only native English speakers of European descent, ignoring speakers of non-European stock. In his 1966 work, for instance, Labov excluded the 26 percent Puerto Rican and 3 percent Chinese residents of the Lower East Side from his sample because they were mostly non-native speakers of English (1966: 107).

The monumental *Atlas of North American English* (Labov, Ash & Boberg, 2006) continues to sample native speakers of primarily European descent and views the strong presence of ethnic minorities in ethnically diverse areas such as NYC as problematic. The sampling practice in these foundational studies means that most descriptions of NYCE features to-date could be interpreted as descriptions of 'white' (i.e., Italians, Jewish, Germans, Irish, Scandinavian, etc.) NYCE. Given the increasingly complex ethnic make-up and the growing number of native English speakers of minority descent in post-1965 NYC, recent researchers on NYCE have begun to directly engage ethnic diversity through investigating the use of NYCE features by members of minority groups (see, for example, Slomanson and Newman (2004) on Latinos; Becker and Coggshall (2010) on African Americans; Blake and Shousterman (this issue) on West Indian Americans). In the remainder of this paper, I will present some findings on the use of NYCE features by a few

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078410000167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

second generation Chinese Americans in NYC (Becker & Wong, 2009; Wong, 2007). These findings show not only that there is intra-group variation with regard to the use of these features but also that such variation corresponds to the differences in speakers' ethnocultural alignment as measured by their social network and lifestyle orientation.

NYCE features and their use by American-born Chinese in New York City

NYCE features

Existing work on NYCE describes a set of phonological features that characterizes this regional variety. These include: (1) non-rhoticity (the dropping of post-vocalic /r/ in words like *fourth* and *floor*); (2) the stopping of the interdental fricatives in words like *these* and *those* (such that they are produced as *dese* and *dose*); (3) the splitting of the low front vowel into two classes, tense /æː/ (in *bag, bad* and *band*) and lax /æ/ in (*back*, *bat* and *bang*), known in the literature as the split short-*a* system (Labov et. al., 2006; Labov, 2007); and (4) the maintenance of the distinction between the low back vowels /ɔ/ (in *caught, coffee* and *Dawn*) and /ɑ/ (in *cot, copy* and *Don*), sometimes referred to as the *caught/cot* distinction. In conjunction with features (3) and (4), /æː/ and /ɔ/ in NYCE are often produced with a diphthongal property and with the tongue raised towards the mid- or high- vowel regions such that /æː/ may merge with /e/ or even /i/ and /ɔ/ with /o/ or even /u/. For an *r*-less speaker, then, the word *bad* may sound like *bared* or even *beard* and the word *law* may sound like *lore* or even *lure*. These features concerning the vowel system of NYCE will be the focus of the rest of this paper.

The vocalic features of NYCE show strong ethnic association with New Yorkers of Italian and Jewish descent. Labov (1966) finds that Jewish New Yorkers produced the highest /ɔ/, Italian New Yorkers the highest /æː/, and African Americans did not participate in the social and stylistic variation of these two variables. It is plausible that the traditional associations of these features with Jewish and Italian New Yorkers may be reinterpreted by New Yorkers of other ethnic backgrounds to index other local meanings in addition to ethnicity, such as marking identification with the mainstream. They are therefore good candidates for studying whether ABCs in NYC vary in their use of these features as linguistic practices of identity.

Furthermore, these two features differ in their phonological complexity and in their interaction with other vowels. The traditional NYCE split short-*a* system is conditioned by a complex set of phonological, grammatical and lexical constraints (Cohen, 1970; Labov, 2007), making its acquisition rather difficult (Labov, 2007; Becker & Wong, 2009). The low back distinction, on the other hand, is not tied to a complicated constraint set. Given their different complexities, these features may not be equally accessible to and manipulated by speakers in their linguistic construction of identities. In fact, the media and the general public appear to be attuned more to the raising of /ɔ/ than to the raising of /æː/ as a sociolinguistic stereotype of NYCE. The raising of /ɔ/ is more often exploited, if not exaggerated, by actors to portray a New York persona, such as the characters 'Fran Fine' in the sitcom *The Nanny,* 'Carrie Heffernan' in *The King of Queens* or 'Linda Richman' from the sketch comedy show *Saturday Night Live*. The raising of /ɔ/ is also more often commented on and represented by non-standard spelling in different media platforms both online and in print (e.g. *dawg* for 'dog' and *tawk* for 'talk'). The purpose of examining the use of these features by ABCs in NYC is twofold. First and foremost, it allows us to determine if both features are used by this group of minority speakers. Second, it allows us to investigate intra-group variation among ABCs in NYC in their use of regional dialect resources and how such variation may be employed as linguistic practices for identity construction.

Data

Data presented in this paper were drawn from a sample of four female ABCs of Cantonese descent. They were either born in NYC or arrived in NYC before the age of three. They ranged from 18 to 29 years old at the time of the interview and varied in their levels of education and occupation. Crucially, they spent almost their entire lives, up to the time of data-collection, in the New York Metropolitan area, except for Beatrice[1] and Doris who left NYC for a few years for college. Table 2 summarizes the social characteristics of the speakers.

Three main kinds of data were collected and analyzed from the speakers. Speech data were

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Table 2: Speakers

	Age	Birthplace	Education level	Occupation	Borough
Alice	22	NYC	High school	Real estate agent	Brooklyn
Beatrice	23	Hong Kong	Finishing college	Accountant	Queens
Candice	18	NYC	College	Student (Pre-law)	Brooklyn
Doris	29	NYC	Graduate school	Business consultant	Manhattan

collected from one-on-one sociolinguistic interviews conducted by the author with each of the speakers. About 1600 tokens containing the relevant vowels (/æː, æ, ɔ, ɑ/) in stressed position was extracted from the digitally-recorded interviews. The height and frontness of these vowels were instrumentally measured and analyzed. Other than speech data, information on speakers' social networks was gathered through a set of name-elicitation questionnaires, adapted from Kirke (2005). The questionnaires took into consideration the frequency of interaction between an informant and her ties, the presence of affective bonds, and the existence of rewarding exchanges (Li Wei, 1994; Milroy, 1987). Data on speakers' ethnic and cultural orientations in lifestyle were also gathered. Having a specific 'lifestyle', loosely defined to include patterns of social relations, group affiliations, cultural and religious practices, entertainment, and dress, implies a conscious or unconscious choice of one set of behaviors over another, linguistic practices included. A set of two self-report questionnaires, adapted from Tsai, Ying & Lee's (2000) General Ethnicity Questionnaire (American and Chinese abridged versions), was used to gauge whether speakers favored a more Chinese or American orientated lifestyle. They were essentially two versions of the same questionnaire, differing only in their reference culture. The questionnaires covered topics on speakers' heritage language use, their preference for ethnic food and music, and other cultural practices.

Results

Statistical tests were carried out to determine whether these speakers produce the two NYCE features and if so, whether there is intra-group variation. Speakers' scores on the network and lifestyle questionnaires were also examined to determine if different rates of use of the NYCE features correspond to different social networks and lifestyle orientations. The results show that the English of ABC speakers does contain certain characteristics of NYCE, although speakers do not produce the traditional NYCE in its entirety. All four speakers continue to maintain a distinction between the low back vowels in *cot* and *caught*. Yet, none of them produce the traditional NYCE short-*a* split system. They do not follow many phonological and lexical constraints that typically condition the complex NYCE system. Instead, speakers produce what appears to be a much leveled and phonologically predictable system: with tense /æː/ appearing before nasal consonants /m, n, ŋ/ (in words like *bam, band*, *Spanish* and *bang*) and lax /æ/ in other environments. This system, labeled the 'nasal system' by Labov (2007: 353), is often considered the default short-*a* system in American English.

The most interesting result concerns the use of raised /ɔ/ (i.e. saying *dawg* for 'dog' or *tawk* for 'talk') by the four speakers. Importantly, speakers vary in their rates of use of this stereotypical NYCE feature. Two speakers, Alice and Candice, use raised /ɔ/ more frequently than the other two speakers. This raises questions concerning whether this intra-group difference is correlated with social differences among speakers. When looking at speakers' social profiles in Table 2, it may be tempting to suggest that the similarity between Alice and Candice in using raised /ɔ/ more frequently could be related to the fact that they are both from Brooklyn. After all, prototypical NYCE features are often dubbed *Brooklynese* by many members of the general public. However, sociolinguists generally believe that the stereotype *Brooklynese* is used to refer to working-class NYCE, whether the speaker is a resident of Brooklyn, the Bronx, or Queens (Labov et al., 2006: 234). Geographic/borough differences in and of themselves should not matter as much as class differences. Interestingly, the two raised /ɔ/ users and the two non-users do not appear to be distinguished by social class

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078410000167 Published online by Cambridge University Press

differences, as measured by their education and occupation. The two raised /ɔ/ users, Alice and Candice, differ in their education level and occupation. The three speakers who received or were receiving college education do not use the feature to the same extent.

While class differences do not seem to correlate with the variation in speakers' use of raised /ɔ/, the differences in speakers' social network and lifestyle orientation do. Information on speakers' social network gathered from name-elicitation questionnaires were analyzed in terms of their ethnic compositions. Each speaker received an ethnic index (Li Wei, 1994: 117ff), which was essentially the ratio of the number of non-Chinese ties to the number of Chinese ties in a speaker's social network. An index above 1 indicates a non-Chinese dominant network and an index below 1 indicates a Chinese-dominant network. Speakers' lifestyle orientation was analyzed based on their responses to the lifestyle questionnaires. Each informant received three lifestyle scores: one for her orientation towards a Chinese lifestyle, one for her orientation towards an American lifestyle, and one for how she related the two lifestyles (i.e. did she show a bias towards one lifestyle or did she balance two lifestyles?) (Tsai et al., 2000). The first two scores were calculated based on the speaker's answer to the 27 questions on each questionnaire. The maximum score, 54, represents a strong orientation towards a particular lifestyle (27 questions × max. 2 points). The minimal score, 0, represents a weak orientation towards that lifestyle. The third score, the score of difference, was calculated by subtracting the Chinese lifestyle score from the American lifestyle score. A positive score indicates a bias towards an American lifestyle and a negative score indicates a bias towards a Chinese lifestyle. Moreover, a score that gravitates towards the two ends of ±54 indicates a more unidimensional mode of lifestyle orientation and a score closer to 0 suggests a more balanced affiliation with both lifestyles. Table 3 summarizes the results on social network, lifestyle orientation, and linguistic use.

Concerning the linguistic practices, Table 3 reveals that not all NYCE features exhibit intragroup variation. Speakers only vary in the use of one NYCE feature, raised /ɔ/. Crucially, such variation seems to be connected to their different social networks and lifestyle orientations. Both raised /ɔ/ users, Alice and Candice, have non-Chinese dominant networks (with ethnic indices above 1). Their non-Chinese ties are predominantly Latino and European Americans. This is in sharp contrast with the non-users, Beatrice and Doris, who have Chinese-dominant networks (with ethnic indices below 1). The non-Chinese ties of Beatrice and Doris are primarily Asian Americans. Turning to lifestyle orientation, while speakers as a whole express a stronger orientation towards an American lifestyle than a Chinese lifestyle, they differ most significantly in their *score of difference*. The two raised /ɔ/ users pattern similarly and appear to show a more unidimensional orientation towards an American lifestyle, as seen by the greatest difference between the two lifestyle scores. The non-raised /ɔ/ users – Beatrice and, to a lesser degree, Doris – show a more balanced lifestyle orientation.

Discussion

The correspondence between the differences in speakers' use of raised /ɔ/ and the differences

Table 3: NYCE features, social networks and lifestyle orientations

		Alice	Candice	Beatrice	Doris
Linguistic features	Short *-a* split	No	No	No	No
	Low back distinction	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	/ɔ/-raising	Yes	Yes	No	No
Social network	Social network index	3.5	3.5	0.8	0.5
	No. of Chinese ties	2	2	5	6
	No. of non-Chinese ties	7	7	4	3
Lifestyle orientation	Difference	19	25	9	14
	Chinese-oriented	24	16	25	24
	American-oriented	43	41	34	38

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in their self-reported social networks and lifestyle orientations suggests the possibility that this particular NYCE feature may be interpreted and utilized by ABC speakers as an index of a locally-situated mainstream, non-Chinese, identity. This identity is constructed through interwoven webs of distinction in speakers' lifestyle choices, social networks, and their use of regional dialect features. The following piece of ethnographic data gathered from the interview with Candice, a raised /ɔ/ user, illustrates how Candice aligns herself with reference to multiple ethnic groups that are salient to her as an ABC in NYC.

> What I've noticed is that even though I'm Chinese and she's [Candice's neighbor] Italian – she's like old school Italian – she sees me as more toward her culture than she would see a Jewish pers-, Orthodox Jewish person, or like a black person, like a Hispanic person. I think it's more [because of my] demeanor, like how I talk and the fact that I'm educated in a well-known university. [...] People told me a lot of times that I don't sound Asian. […] Some people who were born here still have a Chinese lingo. You could hear it. Other people who are not Asian, especially, could hear it sometimes that the other person is not white. I've been accused of sounding white so often. [...] Sometimes I'm flattered because I didn't speak the language and here I am being able to fool people into believing that I'm not Asian. But then, sometimes I'm like, 'What is wrong with you', you know?

In this excerpt, Candice set up an opposition with herself and her 'old school Italian' neighbor on one side, and other minority groups in NYC (Black, Hispanic and Orthodox Jews) on the other. Given that Jews are one of the major ethnic groups that comprise NYC's 'white' mainstream (along with Italians and Irish), it is perhaps not trivial that Candice, when setting up the opposition, self-corrected herself from the more general label 'Jewish' to the more religiously and culturally specific label 'Orthodox Jews'. Candice's self-correction highlights the distinction she was making between the culturally marked minorities and the unmarked 'white' mainstream with which she aligned herself. Candice authenticated her claim to the 'mainstream' by referencing the validation she received from her Italian neighbor and other people 'who are not Asian'. Crucially, Candice justified her perceived 'whiteness' by linking it to the way she talks: her 'sounding white' sets her apart from other Chinese Americans with 'a Chinese lingo'. Her closer alignment with the white mainstream and dissociation from Chinese/Asian Americans is reflected in her social network and lifestyle orientation.

Candice's positioning of herself within the social space contrasts sharply with that of Doris, who did not use raised /ɔ/:

> I am proud of my heritage, very proud of my roots here in New York and especially in Chinatown. [I'm] taking those roots and bringing [them *sic*.] to the next level. Knowing Chinese and hanging out with Chinese people and having a Chinese network allows me to build connections to people who are in Hong Kong and China. I want to kind of put myself there in the next couple of years. So I wanted to stay within the Chinese circle I guess, given that everything that is going on in the business world are around China.

The excerpt from Doris makes it clear that she associated herself with the Chinese community. Her ethnic alignment is also matched by her social network and lifestyle orientation. Importantly, Doris expressed an intention to leave NYC and aspired to be geographically mobile.

Given the differences between Candice and Doris in how they positioned themselves within the larger ethnocultural landscape of NYC, it is perhaps not surprising that Candice favors the use of raised /ɔ/, the stereotypical NYCE feature, while Doris does not. The congruence between speakers' use of raised /ɔ/, their social networks and life orientations displayed in Table 3 suggests that raised /ɔ/ may be interpreted by ABC speakers to be an index of NYC's mainstream 'white' ethnic groups. The social meaning of this linguistic feature enables speakers to use this feature to negotiate and index their positions within a complex system of distinctions, thereby constructing their identities (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Irvine, 2001).

While the findings presented in this paper are based on a small sample, they nevertheless underscore the fluidity and variation that characterize not only the English of ABCs in NYC but also their identities. Crucially, the results suggest the need to critically and empirically evaluate the traditional assumption that ABCs and other Asian American groups inevitably assimilate to some unmarked mainstream American English. Situating the construct of the 'unmarked American English' locally by referencing local dialect features, these findings

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reveal that ABCs in NYC do not produce all of the NYCE features. The NYCE low back distinction is more successfully produced by the ABC speakers than the traditional split short-a system. In addition, different members of the group produce the local feature of raised /ɔ/ to varying degrees, and such variation appears to correlate with speakers' self-reported social networks and lifestyle orientations. Future work that combines quantitative analysis with more context-based ethnographic methodology will surely present a more nuanced picture of the use of English by this ethnic minority group and their identity practices. ■

Note

1 All the names used are pseudonyms.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078410000167 Published online by Cambridge University Press