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Imagination as a key factor in LMLS in transnational families

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Abstract: This article argues that *imagination* plays a key role in whether and how members of transnational families individually and collectively maintain or relinquish their heritage languages and adopt other languages as part of their multilingual repertoires. Imagination is defined here as the vision of where and what one might be or become at some future point in time. We base our argument on linguistic ethnography over two decades with transnational families of Chinese ethnic origin in the UK. Families that seem to have kept their heritage languages and families that have given them up were invited to talk about where, what and how they would see themselves in ten years' time, and a selection of them are subsequently interviewed and observed after the ten-year period. Their responses are analysed in terms of their constructed experiences, environments and visions of the future; their perceptions and imaginations of different places and cultures; key moments in re-evaluation, or re-imagining, that led to major behavioural changes; and self-evaluation of their imaginations. Particular attention is given to the dynamics of differences and tensions between the imaginations of individuals of the same families, as well as changes to the imaginations over time. Theoretical and methodological implications of studying imagination as a key factor for language maintenance and language shift, and for bilingualism research generally, are discussed.

Keywords: imagination, Chinese, family, inter-generational, language maintenance and language shift

1 Introduction

The primary aim of this article is to put forward an argument that *imagination* plays a key role in whether and how members of transnational families individually and collectively maintain or relinquish their heritage languages and adopt other languages as part of their dynamic multilingual repertoires. For individuals and groups with complex and highly mobile experiences, imagination provides a

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crucial source of unity and stability and impacts fundamentally on families' and individuals' decisions regarding language transmission across generations and everyday language choice. We base our argument on linguistic ethnography over two decades with transnational families of Chinese ethnic origin in the UK. Families that seem to have kept their heritage languages and families that have given up their heritage languages, based on ethnographic observations, were invited to talk about where, what and how they would see themselves in ten years' time, and a selection of them are subsequently interviewed and observed after the ten-year period. Their responses are analysed in terms of their constructed experiences, environments and visions of the future; their experiences, perceptions, and imaginations of different places and cultures; key moments in re-evaluation, or re-imagining, that led to major behavioural changes; and self-evaluation of their imaginations. Our analysis pays particular attention to the differences and tensions between the imaginations of individuals of the same families, as well as changes to the imaginations over time. In doing so, we also show how "heritage" and "heritage language" are constructed by the transnational individuals themselves as dynamic concepts, and how imagination contributes to the dynamic nature of heritage language maintenance.

The article is structured as follows: we begin with a brief discussion of the existing approaches to language maintenance and language shift and an introduction of the concept of imagination. We then outline the study from which the data for the present article draws. The main body of the article is devoted to a discussion of the themes that emerge from the ethnographic interviews, from the common themes across the families, moving to how imagination is constructed in the responses to the interviews, and then to an analysis of the data collected after the 10-year period. To demonstrate how the various themes and factors work in the families, we tell the story of the Kan family as an example. The article concludes with a summary of the key findings and arguments. Theoretical and methodological implications of highlighting imagination as a key factor for the study of language maintenance and language shift, and for bilingualism research generally, are discussed.

2 LMLS as a field of enquiry

Language maintenance and language shift (LMLS) as a field of enquiry started with the 1964 seminal article by Joshua Fishman, the founder of this journal, who defined LMLS as a field that is "concerned with the relationship between change or stability in habitual language use, on the one hand, and ongoing

psychological, social or cultural processes, on the other hand, when populations differing in language are in contact with each other” (Fishman 1964: 32). Over the following 50 years, sociolinguists have identified a range of factors that contribute to either language maintenance or language shift (e.g. Conklin and Louris 1983; Gaarder 1977; Baker 2011), as well as ways of halting and reversing language shift (RLS) (e.g. Fishman 1991). The factors have often been grouped under linguistic (e.g. whether the heritage language is standardized or not, literacy level), cultural (e.g. whether there are heritage language institutions, cultural and religious activities associated with the language, how much emphasis is given on family ties and community cohesion), and political, social and demographic (e.g. number of speakers, socio-economic status of the community, community relations, connections with country of origin and relations between home country and the country of residence) causes. In his own studies, Fishman emphasized the importance of the family both as a unit of analysis and as a key factor in determining the speed and the outcome of LMLS. Various generation-related models of LMLS and RLS have been proposed. For example, a three-generation shift from monolingualism in the heritage language amongst the grandparent generation via different degrees of bilingualism in the parent generation to monolingualism in the mainstream society language amongst the children represents the fastest change in habitual language use in a family (e.g. García and Díaz 1992; Li 1994), while Paulston (1994) describes a four generation shift in the Greek community in Pittsburgh, US, and Von Gleich and Wolck (1994) a five-generation shift in Peru.

There is a tendency in the existing LMLS and RLS studies to look “backward”, as it were, documenting what happened in the past and identifying past factors that had influenced families’ and individuals’ language choice in different domains. Recognizing the potential problem with the “backward-looking” approach, Fishman (1991) pointed out, for example, that uncertainty and anxiety about the future is often at the heart of language shift. He argued for “greater sociocultural self-sufficiency, self-help, self-regulation and initiative” (1991: 4) amongst immigrant and minority language groups, in addition to institutional support, in order to maintain their heritage languages. He called upon the communities themselves to raise aspirations about their heritage languages and the researchers to look for factors that would help communities to maintain their languages and to reverse language shift.

In this article, we hope to contribute to the study of LMLS by developing a more “forward-looking” approach that focuses on the role of a hitherto under-explored factor, namely imagination, in the decision-making process regarding intergenerational language transmission and use in transnational families. This, we believe, should also contribute to identifying what Fishman (1991) called “priorities” in RLS.

3 Imagination and the new diasporic thinking

“Imagination” is included in the *Dictionary of the Untranslatables* (Cassin et al. 2014) as an example of the difficulties experienced in translating Greek into Latin and subsequent translations into other European languages. The Greek origin for the concept was *phantasia*, which evolved in the sense of *fantasy* and *phantasm*, but was translated into Latin as *imaginatio*. And it was this relatively obscure Latin term that was adopted in English. The difference between *phantasia* and *imaginatio* is “the difference between the creative force of apparitions and the reproductive faculty of images”, an issue that has been discussed extensively by philosophers who see the tension between the two original concepts to be central to “the place of the imagination in the play of faculties and the modalities of being in the world” (Cassin et al. 2014: 479). Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 1781/1999), for example, makes a distinction between a reproductive empirical imagination and a transcendental imagination that produces the schemata, and is thus the condition of possibility of our representations. Psychologists often define imagination as the ability and the process of forming new ideas, images or feelings in the mind that are not being seen, heard, or felt presently (Byrne 2005). It is mediated by one’s past experience and present environment, but can override memory (past) and perception (present) in influencing one’s beliefs and behaviour. Both psychologists and philosophers regard imagination as a major source of inner strength and a sense of unity in the mind, producing a fusion between longing and belonging and affecting everyday social behaviours (Harris 2000; Sallis 2000; Byrne 2005). Advances in cognitive neuropsychology have renewed interests in the complex relationships between memory, perception and imagination. Images made by fMRI in laboratory experiments show that identical parts of the brain - the thalamus and neocortex – are activated during remembering and imagining tasks, suggesting a close connection between the two processes (Leahy and Sweller 2007; Costa et al. 2010). In the meantime, historians and social scientists working on migration also point to the intrinsic links between the migrants’ past experiences, present conditions and future aspirations (e.g., Salazar 2011).

In the present study, we define imagination as the vision of where and what one might be or become at some future point in time. Our research with immigrant communities and transnational families over the years has shown that they do not just look back at the past; they are very much concerned with the future, and imagination plays a key role in their everyday life. We see a close link between imagination and what we would like to call “new diasporic thinking”. The latter refers to the capacity of transnational individuals and groups to see the potentials of their present environment and to create new social spaces for themselves and their

future generations. Diaspora is a very old concept, originally meaning the scattering of people between, through, and across different geographic location. Its main reference was, for many centuries, the historical mass dispersions of the Jews, African slaves and the Chinese labourers (known as *coolies*). The emphasis on the involuntary nature of the displacement and dispersal in the historical references was easy to see. Studies of transnational human migration in the twentieth century tended to use terms such as immigrants, guest workers, asylum seekers, ethnic minorities, displaced populations, etc., to refer to different groups of migrants in contemporary society. As the world moved into the twenty-first century, researchers increasingly find terms such as “immigrants”, and “minorities” unsatisfactory. As Clifford (1997: 255) suggests, a new “diasporic language seems to be replacing, or at least supplementing, minority discourse. Transnational connections break the binary relation of ‘minority’ communities within ‘majority’ societies” (see also studies in Li 2016).

Diaspora in the twenty-first century is, to use a popular phrase, a “super-diverse” phenomenon (Vertovec 2007). Individuals with different migration motivations and experiences, of different educational and socio-economic backgrounds and statuses come together; recent migrants are intermingled with long-term settlers; speakers of different languages, dialects and accents are interacting with each other, often in a mixed mode. Yet they find sufficient common ground to identify themselves with each other as part of a diaspora, creating an “imagined” community. This diasporic imagination often involves suppressing or neutralising past differences and establishing commonality and connectivity through which new identities can be negotiated (Sofos 1996). The new diasporic thinking indicates a shift of emphasis from the victimization, uprooting and displacement of the individuals and groups concerned, to their capacity of constructing new transnational spaces of experience that are complexly interfacing with the experiential frameworks that both places of settlement and purported places of origin represent (Morley 2000). Tsagarousianou (2004: 58), for example, talks about the “potentialities” of diasporas, that is “the various creative possibilities opened by the activities of diasporas in both local and transnational contexts”. She further argues that it is important to focus on “the ability of diasporas to construct and negotiate their identities, everyday life and transnational activities in ways that often overcome the ethnic identity versus assimilation dilemma” (2004: 58), rather than the experiences of loss and displacement or the nostalgic fixation to a “homeland”. For Tsagarousianou, the diasporic communities’ readiness and willingness to engage themselves with the building of a transnational imagination and connections differentiate them from “ethnic minorities”. In Brah’s terms, “diasporas are [...] the sites of hope and new beginnings” (Brah 1996: 193); rather than looking back in a nostalgic effort of recovering or maintaining their identity, they discover or construct notions of who they are and what home is by essentially looking forward.

The shift of interest and emphasis in diaspora studies is echoed in applied linguistics research through the works of scholars, such as Block (2008), who challenge the appropriateness of the metaphor of “loss” in studying multilingual, transnational individuals and communities and calls for a move away from the excessively emotive and romanticized stances towards language maintenance and language shift. For many such individuals and communities, it is not what they have lost that occupies their minds in their everyday life, but what they seek to develop and construct for themselves. The estrangement of an individual or a community in diaspora, to use Mandaville’s words, “often leads to a particularly intense search for and negotiation of identity” (2001: 172). It is therefore important to recognise the opportunity structures that the diasporic condition entails, which must include both the restrictive consequences of deterritorialization and reterritorialization and the creative potential of the multiplicity of connectivity. The multiplicity of connectivity creates an “imagined” rather than given community (Anderson 1983/2006), continuously reinvented and reconstructed through the lengthy process of forging links amongst their members in both local and transnational contexts (Zhu and Li 2018).

In the present study, we look at both individual and collective imaginations, the latter referring specifically to a family’s collective vision of the future. The two may not always be consistent with each other, and how tensions and conflicts between the individual and the collective imaginations are resolved can have fundamental impacts on all concerned. Whilst an individual’s imagination can be a determining factor in personal decisions in particular, a family’s collective imagination can be an important part of the ethnolinguistic vitality of the social group to which the family belongs. In the meantime, imaginations can be positive and optimistic or negative and pessimistic. Positive imaginations highlight bright, exciting, and successful outcomes of the future, whereas negative imaginations focus on gloomy and adverse outcomes of the future. Both kinds of imaginations can have an effect on LMLS, but the behavioural outcomes in terms of language practices are likely to be different.

4 The present study

The study on which this article is based is part of a large-scale family ethnography project that was started some 30 years ago (1986). The project focuses on multilingual, transnational families in Britain with roots and connections in and with Greater China including mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan

and have covered some seventy families. As a family ethnography project, the study looked at the “whole” family including the extended relations wherever possible. It therefore included a variety of data, especially observation and interviews but also family photo album. The main analytical interest was in the inter-generational relations and changes in the families. A subset of 30 three-generational families of Chinese ethnic origin was studied in detail with regard to their language maintenance and language shift patterns and their everyday multilingual practices in different domains (see Acknowledgements). This article presents data from a study of a further subset within the 30 three-generational families who were invited to talk about: (1) migration experience and major life-changing moments; and (2) where, what and how they would see themselves in ten years’ time (from the moment of the interview). Five families (M1-M5, three originally Cantonese-speaking, two Mandarin-speaking families = 37 individuals) that seemed to have maintained their original languages, measured in terms of using it as the primary language of inter-generational interaction, and eight families (S6-S13, five originally Cantonese including two with some Hakka, one Hakka, and two Mandarin = 61 individuals) that have undergone major language shifts were selected and invited to talk about the two topics in interview-style conversations with the researchers. A selection of the families (two language maintenance M1 and M4, five language shift S6, S9, S10, S12, S13) were subsequently observed and invited to talk about their experiences after the ten year period, involving 18 individuals. Table 1 summarises the families.

Table 1: Families selected for the present study.

| Family | Members | Original language of the family (L1 of first-generation immigrants) | Present-day primary language of inter-generational interaction | Follow-up observation and interviews |
|--------|--|---|--|---|
| M1 | GP = 2 male; 2 female P = 1 male; 1 female C = 1 male; 2 female GC = 1 male | Cantonese | Predominantly Cantonese | P = 1 male; 1 female C = 1 female GC = 1 male |
| M2 | GP = 1 male; 2 female P = 1 male; 1 female C = 1 male; 1 female | Cantonese | Predominantly Cantonese with some English | |
| M3 | GP = 1 male; 1 female P = 1 male; 1 female C = 1 male; 2 female | Cantonese | Predominantly Cantonese with some English and Mandarin | |

(continued)

Table 1: (continued)

| Family | Members | Original language of the family (L1 of first-generation immigrants) | Present-day primary language of inter-generational interaction | Follow-up observation and interviews |
|--------|--|---|--|---|
| M4 | GP = 2 male; 1 female P = 1 male; 1 female C = 2 female | Mandarin | Predominantly Mandarin | P = 1 male; 1 female C = 1 female |
| M5 | GP = 1 female; 1 female P = 1 male; 1 female C = 2 male | Mandarin | Predominantly Mandarin | |
| S6 | GP = 1 male; 2 female P = 1 male; 1 female C = 1 male; 2 female GC = 1 male | Cantonese | Predominantly English, with some Cantonese reserved for interactions with grandparents, and Mandarin | P = 1 female C = 1 female GC = 1 male |
| S7 | GP = 2 male; 1 female P = 1 male; 1 female C = 2 male; 1 female | Cantonese | Predominantly English, with Cantonese for interactions with grandparents | |
| S8 | GP = 2 female P = 1 male; 1 female C = 2 female | Cantonese | Predominantly English, with Cantonese for interactions with grandparents | |
| S9 | GP = 1 male; 1 female P = 1 male; 1 female C = 1 male; 1 female GC = 2 female | Cantonese and Hakka | Predominantly English, with Cantonese and a little Hakka for interactions with grandparents, and some Mandarin | P = 1 male; 1 female |
| S10 | GP = 1 male; 1 female P = 1 male; 1 female C = 1 male; 1 female | Cantonese and Hakka | Predominantly English, with Cantonese for interactions with grandparents | P = 1 male C = 1 female |
| S11 | GP = 2 male; 2 female P = 1 male; 1 female C = 1 male; 1 female GC = 1 male; 1 female | Hakka | Predominantly English, with some Hakka for interactions with grandparents, and Cantonese and Mandarin | |

(continued)

Table 1: (continued)

| Family | Members | Original language of the family (L1 of first-generation immigrants) | Present-day primary language of inter-generational interaction | Follow-up observation and interviews |
|--------|---|---|---|--------------------------------------|
| S12 | GP = 1 male; 2 female P = 1 male; 1 female C = 2 male GC = 1 male | Mandarin | Predominantly English, with Mandarin for interactions with grandparents | P = 1 female GC = 1 male |
| S13 | GP = 1 male; 1 female P = 1 male; 1 female C = 2 male | Mandarin | Predominantly English, with Mandarin for interactions with grandparents | P = 1 female C = 1 male |

M = Maintenance; S = Shift
GP = grandparents; P = parents; C = children; GC = grandchildren

The resulting data formed a large corpus of narrative accounts and observational notes that can be used for quantitative and qualitative analyses for different purposes. What we have done so far is to carry out a content analysis of the interview data first, focusing on the participants’ experiences as members of transnational families, their sociocultural and sociolinguistic environments and linguistic practices, and their visions of the future. Our approach is connected to what amounts to a “narrative turn” in socio- and applied linguistic research in recent years (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2008), and makes use of specific analytical methods that have been developed in relation to narrative enquiries, for example, the *Critical Incident Analysis* (Spencer-Oatey and Harsch 2016), the analysis of *small stories* (Georgakopoulou 2006), and *Moment Analysis* (Li 2011). However, rather than focusing on the organizational structures of the narratives, either thematic or chronological, we are particularly interested in the experiential contents of the accounts, especially the micro-, fleeting aspects of lived experience that are mentioned either directly or *en passant* in response to the interview questions. Our approach is also informed by *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (IPA), a qualitative psychological approach that focuses on narrative data where the participants are trying to make sense of their world, while the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world (Smith and Osborn 2008). So, where possible, we would let the data speak for themselves. But we structure the

presentation of the data according to themes and select the most appropriate and revealing examples for discussion on what and how languages are used in the families concerned.

As the content analysis progressed, a general pattern emerged that families that maintained the imagination of returning one day where they originally came from also maintained their Chinese better than families that saw themselves more likely to be settled in Britain or at least not returning to China or Hong Kong. We realised that visions of the future, particularly visions of where and what one might be or become at some future point in time, played a key role in the decisions members of transnational families individually and collectively made regarding language choice and everyday practices. We therefore focused our analytical attention on differences and tensions between the imaginations of the individuals of the same families, and changes to the imaginations over time. For the latter, we examined the key moments of re-evaluation, or re-imagining, as revealed in their accounts, that led to major behavioural changes. In what follows, we first look at the common experiences that emerge from our content analysis across the families. We then look at specifically how imagination is constructed and displayed in their own accounts and its role in language maintenance and shift.

4.1 Common experiences across the families

As a means of contextualising the different families, we first look at the shared experiences amongst the two groups – language maintenance families and language shift families. Here we only focus on the commonly occurring themes that emerged from the stories told by our participants. The quotations are given in the original language as they were related to us, with English translation underneath where appropriate.

4.1.1 Language maintenance families

For the families that have by and large maintained the heritage language for their intergenerational interaction, three themes came out from the participants' responses to our interviews:

- the grandparent factor;
- desire to return to place of origin;
- future prospect and opportunities for the children;
- dissatisfaction with life in the UK.

The grandma/grandpa factor, that is, the presence of non-English speaking grandparents or great grandparents in the household has been identified by studies of LMLS as a particularly important factor (e.g. Li and Zhu 2010). It was clear from our data that these families wanted to make sure that the grandparents and great grandparents were included in the family interactions and they avoided using English in their presence. A longer term result of this was the amount of heritage language the British-born generation of younger members of the families used. Several of them reported that they felt the need to learn and speak the heritage language because “it would not be respectful towards the grandparents who did not know English”. Some brought up the issue of embarrassment, even shame, that not being able to speak Chinese might cause. Language maintenance, then, seems to be a psychosocial issue for the families where family cohesion, generational hierarchy and respect need to be taken into consideration when it comes to language practices. One mother of two in her forties said to us:

- (1) (Mother of M4, originally from China.)

我们一家人有他们两个不会说话怎么行？不只是我们作父母的觉得不好意思，老人也会不高兴的，自己的孙子孙女没法和自己交流，多难堪呢！
 ‘How can it work in a big family like ours when you have two of them who are unable to speak (Chinese)? It’s not only us parents who would feel embarrassed. The grandparents won’t be very pleased either. What a shame when your own grandchildren can’t communicate with you!’

Some of the families told us that the amount of English used in family interactions increased after the grandparents passed away, although others insisted that they managed to maintain the amount of heritage language use at home even after the grandparents were gone.

We did not observe any significant difference in the amount of heritage language used between the families where the grandparents and grandmothers lived with them under one roof and those whose grandparents and great grandparents lived in separate households, because there were frequent visits and contacts between the grandparents and great grandparents and the rest of the family in the latter case. In some of the language maintenance families whose grandparents were not living in the same household, contacts, including visits and phone calls, were practically daily. Getting together for a big family meal every weekend also seemed to be customary in these families. Even for the families whose grandparents were not living in the UK but in China or Hong Kong, maintaining frequent contacts seemed to be associated with language maintenance. This included new media contact such as WeChat and Skype. In

fact, all the language maintenance families also sustained strong and frequent contacts with relatives from their places of origin. These included not only grandparents but also members of their extended families.

We were interested in the effect of technology-mediated communication with families in other parts of the world, especially the possible facilitating effect on maintaining Chinese literacy. But most of the families in our studies said that the children's generation tended to communicate with their relatives overseas through oral means, sometimes digital platforms, rather than written. There is no evidence that they would learn to read and write Chinese characters in order to maintain contacts with the extended family globally. One mother of three in her mid-fifties said:

- (2) (Mother from M1, originally from Hong Kong)

老人家都想見到佢哋，唔係想睇佢哋寫嘅信或者 email，而係想睇吓佢哋個樣，同佢哋傾下計。

'Older people (i.e. grandparents) all want to see them (i.e. grand children). They don't want to read letters or emails from them. They want to see how they look, and have a chat with them.'

Interestingly, few of the families emphasized their past experience as a factor in language maintenance. Their stated motivations for maintaining Chinese were more forward than backward-looking. Many language maintenance families explicitly expressed a desire to return to the country or region of their family origin, i.e. China or Hong Kong, or a desire for their British-born children to "return". We have reported elsewhere the frequent occurrence of the word 返 (*fan*, in Cantonese) or 回 (*hui*, in Mandarin) as in phrases such as 返香港 (*fan heong gong* 'go back to Hong Kong') and 回国 (*hui guo* 'return to the motherland/home country'), and the paradox that some British-born youth who had never lived in these places also adopted the "discourse of returning" (Zhu and Li 2016). In the present study, we see a strong link between this expressed desire to go back to the country or region of origin and language maintenance. The reality, however, is that in our 30 years of working with the Chinese families in Britain, we have seen very few families actually returning as a whole unit to China or Hong Kong to live and work there. Some individual members of the families have gone to China and Hong Kong because of work, study or medical treatment, but in most cases, their stay tended to be temporary. But the discourse of returning is constant, and seems to be part of their imagination and identity construction. We asked a number of people why they used phrases like 返香港 (*fan heong gong* 'go back to Hong Kong') or 回国 (*hui guo* 'return to the motherland/home

country'), especially the latter where, to us, the sense of belonging is explicitly expressed. Some of the responses include:

- (3) (Mother of M2, in her late thirties, having two British-born children.)
 我就係 miss 香港, 嗰種味道、噪音、舖頭、人、海港、山。唯一唔 miss 嘅就係天氣。我啲細路都鐘意呢度, 因為學校冇咩壓力。但係佢哋唔知道 miss 咗乜嘢。
 'I just miss Hong Kong, the smell, the noise, the shops, the people, the harbour, the hills. The only thing I don't miss is the weather. My children like it here, because there is not so much pressure at school. But they don't know what they miss.'

Linguistically, it is noticeable that she used *miss* in English three times. The first two uses are in the sense of feeling sad of someone's or something's absence, and the third in the sense of 'not to experience or do'. For the first sense, the Chinese translation equivalent would be 想 (*xiang*). But, as we will discuss in more detail later, the Chinese word also carries the meaning of 'want to do something' and is more forward than backward-looking. Whilst what the speaker said was intended to explain why she wanted to maintain Chinese, and wanted her children to maintain Chinese, she switched to English to emphasize her feeling of absence and loss, rather than any actual plan for action in the future. Through code-switching, she was making a careful distinction between these different meanings.

- (4) (Father of M5, over 50, lived in the UK for more than 30 years.)
 等我老了的时候没人管我。国内我有很多亲戚, 等我退休我可以回国。
 'Nobody will look after me when I'm old. I have lots of relatives in China. I can go back there when I retire.'

We asked this man exactly how that might affect his children's maintenance of the Chinese language. He reasoned:

- (5) (Male from M5, over 50, lived in the UK for more than 30 years.)
 国内照顾我的人都说中国话呀。他们也得跟人家交流哇。再者说了, 我老了也许只能说中国话了, 谁还跟他们天天讲英语? 他们不说中国话, 也就等于不跟我说话了。
 'The people who will be looking after me in China all speak Chinese. They (i.e., his children) need to communicate with these people. Besides, when I am old, Chinese may be the only language I can speak. Who will be speaking English with them every day? If they don't speak Chinese, it means that they can't talk to me.'

- (6) (Female from M3, in her early forties, who came to Britain in her teens.)
 中國發展得好快，有好多機會俾啲細路。佢哋需要語言。唔似喺英國，
 好難搵好嘅工。
 ‘China is growing fast and more job opportunities for the children. They
 need the language. Not like England. Good jobs are hard to find.’

The perception that China is growing stronger economically and therefore knowing Chinese would enhance one’s employability may have been influenced by the media hype. But in this particular quotation, one can also see the connection with the speaker’s own experience in Britain where she evidently felt that good jobs were difficult to obtain.

In one of the more extended accounts by the husband of the woman in extract (6), he told us his experiences of having been born in Guandong province of mainland China and first migrating to Hong Kong in his teens and then to Britain in his twenties. He then said the following in English:

- (7) (Man from M3 in his forties.)
 Not fitting in after thirty years. Still don’t feel at home. Not racism such as,
 but “alienation”. They call us “aliens” and I think they look at us as
 “aliens”. China’s rising has made it worse. They think we are a threat.
 We are here to take their jobs.

His account, along with his wife’s mention of the difficulties in finding good jobs in Britain, shows another factor that seemed common amongst the language maintenance families, that is the dissatisfaction of life in the UK and dreaming, or imagining, that life would be better in the “homeland”. There is a fusion between longing and belonging, in this case feeling a lack of belonging to Britain. His use of pronouns “they/their” and “us/we” is particularly relevant here.

4.1.2 Language shift families

For the families who experienced significant shift in habitual language use towards English, several common themes were articulated, often together in one account. The themes include:

- easier, but not necessarily happier, life in the UK;
- friendship ties in the UK;
- strong desire for the children / younger generations to live a better life and speaking English can help them to gain access to better life;

- desire to integrate;
- loose connection between language and ethnic identity.

The following extracts illustrate the points:

- (8) (Mother of three from S7, in her forties, originally from Hong Kong.)
 I think life is easier in England. Certainly it is easier for them (the children). In Hong Kong, there is too much competition. Of course there is competition here too, and I have to work hard. But it's a little bit different. You can do different things. You don't have to get good grades or awards all the time to prove yourself. And there is also more space. Hong Kong is so crowded. We can never afford a big house there.

This shows a rather different experience from the accounts of the language maintenance families that we have discussed above. The woman realises the different cultural expectations and practices in Britain and Hong Kong and articulated her preference.

Often, friendship networks can play a crucial role, as the following quotation illustrates.

- (9) (Female in her early thirties from S8, with two children.)
 We have made a lot of friends with the neighbours and with parents from the school (of the children – our note). You have to have good English to make friends and having friends will make you happier, isn't it? If your English is better, better than me, than it is easier for you to make friends, get better jobs. They can still speak Chinese to me. But I have to speak English at work. So I think it is perfectly ok to speak English. I want them (the children) to speak good English.

The idea that speaking English, especially “good English”, can somehow make one happier or help to get better jobs was repeated by several people. The following is another example.

- (10) (Man in his late-fifties from S12, with two grown-up children and one new grandchild. Originally from China.)
 人家一看你就知道是中国人，not British。会不会说中文无所谓。但你英语要是说得特别好，他们可能 surprised。“Oh you speak good English.” 还能找好点儿的工作。要在这儿生存就得有好英语！
 ‘They look at you and immediately know you are Chinese, not British. It doesn't matter if you speak Chinese or not. But if you speak especially good

English, they may be surprised. “Oh you speak good English.” And you can get better jobs. If you want to survive here, you must have good English!”

It seems that to this man, an ability to speak Chinese was not a crucial part of being Chinese in Britain. Whereas speaking English, especially “good English”, was important for integration into the British society. We were intrigued by their notion of “good English”. So we asked the participants specific questions about this, and here are some responses.

- (11) (Female in her early thirties from S8, with two children, the same speaker as in 9 above.)
Good pronunciation. To be able to speak clearly. 我們廣東人讲英文 (‘we Cantonese speak English’ [with a]) terrible accent. I don’t think people can understand what we are saying.
- (12) (Man in his late-fifties from S12, with two grown-up children and one new grandchild. Originally from China, the same man as in [10].)
Accent. Not like Chinese English. Indian English accent 我就听不懂 (‘I can’t understand’). I think it must be hard for the English people to understand the Chinese accent too. 用词也很重要 (‘And choice of words is also important’).
- (13) (Woman in her forties of S10, originally from Hong Kong.)
I know this girl from China. Her English is so good, and people love her. She sounds native. Of course she can get a job anywhere.

Their sentiments reflected the ideological compartmentalization of languages by nation. Hence a member of the Chinese diaspora is expected to become a good speaker of English, no matter what the actual circumstances are, in order to be successful in British society. The “good jobs” that they often mentioned were jobs in large companies such as banks, accountancies, and law firms, or public organizations such as hospitals and universities, not community-based shops or restaurants, or anything that is specifically for the Chinese community or connected with the Chinese.

It was interesting to notice that many members of the language shift families commented explicitly on language. They seemed conscious of the fact that there has been a language shift in the family and this was something they needed to justify somehow, as one of our participants said:

- (14) (Man in his forties of S10, from Hong Kong.)

Even Hong Kong and China speak English now. And we are in Britain. So there is nothing wrong to speak English. Yes, we want the children to learn Chinese. But when you go back to Hong Kong and China, they will say oh you are from England, do you speak English? So your English needs to be really good to compete with the people there.

Sometimes it was a particular past event that impacted on their attitudes towards language maintenance and language shift (see further in Section 4.3.2, under Re-imagining). One parent, a woman in her late forties, told us about the experience of dealing with the police after their house was burgled.

- (15) (Mother of two in her forties of S13, originally from China.)

两个警察来了不跟我们说，以为我们不懂英语。我的英语是不好。可是也不跟我先生说话，问小孩可不可以给我们翻译，需不需要 interpreter。而且不相信我们说的。（采访者：你是说他们不相信你丢了东西？）对。他们以为我们把什么花瓶呀、jade 呀，还有那些屋里的，you know, decorations, 被盗了，都是 made up。So I suffered because my English isn't good. So I told the kids, if you want to live here, you need to speak really good English to survive.

'Two police came and wouldn't speak to us. They thought we didn't understand English. My English isn't good. But they wouldn't speak to my husband either. They asked the children if they could translate for us or if we needed interpreters. And they didn't believe what we said. (Researcher: You mean they didn't believe you lost things.) No, they thought we made up the vases and jade, and things we put around the house, you know, decorations and things that were stolen. So I suffered because my English isn't good. So I told the kids, if you want to live here, you need to speak really good English to survive.'

Let us now turn to the factor of imagination in language maintenance and language shift.

4.2 How imagination is constructed and displayed

Imagination in Chinese is 想象 (*xiangxiang*) or 幻想 (*huanxiang*), which indicate some kind of fantasy or illusion similar to the Greek original *phantasia*. In our data, the most frequent word used by the participants in constructing their

imagination is 想 (*xiang*), which is a polysemy that can be translated into English as a verb meaning ‘think, wish, believe, feel like doing, miss, suppose’, etc., or as auxiliary verb: ‘would like’. It can also be used as a noun, meaning ‘thought, idea’. The common collocations in Chinese include: 想望 (*xiangwang* ‘expect, desire’), 想到 (*xiangdao* ‘have thought’), 想起 (*xiangqi* ‘have remembered, recall’), 想要 (*xiangyao* ‘want to’), 想念 (*xiangnian* ‘miss’), 假想 (*jiaxiang* ‘hypothesize, guess’), 猜想 (*caixiang* ‘guess’), 幻想 (*huanxiang* ‘fantasy’), 妄想 (*wangxiang* ‘delusion’), 思想 (*sixiang* ‘thought, idea’). We have identified different types of imagination in the accounts our participants related to us, including inter-generational imagination, relational imagination, inevitability and fate, chance and opportunity, and new diasporic thinking. We will discuss these in turn with examples.

4.2.1 Inter-generational imagination

One of the most frequent topics in the imagination discourse of our participants relates to the future of the children in the family. It is natural for all families to think and plan the future for their next generation. But in the transnational families like the ones we have studied, the vision of the future of the children of the family is closely intertwined with their migration experience, their present position in the place of residence, and their relationships with other families and social groups. The following example illustrates how earlier experiences as immigrants shape the speaker’s attitude towards language maintenance and language shift.

- (16) (Grandfather in his late sixties, originally from Hong Kong, from S7.)

我當年啱啱嚟到英國唔識講英文，乜嘢都聽唔明，只可以靠朋友，喺人哋鋪頭幫手搬貨。等佢哋大個就有問題喇，佢哋英文都好好，將來可以搵佢哋想要嘅工。

‘When I first came to Britain I didn’t know English. Couldn’t understand a thing. I had to depend on Chinese friends, moving goods for their shop. They (grandchildren) won’t have any problems when they grow up. Their English is good. They can find jobs that they like.’

Sometimes, a specific incident would enforce the family members’ attitudes towards language learning and language use, or trigger a re-think amongst the family members (see also Re-imagining, Section 4.3.2), as the following two examples show:

- (17) (Mother of two in her mid-forties, originally from China, from S12.)

爷爷在这儿是闹了一场大病，把我们全家都折腾得不可开交，天天得有人陪。不懂英语呀，有什么办法！除非将来他们也都回中国去住，在这儿还得会英语。当然懂点儿中文也会有用。（访谈者：你觉得有什么用呢？）中国现在发展的不错啊，做生意机会多啊。（访谈者：那你会让他们回中国做生意吗？）听他们的吧。

‘Granddad got very ill. It sent the whole family into a turmoil. He needed someone to be with him (in hospital) on a daily basis. He doesn’t know English and couldn’t survive without us. Unless the children will go and live in China, they have to know English if they live here. Of course knowing some Chinese can be useful too. (Researcher: How do you think it would be useful?) China is developing well. There are many business opportunities. (Researcher: Do you want the children to work in China then?) Let them decide.’

- (18) (Man in his late forties, from S13.)

我听人家说老人中风后只会说母语，外语就忘了。我老了也许就得回中国，不然在这儿也没人跟我说话。

‘I heard that if an old person had a stroke, they can only speak their mother tongue. They will forget the foreign language. When I’m old I might have to go back to China. If I stayed here, nobody would (be able to) talk to me.’

The second example (18) is interesting as the speaker seems to describe English as a “foreign” language, even though his family interaction was predominantly in English.

More inter-generation references occurred in discussions of the children’s future, especially with regards to marriage and employment, as the following examples show.

- (19) (Mother of two teenage daughters, originally from China, from M4.)

谁知道她们将来会嫁给中国人还是外国人。我希望她们和华人结婚。生活习惯上会有些不同。

‘Who knows whether they (the daughters) are going to marry Chinese guys or foreigners in the future. I hope they will marry Chinese. (If they married foreigners), living habits/styles are going to be rather different.’

The term 外国人 ‘foreigner’ refers to anyone who is not ethnically Chinese.

- (20) (Father of a fifteen-year-old son and a young daughter, originally from Hong Kong, from M2.)
 他说他想去香港找工。那你广东话就不能忘，也要学普通话。
 ‘He (son) says he wants to work in Hong Kong. Then you can’t forget your Cantonese. And you need to learn Putonghua.’

There were of course different views about the future from different generations of the families. We spent a considerable amount of time discussing with the families about how to resolve the tensions and conflicts in their visions for the future. The typical response would be the following:

- (21) (Man in his late forties from S13, the same man as in [18].)
 老人有老人的愿望，孩子有孩子的想法。当然要尊重老人的愿望，但我看最终还是要以孩子的想法决定。
 ‘Grandparents have their wishes, and children have their own ideas. Of course we should respect the grandparents’ wish. But at the end of the day it has to go according to the children’s plans.’

4.2.2 Relational imaginations

In addition to the inter-generational thinking evidenced in the above examples, we often see the role of broader family relations in the participants’ imaginations. The following is a good example:

- (22) (Father of M5, originally from China, referring to his teenage son LL.)
 我大舅的儿子从澳大利亚回来，先是在别人（律师）事务所干，后来自己在上海开了个公司，结婚，挺稳定的，孩子都上学了。我们回去上海玩儿，LL 特别喜欢他那里，两人可好了。他说等LL毕业可以到他那里工作，条件不错，比英国还好。（To LL）就是得懂中文，不懂中文什么也不行。
 ‘My uncle’s son returned from Australia after studies. First he worked in somebody else’s law firm. Then he went to Shanghai and set up his own company, got married and has a stable life. Their child has already started school. When we went on a holiday in Shanghai, LL loved their company. They got on really well. He said when LL graduates from university he could work for him. Their living/working conditions are very good, better than in Britain. (To LL) But you must know Chinese. If you don’t know Chinese, you can’t do anything.’

Examples such as this not only show the participants' global connections but also their global awareness. They are aware of the opportunities migration and diaspora afford them and have a desire to make good use the affordances.

4.2.3 Inevitability and fate (命运)

We specifically asked the families who seemed to have changed their dominant language use from Chinese to English why they thought it happened. Some gave reasons of past experience or expectations for future employment, as some of the examples in the sections above show. Others expressed their feeling of fatalistic inevitability like in the following quotations:

- (23) (Mother of two from S13, in her forties, originally from China.)
谁不想保持自己的语言？！我们原来也是特别想让他们学中文，可是后来他们的朋友都是外国人，都在一起说英语，也没办法了。
‘Who wouldn’t want to keep their own language?! We used to really want them (the children) to learn Chinese. But their friends are all foreigners. They all talk in English to each other. What can you do?’
- (24) (Husband of the woman in 24, father of two from S13, in his late forties, originally from China.)
What can you do? English is everywhere. All their friends speak English, even the Chinese friends. We also have to speak English. Chinese is very hard for them. They can understand some of the things we say. But they can’t read or write. And there isn’t anything we can do.

These quotations seem to provide evidence that the friendship networks play a significant role in language choice, language maintenance and language shift, as our previous studies have shown (e.g. Wei 1994).

4.2.4 Chance and opportunity (机遇)

For a number of families, something that happened by chance seemed to have impacted on their subsequent life with the languages, as the following example shows. This is from a Cantonese-speaking family (S6), originally from Hong Kong, who used to live in a rather remote village in the northwest of England. The parents are fairly fluent in Mandarin. We wondered where and how they

acquired it. Here is what the mother told us, in Mandarin, which she refers as Putonghua following the terminology of mainland China:

- (25) (Woman in her early fifties, from S6.)

当时刚好有个店空，我们就卖了，结果就搬到这里。附近根本就没有别的华人。小孩子上学也没有讲中国话的朋友。后来有家大陆人搬到附近，我和他们讲普通话。(访谈者：你以前能讲吗?)一点点。后来和他们学慢慢，后来就可以将多一点了。讲但小孩子还不太会讲。

‘There was an empty take-away shop and we bought it. So we ended up moving here. There was no Chinese nearby. There were no Chinese-speaking children in the school that our children went to. Later on a family from mainland China moved nearby. I spoke Putonghua with them. (Researcher: Did you know how to speak Putonghua?) Only a little. I learned it slowly from them. Later I could speak a bit more. But the children still can’t speak it.’

4.2.5 New diasporic thinking

In both language maintenance and language shift families, the global connections, with relatives in different parts of the world, enhance their desire for more mobility and connectivity, rather than stability in the traditional sense. The following exchange with one of the younger participants from a language maintenance family illustrates the point:

- (26) (F: British-born teenage girl from M4. W. Fieldworker.)

F: My parents always say, “Learn Chinese. Chinese is so important to your future. Look at so-and-so’s kids. They can’t find a good job and have to work in a shoe shop or something. Their family suffer so much. If you know Chinese you can always find a really good job in China, earning loads of money. China is growing really fast. It’s going to take over the world, and all that.” I tell them that if I go to China, they will want my English, not my Chinese.

W: Do they want you to go and work in China then? Or do you want to work in China?

F: I don’t know if they really want me to go back to China. All their brothers, sisters and cousins seem to be somewhere else, outside China. My grandparents are in New Zealand with our auntie. I don’t think they really want to send me to China. I don’t think I want to go and live there.

W: So why do you think they tell you that you need to know Chinese?

F: I think they just want us to know Chinese anyway. I think they think if we are told that we might go back to China, we might take it more seriously. But I don't think it's for real, for them anyway. My mom sometimes says, "oh I want to live in Hawaii", or "I want to go to Australia". And they always say, "study hard so that you get into a good university", here in Britain that is. I don't think they really want to go back to China. They've been here longer than they were in China.

The girl in this extract can clearly distinguish reality from imagination. But it is the imagination, arising from the family's migration experiences and global connections, that drives the family forward and influences their language choice decisions.

Another example comes from a mother of a language shift family, originally from Hong Kong.

(27) (Mother of S6.)

We talk to our family on Skype all the time. We have a large family, and we have relatives in Brazil, Australia, Italy, Canada, lots of places. (W: Do you visit each other?) Of course. We have holidays. Sometimes we go on holidays in a different place together. Last Christmas we all went to Indonesia. We don't have family there, but we just thought it would be nice to have a big family reunion there. 24 of us all went there. (W: And did you all speak English?) Lots of the time. But there were kids also speaking Portuguese. Some of them want to come to Britain to study and to work. And our children want to go to Australia. It's good for them, especially the children, to travel. They can learn new things.

What the mother describes here is by no means atypical of Chinese diasporic families across the globe. Many of them have a large, complex network of relations in different parts of the world. They are exposed to many different languages and cultures. Maintaining the family relations helps to develop their linguistic and cultural awareness and a new global outlook.

4.3 Ten years on

We now turn to the small selection of families (two maintenance: M1, M4; five shift: S6, S9, S10, S12, S13) whom we observed and invited to another round of conversations after a ten-year interval. Inevitably the family situations changed over the ten-year period and several members moved to other parts of Britain

and of the world. We managed to get together 18 individuals, with whom we maintained contacts over the years. They were eager to share their stories, as it provided them with an opportunity to simultaneously make sense of the present by drawing on their experiences in the past and of the past with reference to the present.

4.3.1 Struggles with language maintenance

It became immediately clear that all the families struggled with language maintenance. The following quotations reveal their efforts. One young woman in her mid-twenties told us,

- (28) (Woman from S6, in her twenties, British-born, of parents from Hong Kong.) Mom used to lock us up, well, not literally, but you know what I mean, so that we could do the Chinese homework from the Chinese school. I did do the GCSE. It wasn't too hard. But then when I got to A-level, I gave up Chinese. It was too much.

Her mother backed up her story:

- (29) (Mother from S6. She is following her daughter's language choice and speaking in English here.)
I really wanted her to keep learning Chinese. I wanted her to do A-level Chinese. But she did have a lot of work to do, and I thought, well, she needs to go to a good university. Chinese is only a bonus. She needed to concentrate on her other subject. I think she can still speak quite well. But her reading is poor, and she can't write Chinese.

Another parent, a businessman and father of two children, now with two grandchildren, reflected on why they did not manage to maintain the language as well as they had wished,

- (30) (Man in his sixties, originally from Hong Kong, from S9.)
I think we were too optimistic, maybe too naïve about speaking Chinese. We wanted to speak Chinese with them (the children) and I think we did to start with. But then after they started school, everything seemed to be in English. I was busy at work and my wife was also working. She still is. And when we dealt with their school work, it was also all in English. So gradually, not deliberately, we started speaking English to each other.

The children know we can speak English. So it's hard to pretend that we don't understand them. We try to speak as much Chinese as possible, but certainly not all the time.

Even with the language maintenance families, the struggle was obvious, as one woman in her late twenties told us.

- (31) (Woman from M4, British-born, from a language maintenance family. We originally interviewed her when she was a teenager.)

I thought my parents were crazy. They put all these posters in Chinese in my bedroom, trying to encourage me to think I was in China or something. And they asked me to learn Chinese songs. I liked singing. My mom said, "oh you can be the next A-Mei" (Zhang Hui-mei, a Taiwanese singer), or something like that. I think she liked her. So I teased her a lot. Sometimes she said, "can I put your name for the Chinese Pop Idol on cable TV" or something. She also pretended that she didn't understand any English and had rows with my dad if he spoke English to us.

When we asked this young woman if she felt that her mother's efforts paid off, she said:

- (32) I suppose they have. I can definitely speak Chinese. I can read quite a bit too. But I don't think I can write very well. She certainly made sure that I understood that we speak Chinese in the family. Or that's her preference anyway. I do speak Chinese with my parents. My mom will insist on it.

Several people felt that the efforts they made collectively in trying to maintain Chinese at home, whether they were successful or not, brought them closer together as a family, as the following quotations indicate:

- (33) (Father from M4, originally from China.)

她们明白我们家是中国人的家，她们应当尽量说中国话。我知道不那么简单，但也要努努力啦。她们回家是会跟我们用中文打招呼，有时也用中文 text，但有很多错。可是她们是在 trying。

'They (the daughters) know that we are a Chinese family. They should speak Chinese as far as possible. I know it's not always straightforward. But we have to try. When they come home, they do greet us in Chinese, and sometimes they send text messages in Chinese, with lots of mistakes. But they are trying.'

- (34) (Woman from S9, originally from Hong Kong.)

婆婆前幾年過身之後我心諗死喇，啲細路唔會再想講中文喇。因為佢哋知道我哋識講英文，佢哋中文唔係幾好。但係佢哋係同我哋講中文嘅。有時我個囡話：“哦，媽咪，我唔會 abandon 你嘅，我會同你講中文”。

‘When grandma passed away a few years ago, I thought this is it. The children won’t want to speak Chinese any more. Because they know we can speak English and their Chinese isn’t very good. But actually they do speak Chinese to us. Sometimes my daughter says, “oh mom, I don’t want to abandon you. I’ll speak Chinese with you”.’

These two quotations also reflect the fragmented and partial nature of language maintenance and language shift. Some have maintained Chinese more than others; some can speak it and understand it when it is spoken to them but cannot read or write it; and some have lost their parents’ native variety of Chinese but gained Mandarin instead. They present a major challenge to family and community cohesion of the Chinese diaspora in the twenty-first century.

4.3.2 Re-imagining

For many transnational families, changes are constant. They may well have long-term plans for their future generations. But their plans are often subject to change, sometimes suddenly, as some of the examples above show. The changes in the circumstances then trigger a re-imagination. Our follow-up interviews after ten years contain several examples of re-imagining. The following are two such examples.

- (35) (Mother of S12.)

其实我们原来都是跟他们讲中文的。带他们回中国去，他们也很开心。后来国内没人了，老人不在了，其他的都出去不回来了。我们也就没再坚持。可他们（指儿子）有时说将来会回中国去，也想让他们的孩子学中文。

‘In fact we used to speak Chinese to them (when they were little). They were very happy when we took them to China. Later on all the relatives in China disappeared. Old people passed away and others went overseas and never returned to China. We didn’t persist. But they (the sons) say that they would go back to China one day and want their own children to learn Chinese.’

- (36) (Father of S9, originally from Hong Kong. He is speaking Mandarin here, transcribed in complex Chinese characters to show his Hong Kong, Cantonese-speaking background.)

我們以前是和他們講廣東話的。後來他們上大學自己學講國語了，我看他們有很多從中國來的朋友。我也和他們講國語。

‘We used to speak Cantonese with them. They then picked up Mandarin at university. I think they have a lot of friends from China. I now also speak Mandarin to them.’

4.3.3 Differing perspectives

Of course, there were different views and different experiences about the families’ efforts in language maintenance. Some of the British-born members of the families said to us that they felt attending the Chinese complementary school at weekends was a waste of time, as the following quotation illustrates,

- (37) (A British-born woman in her mid-twenties from S10, of parents from Hong Kong.)

We were not really forced to go, but it was the routine. Every Sunday afternoon during term time, we would all drive to the Chinese school and I spent 3 or 4 hours there. I don’t think the teaching was very good. I don’t remember much of what we learned. I probably have picked up more Chinese at university, by just talking to Chinese students, especially those from China.

Others had a somewhat different view, as the following quotation shows:

- (38) (A British-born university student, from M1, of parents from Hong Kong.)
I thought the Chinese school was fun. I did learn something. Maybe not as much as I could or should have. But I think it was good because you meet other Chinese kids, and I made a lot of friends. I’m still keeping in touch with some of them now, and we go out together sometimes. Some of the teachers were just parents. We knew one or two of them. They were trying so hard to help us.

Equally interesting to us were the comments by some of our participants that our project helped to raise their awareness of the significance of language maintenance in transnational families. The following are two examples of such comments:

- (39) (A mother in her late forties, from M4, originally from China.)
我从来没想到保持你自己的语言会这么难。还是跟你谈过以后我们在家

谈，说“得有个计划。”我们得想要孩子将来做什么，我们一家想去哪儿。我们是想两种语言都能保持。但我们更需要为中文努力，因为在家外边没有学习使用的机会。

‘I never thought keeping your own language could be so hard. And after talking to you, we discussed it at home and said, “we have to have a plan”. We had to think what we wanted the kids to do in the future, and where we as a family wanted to be. We wanted to keep both languages. But we needed to make more effort for Chinese because there was no opportunity outside the home to learn and use it.’

Her husband said:

(40) (Husband from M4.)

我们本来没有计划在英国长居。我们其实是想应该尽量努力多学英语，快点学，回了国可以说一口好英语，小孩的英语也不会忘。但你这个项目让我们见到其他人家，才知道保持中文反而更难。他们从幼儿园学校就能学英语。可只能跟我们学中文，而我们又不是专业。不知道怎么教中文。

‘We didn’t plan to stay in Britain long. And we actually thought we should try and learn as much English as possible, quickly, so that when we go back to China we can speak good English and the kids won’t forget their English. But meeting the other families through the project made us realise that keeping their Chinese is even harder. They (the children) can learn English from nursery and school. They can only learn Chinese from us, and we are not professionals. We don’t know how to teach Chinese.’

So far we have provided examples for a number of themes that emerged from our family ethnography. These themes constitute significant contributing factors for inter-generational language maintenance and language shift. Very often, the different factors work together in a complex way, depending on the circumstances of the specific family in question. To illustrate how the factors work, as well as the role of imagination, we now tell the story of the Kan family who has gone through a series of language shift, yet has managed to maintain a good level of Chinese.

4.4 The story of the Kan family

The person we got to know first in this family is Mrs Kan, a woman in her late sixties. She is the first generation of immigrant and now the grandmother of the family. She is of Hakka-speaking background, from a village in the New

Territories of Hong Kong. She came to Britain in the 1960s when she was in her late twenties. She told us that she met her husband, a Cantonese speaker, in England, but apparently it was an arranged marriage, so she was in fact legally married to Mr Kan before she left Hong Kong. At the time, Mr Kan was also fairly new to Britain, having migrated a few years before Mrs Kan and was also in his late twenties. He worked in a construction company briefly, with limited English. He then worked in a Chinese restaurant run by someone from the same village. When Mrs Kan arrived, she first worked in the same restaurant as well. She picked up a small amount of English and Cantonese from working in the restaurant. The husband then went back into the construction trade and was apparently involved in some major building projects in London. They earned enough money to set up a take-away shop for themselves. They had a part-time assistant, a distant relative from Hong Kong who could speak English, to take orders and deal with customers at the shop front. But it was mainly Mrs Kan who ran the family business. Mr Kan continued to work in the building trade, but on a part-time, freelance basis.

Mrs Kan learned Cantonese from the husband and from the others in the Chinese restaurant. She speaks Cantonese with Mr Kan. When Mrs Kan was expecting their first child, her parents joined the family in order to help with childcare. The grandparents were Hakka speakers. They apparently understood some Cantonese but the family communication was largely in Hakka, except for interactions with Mr Kan. Mrs Kan reported that her children, one daughter and one son, knew Hakka very well, as they were brought up with by the grandparents. But they were sent to a Cantonese complementary school at weekends as there was no other Chinese complementary school at the time. In fact, there is still not Hakka provision in any of the Chinese complementary schools in Britain. Both Mr and Mrs Kan know some Mandarin and were very happy to speak it with us. We asked how they learned it. They said they just picked it up from interacting with Mandarin-speaking friends. It reflects recent changes to the demographics of the Chinese community in Britain, with a significant increase of Mandarin speakers since the 1980s.

We have met and spoken to Mr and Mrs Kan's daughter and son on many occasions. They speak English to each other and prefer to speak English with us though they did also speak Mandarin with us too. They claim that they have forgotten their Hakka and their Cantonese is "OK but not brilliant". They told us that the family stopped using Hakka and changed to Cantonese as the main home language after the grandparents passed away in the 1980s. They also told us that when they were at university, they learned some Mandarin from the ethnic Chinese friends they made who came from mainland China, Taiwan, and Singapore. The daughter has married an ethnic Chinese man from Malaysia who

knows Mandarin and some other varieties of Chinese and they speak mainly English to each other. But they do watch Chinese TV and can speak Mandarin very well. The son married a British-born Chinese woman from a Mandarin-speaking family. They say that they would like their future children to learn to speak both Cantonese and Mandarin.

Mr and Mrs Kan sold their family take-away in early 2000. They constantly talked about going back to Hong Kong. But their longest stay in Hong Kong in nearly 40 years since they came to Britain was seven months and only Mr Kan on his own. He did not have a wealthy background, though according to him the family had some land in the New Territories. The following is a quotation from Mr Kan in Mandarin:

- (41) 風俗習慣的確是個問題，我在這裡三十多年也覺得不習慣，還是比較習慣香港。想起香港就開心。

‘Cultural customs is an issue. I’ve lived here for over 30 years, and I’m still not used to the customs here. I’m more used to Hong Kong. And I’m just so happy whenever I think of Hong Kong.’

Mrs Kan, on the other hand, acknowledged the struggles she has had with various languages. As a Hakka speaker married to a Cantonese, she had to learn the husband’s language but she also felt that it was necessary to learn Cantonese in order to work in the Chinese catering trade. Even when they were running their own business, she knew that they had to deal with other Chinese, including the suppliers, who were mainly Cantonese speakers. They really cared about their own children’s learning of Chinese and sent them to a Cantonese school. But they also accepted that to survive in Britain, they needed English. Mr Kan’s English is actually quite good. Mrs Kan says she can understand most things and watches English TV programmes regularly. Hakka lives on in her memory. She told us in Mandarin:

- (42) 我現在也很少講客家話了。沒人跟我講。反而越來越多是講普通話。我們兩個孩子上大學後，我在家裡一個人沒意思，出去找朋友。後來又給別人幫忙，學著說普通話。

‘Now I speak very little Hakka. Nobody is speaking Hakka with me. I actually speak more and more Putonghua. When our two children went to university, I felt bored on my own at home. So I went out to my friends. I later helped with their business. I learned to speak Putonghua.’

What we found interesting though is that both Mr and Mrs Kan have picked up very good Mandarin, which, like woman in extract (23) above, she refers to as

Putonghua adopting mainland China's terminology. Mr Kan says that since the 1990s, he has known more and more Mandarin speakers, especially from mainland China, through his business contacts. He has not learned it formally but picked it up from interacting with Mandarin speakers. Mrs Kan has also picked up some Mandarin and is very keen to practise it. She is the one who encouraged her own children to learn Mandarin at university. She says on a number of occasions that she wanted her daughter and son, and her future grandchildren, to learn Mandarin because if one day they would decide to go and work in China, Mandarin would be very helpful to them. She described Mandarin as 我们中国话 'our Chinese language' and calls it "Putonghua" on a number of occasions and talked about its usefulness in the today's society. On one visit when the son happened to be in the house too, we ended up having a conversation in Mandarin with both Mr and Mrs Kan. It seems that the Kan family has collectively seen the potential of Mandarin as a language of the future and at the same time reconstructed Mandarin, rather than Hakka or Cantonese, as the heritage language representing their ethnic and cultural roots.

The Kan family's story shows that language shift is not one-directional or a single linear process. At different points in time, significant events in the family, such as marriage, birth, employment, education, children leaving home, would impact on the way family members negotiate their language choice decisions. Earlier choices could be reversed by later events and parallel processes could be happening at the same time for different members of the same family. Nevertheless, their imagining of the future goes on. In this specific regard, it is relevant to mention that our data contain ample examples of syntactic and lexical devices in Chinese expressing their imaginations, such as 要是...就好了 (*yaoshi...jiuhaole* 'it would have been good if....(something had happened)'), 要是...該多好...(*yaoshi...jiuhaole* 'how nice it would have been if.... (something had happened)?'), 當初真應該... (*dangchu yinggai* 'at the time, (I) should have done...'), and Mrs Kan's favourite phrases 如果有一天 (*ruguo you yitian*) and 假如有一天 (*jiaru you yitian*), both meaning 'if one day' in English, to suggest that Chinese speakers can and do think counterfactually (Au 1983; Liu 1985; Wu 1994; Jiang 2000; Yeh and Gentner 2005; cf. Bloom 1981, who hypothesized that Chinese speakers could not enter into the counterfactual realm due to lack of subjunctive mood in the language), despite the lack of structural equivalent of subjunctive mood in the Chinese language on surface. In fact, many of the people in our study seem to cherish fantastical counterfactual thought and display a vivid and wonderful imagination for themselves and their families. Moreover, most of the examples we find in our data show "upward counterfactuals", which are believed to produce positive functional or beneficial effects (Roese and Olson 1995; Roese 1997).

5 Summary and conclusion

As we explained at the beginning, the main purpose of the article is to make an argument for the role of imagination to be taken seriously in studies of language maintenance and language shift. We did not set out to prove any hypothesis. But in going through large quantities of interview data, it became clear to us that whilst many of the factors that have been identified to play a role in language maintenance and language shift, how transnational individuals and families imagine their future was a key factor that has not been studied systematically before. This factor is crucial because, as the examples and quotations show, it produces a fusion of longing and belonging which in turn provides a vision and a source of inner strength that drives them forward in their daily struggles. Immigrants and their families do not simply look back all the time; they also look forward and see the potentialities of their present environment. Imagination is shaped both by the individuals' and the families' past experiences and present circumstances, and interacts with other factors that determine their choice of social behaviour including language choice and practices. We have examined imagination alongside some other more material factors that shape people's LMLS, including whether they worked in a place where English was required, whether they shared a language at home or not, as in the case of the Kan family, with Hakka and Cantonese, and whether grandparents were living in the same household or close by. Future research could investigate the intersection of imagination and these more durable factors further by focusing specifically on how the latter factors impact on imagination and vice versa, and how they together impact on the transitional individuals and their families' new diasporic thinking.

We have seen examples of the ways in which imagination is constructed and articulated, sometime explicitly and other times implicitly. Both positive and negative imaginations are on display. But the same type of imagination can result in different coping strategies. For example, some families imagined that they would not be staying in Britain very long and therefore they wanted to make sure that their children maintain their Chinese to a high level. Others, however, felt that they should make best use of their (imagined) short stay in Britain and get their English to a good level. For all the families, imaginations change over time as circumstances change, and there are difference and tensions between the imaginations of individual members of the same family, resulting in different attitudes and behaviours. The imagining and re-imagining help to produce a more dynamic notion of "heritage" and "heritage language", as well as a more complex sense of belonging (see other studies in Li 2016).

An important and specific methodological consideration in our study has been to develop ways to investigating language maintenance and language shift not simply by asking what has happened in the past, but by looking how transnationals individually and collectively imagine the future and how their imagination impact on their attitudes and behaviours. We therefore specifically asked the families in our study their plans for the future and how their language choice, language learning and language use might interact with their plans. To capture imagination as a key factor in language maintenance and language shift, analysis that focuses on small stories and fleeting moments (Li 2011) has proven to be particularly useful. Traditionally, sociolinguistic and applied linguistic analyses of language maintenance and language shift focus primarily on the overall patterns or on frequent and regular behavioural choices. Our study suggests that what seems to be small stories and mundane moments can prove to be highly significant and consequential. Families and individuals may come to realise something really important to them during the course of a brief, informal conversation, which may impact on their attitude and behaviour in a fundamental way. Further efforts should be made to develop ways of capturing these moments more precisely.

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