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"I'm Forever Chinese": The Role of ICTs in Cultural Identity Maintenance among Chinese Immigrants in Transnational Families

Wenjun Zhu ^{1,*}



¹ Software Engineering Institute of Guangzhou, Guangdong, 510990, China

* Correspondence: Wenjun Zhu, Software Engineering Institute of Guangzhou, Guangdong, 510990, China

Abstract: This study explores the role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in preserving cultural and ethnic identities among Chinese immigrants in the U.S. By focusing on the case study of Haley, a second-generation immigrant, the research investigates how digital platforms like WeChat, TikTok, and YouTube facilitate the preservation of cultural heritage and promote cultural inclusion. ICTs enable real-time communication with family, participation in cultural practices, and access to traditional resources, helping bridge generational and cultural gaps. The study highlights how these platforms support dual cultural environments, balancing cultural roots with adaptation to American society. Additionally, challenges such as digital access disparities and the marginalization of older generations are discussed. The findings emphasize the transformative impact of ICTs on identity formation and provide insights into the ongoing negotiation of cultural and ethnic identity in transnational contexts. This research contributes to the broader discourse on globalization, cultural continuity, and the evolving role of technology in shaping immigrant identities.

Keywords: Chinese immigrants; ICTs; cultural identity; transnational families; digital access disparities

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1. Introduction

As of 2022, over 5.4 million Chinese Americans reside in the U.S., making them one of the most significant ethnic minorities [1]. This community, consisting of first-generation immigrants and their descendants, faces the challenge of preserving cultural heritage while adapting to American society. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) like WeChat, TikTok, and YouTube aid cultural continuity by helping immigrants stay connected with family, engage in cultural activities, and access language and traditional resources. Chinese immigrant families face the dual challenge of younger generations assimilating through education while older generations strive to maintain cultural roots through language and traditions [2]. However, frequent English use can erode heritage language skills, weakening cultural ties [3]. ICTs help preserve cultural identity by supporting communication, engagement in cultural practices, and access to heritage language. Platforms like WeChat, TikTok, and YouTube enable Chinese immigrants to maintain real-time communication, participate in cultural practices, and access resources on Chinese language and traditions. The concept of cultural identity as both a state of “being” and a process of “becoming” along with Grosjean’s work on bicultural bilinguals, demonstrates how ICTs help balance cultural roots and adaptation [4]. Levitt and Glick Schiller’s

“simultaneity” and Bacigalupe and Lambe’s “virtual familyhood” further emphasise digital platforms’ role in sustaining emotional intimacy across transnational families [5,6].

This study examines the role of ICTs in preserving cultural and ethnic identities among Chinese immigrants, focusing on how these technologies help navigate dual cultural environments. Using the case study of Haley (pseudonym), a second-generation immigrant, it explores how digital communication tools aid in cultural heritage preservation while fostering inclusion and belonging. The study also addresses challenges like generational gaps and digital access disparities, contributing to the broader academic discussion on globalisation and the continuity of cultural traditions. Employing a qualitative case study approach, it follows a constructivist paradigm, focusing on Haley’s use of ICTs, language habits, cultural identity, and her interpretation of these experiences.

From the interview with Haley, it is clear that ICTs, particularly WeChat, play a crucial role in helping Chinese immigrants maintain cultural and ethnic identities. Haley stays connected with family, shares updates, participates in virtual festival celebrations like the Lunar New Year, and exchanges red envelopes through digital platforms. Haley described how these platforms enable her to engage with her cultural heritage, serving as communication tools and spaces for identity preservation. This highlights how ICTs bridge cultural preservation and integration into American society.

2. Literature Review

2.1. ICTs and Transnational Families

ICTs have transformed transnational family communication by enabling frequent and affordable interactions [6]. Platforms like WeChat, Skype, and WhatsApp help families stay emotionally connected and “be family” virtually, regardless of physical distance, supporting activities like milestone celebrations and advice-sharing [5]. For instance, WeChat’s multimedia features, such as voice messages, images, and videos, create intimacy despite geographical separation. These interactions foster intimacy and strengthen familial and cultural ties across borders.

The role of ICTs in supporting transnational practices has been studied in many contexts. Chib et al. explore mobile phones in transnational mothering, showing that mobile phones can close emotional and cultural gaps [7]. Bacigalupe and Lambe also say that ICTs help create “transnational social fields.” These are spaces where families can interact easily across borders [5].

2.2. Identity in the Digital Era

Identity is flexible and dynamic, shaped by history and current influences. ICTs provide spaces for immigrants to blend cultural continuity with adaptation to new environments [8]. The internet is a virtual “third space” for engaging with heritage and host culture, fostering biculturalism where individuals integrate ancestral and adopted identities. [4,9].

Cyberspace provides a space for cultural resources, offering immigrants access to information, traditions, and otherwise unavailable practices [10]. Online platforms serve as cultural archives, preserving traditions and supporting hybrid identity creation. Lingel et al. show that these platforms enable transnational migrants to maintain their heritage while adapting to new environments [11].

ICTs are vital in preserving language, which is central to cultural identity and inter-generational connections in immigrant families [12]. Digital tools like language-learning apps, video tutorials, and social media help immigrants retain and pass on heritage languages, fostering linguistic continuity, cultural pride, and belonging. For example, Kurniawan shows Chinese Indonesians blending “Chineseness” with Javanese culture. Darwin and Perera et al. highlight how platforms like TikTok and Instagram support cultural expression, challenge stereotypes, and strengthen identity [1,13,14]. Han finds that Chinese students used Weibo to respond to experiences of discrimination, reinforcing

their ethnic identity through shared narratives and cultural discourse [15]. These studies demonstrate how ICT platforms shape ethnic and cultural identities through user practices.

2.3. Theoretical Perspectives on ICTs and Identity

Hall's framework defines identity as both "being" (connection to roots) and "becoming" (adaptive reshaping), highlighting its fluid, dynamic, and multifaceted nature. This dual perspective reflects identity's fluid and dynamic nature, especially in transnational settings where individuals navigate the tension between heritage preservation and cultural adaptation. In transnational contexts, ICTs support heritage preservation while aiding cultural adaptation, enabling individuals to balance cultural roots with societal integration and navigate complex identity tensions more effectively.

Grosjean's research on bicultural bilinguals highlights how ICTs support dual identities by bridging heritage and host cultures, providing access to diverse cultural and linguistic resources [4]. This reinforces Hall's framework as a valuable lens for understanding identity negotiation in multicultural contexts, showing how immigrants effectively manage their bicultural lives through technology. Besides, Hall-Lew demonstrates how Chinese Americans in San Francisco use "FOB styles" to balance traditional cultural identity with adaptation to American society, reflecting Hall's concept of "being" and "becoming." However, Parvin critiques "Chineseness" as a cultural constraint since the struggle of Chinese Americans to fully return to traditional culture or integrate into American society, while Ang highlights that societal biases shape "Chineseness," as seen in William Yang's experience of imposed identity burdens [6,16,17]. These studies reveal tensions between heritage preservation, adaptation, and external pressures in shaping dynamic and fluid identities. Our research provides evidence for the debate on Chinese identity in transnational contexts, exploring ICTs' role in balancing heritage preservation with adaptation, enriching theoretical discourse, and offering practical insights into identity maintenance globally.

Levitt and Glick Schiller's concept of "simultaneity" is another helpful theory [6]. It shows how transnational migrants maintain connections to their home countries while engaging with host societies, a process facilitated by digital technologies. ICTs provide real-time communication, cultural exchange, and identity-building platforms, enabling what Bacigalupe and Lambe term "virtual family hood," where digital interactions replicate physical proximity's emotional and cultural intimacy [5].

Shi shows that ICTs sustain cultural links among Iowa's Chinese migrants but also reveal marginalisation and adaptation challenges [18]. Ip's research shows how transnational travel and family contact sustain emotional ties, while "cultural identity anxiety" leads migrants to develop dual identities, balancing homeland and host society connections [19]. These studies illustrate how migrants use "simultaneity" to navigate identity tensions between their sense of Chineseness and integration into new cultural contexts. Building on these insights, our research contributes empirical evidence to this debate, providing further understanding of how Chinese Americans navigate identity tensions in transnational contexts.

2.4. Gaps in Existing Research

Although the existing literature highlights ICTs' transformative role, research gaps remain. Most studies focus on their practical functions, like communication facilitation and information spread, while emotional and symbolic roles in identity preservation are less explored. Furthermore, ICT challenges, like digital access inequalities and cultural commodification challenges, are also underexplored.

In addition, many studies overlook the specific experiences of distinct immigrant communities, such as the Chinese diaspora, whose unique cultural and linguistic characteristics shape their interaction with ICTs. Examining these specifics provides insights into how ICTs influence identity construction within cultural settings.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

Haley, a 19-year-old who immigrated to the United States four years ago to reunite with her parents, participates in this study. Her family lives primarily in Guangdong province, China. The semi-structured interview offers Haley the flexibility to choose her preferred language, Cantonese, reflecting her heritage language preference. The interview focuses on gathering detailed information about her family connections, language use, ICT usage, and cultural practices. Specifically, it explores her geographic and emotional ties with her family in China, the languages she uses in various contexts, the frequency of her digital interactions, and how ICTs help her maintain cultural traditions, such as celebrating the Lunar New Year. The interview provides valuable insights into Haley's identity as a bicultural individual navigating dual environments. The transcript has undergone member checking to ensure accuracy, with Haley confirming the recorded information. Themes are cross-referenced with existing literature to align with broader ICTs and cultural identity research frameworks.

3.2. Questionnaire

A complementary questionnaire is administered to collect quantitative data on Haley's ICT usage, focusing on four key aspects. First, it assesses the frequency of her daily interactions on platforms like WeChat, TikTok, and YouTube, providing quantitative information on her engagement. Second, it looks at her language practices, specifically the proportion of time she spends using Cantonese versus English in digital communications. Third, the questionnaire explores her cultural engagement, focusing on her participation in online cultural activities such as virtual festival celebrations and sharing traditional practices on social media. Lastly, it examines the emotional connection fostered by ICTs, investigating how these technologies contribute to Haley's sense of closeness with her family and cultural roots. The data from the questionnaire provides a structured overview of Haley's ICT usage patterns, which are used to validate and enrich the qualitative findings from the interview. By triangulating data from both methods, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of how ICTs support identity maintenance among Chinese immigrants.

3.3. Data Analysis

The conversation is transcribed and analysed using thematic coding to identify patterns in Haley's experiences and perceptions. Key themes, such as identity negotiation, language practices, and digital engagement, are derived from literature. The interview findings are cross-referenced with the questionnaire data to ensure the quality of the data. This comparative approach ensures triangulation and enhances the validity of conclusions, highlighting how ICTs reinforce cultural identity and support dual cultural navigation.

4. Discussion

4.1. Virtual Proximity and Identity Reinforcement

Apart from her parents, Haley's family resides in Guangdong. She frequently interacts with her classmates from before high school and with relatives in Cantonese to maintain her heritage language. In contrast, she communicates in English with peers and col-

leagues in the U.S., reflecting her bilingual identity. Haley engages in bilingual discussions, switching languages based on context and navigating dual cultural environments. Her ICT use is intensive, with regular video calls, messaging, and virtual celebrations like the Mid-Autumn Festival. Through these practices, Haley identifies strongly as Chinese and American, using ICTs to balance and integrate these aspects of her identity.

ICTs create virtual proximity, bridging transnational families. Haley's frequent use of WeChat reinforces her Chinese identity: "Sometimes I feel like I'm back home." This demonstrates how the instantaneous nature of digital interactions fosters an environment where cultural ties are continually reaffirmed. Regular video calls and photo exchanges maintain these ties, showcasing how ICTs support heritage engagement and identity maintenance.

Virtual proximity extends beyond personal relationships. Haley participates in online groups like the Enping Townsman Association, sharing cultural practices, exchanging advice, and sustaining collective identity. These platforms recreate shared cultural spaces, helping individuals like Haley navigate dual identities and blend heritage with new environments.

4.2. Language Use and Cultural Continuity

Language is a cornerstone of cultural identity [12]. Haley's use of Cantonese in daily communication and her engagement with Mandarin through online resources illustrate how ICTs facilitate heritage language preservation. She remarked, "I primarily speak Cantonese at home and use Mandarin when necessary. Social media platforms make it easier to learn and practice both languages."

Digital platforms such as TikTok and YouTube have become vital tools for cultural education. Haley shares how she practises traditional Chinese calligraphy by watching online tutorials, saying, "It's amazing how I can learn something so traditional just by watching a video on my phone. It makes me feel closer to my home." This enhances her language skills and deepens her appreciation for Chinese culture. Such resources democratise access to heritage education, enabling individuals to connect with their cultural roots regardless of geographic constraints.

Haley's bilingual discussions in online communities exemplify how ICTs foster linguistic diversity. She alternates between Cantonese and English based on context and audience. She uses Cantonese to maintain her cultural roots for family-related conversations and interactions within heritage-focused groups. Conversely, she primarily uses English when engaging with peers or participating in academic and social discussions in the United States. "When I talk to my family or people in Cantonese groups, it feels like I'm keeping a part of my heritage alive. But with my friends and classmates here, it's natural to switch to English—it's like being part of two worlds," Haley explains. This linguistic flexibility highlights her dual cultural identity and demonstrates how ICTs enable her to seamlessly navigate and integrate these two facets. These interactions reinforce her bicultural identity, allowing her to engage with Chinese and non-Chinese peers. The frequent use of heritage language online bolsters cultural pride and strengthens ties to her ethnic identity.

4.3. Participation in Cultural Practices

Haley's experiences reveal how ICTs enable participation in cultural practices, such as celebrating traditional festivals online. Haley shares, "We celebrate birthdays and Spring Festival through video chats and WeChat red envelopes. These practices make me feel connected to my family and culture." These practices mirror Levitt and Glick Schiller's concept of "simultaneity," showing how migrants maintain homeland ties while integrating [6]. However, Shi highlights that ICTs can expose migrants to marginalization [18].

Digital platforms enable virtual celebrations, bridging distances as Haley describes how her family collectively watches Chinese New Year galas streamed online, followed by group video calls to exchange greetings and share memories. These activities replicate in-person gatherings, preserving cultural rituals and fostering belonging in diasporic communities, aligning with Bacigalupe and Lambe's "virtual familyhood," where digital interactions replicate emotional and cultural intimacy [5].

Online platforms also enable immigrants to partake in community-driven cultural initiatives. For example, Haley participates in virtual workshops organised by her local Chinese association, which include activities like traditional cooking classes and cultural storytelling sessions. These events foster a shared sense of belonging and ensure the continuity of cultural traditions within diasporic communities. However, as Ip notes, this dual engagement with heritage and host society can lead to "anxieties" as individuals juggle conflicting cultural preservation and adaptation demands [19].

Haley's case aligns with Hall's framework of identity as "being" (connection to roots) and "becoming" (adaptive reshaping), highlighting the fluid and dynamic nature of identity in transnational contexts. Her use of digital platforms demonstrates how ICTs aid in balancing heritage ties with societal integration. This aligns with Hall-Lew's observation of Chinese Americans using "FOB styles" to merge tradition and adaptation. However, Parvin critiques "Chineseness" as a constraint, limiting full integration or singular identity formation. Similarly, Ang highlights external biases that impose identity burdens, as immigrants struggle with "Chineseness" as a societal label rather than self-definition [16,17,20]. Haley's reliance on digital tools may help navigate these tensions but also reveals the pressures of negotiating societal expectations tied to cultural identity.

Haley's participation in cultural practices via ICTs demonstrates opportunities for heritage preservation while exposing complexities in transnational identity construction. Digital tools enable connection and adaptation but underscore tensions between identity fluidity, societal biases, and integration.

4.4. Challenges and Digital Divide

Despite their benefits, ICTs highlight challenges, such as the digital divide within immigrant families. Haley's grandmother, for example, relies on video calls but struggles with typing and other digital functions. This generational gap in digital literacy poses barriers to full participation in digital cultural practices, underscoring the need for inclusive technology design [21].

Haley expresses concerns about how limited access to technology among older family members affects their ability to engage in cultural preservation. "My grandmother doesn't know how to use social media, so we rely on video calls to stay connected," she notes. This reliance on a narrow range of ICT functionalities restricts the depth of her grandmother's engagement with the broader family network [22].

The digital divide also manifests in varying levels of digital fluency across different socioeconomic groups. Haley observes that some community members lack access to high-speed internet or modern devices, limiting their ability to fully participate in online cultural activities. This highlights the importance of addressing systemic inequalities to ensure equitable access to ICTs.

4.5. ICTs as Mediators of Identity Negotiation

ICTs serve as mediators in the complex process of identity negotiation. They provide platforms for expressing and exploring multiple facets of identity, from linguistic preferences to cultural affiliations. For example, immigrants can participate in online forums and social media groups that align with their cultural heritage, fostering a sense of belonging. Haley has joined a virtual Cantonese opera group, where members sing traditional songs and share performances online. She reflects, "It's a way to stay connected to

my roots while learning with others who share my passion.” This highlights how digital platforms support both cultural preservation and community belonging.

These platforms also enable dialogue and exchange between immigrants and their host societies. Immigrants contribute to a richer, more diverse social fabric by highlighting their cultural practices and traditions. This bidirectional exchange facilitates integration and enhances the visibility and appreciation of their heritage within the host culture.

4.6. ICTs as Cultural Anchors

ICTs serve as cultural anchors by providing access to diverse cultural content. Haley watches Chinese historical dramas and videos related to Chinese culture and history on platforms like YouTube and local Chinese television channels. “These programs remind me of my heritage and make me proud to be Chinese,” she explains [23].

In addition to consuming cultural content, Haley actively shares her experiences on social media. She posts photos and videos of traditional Chinese dishes she prepared, along with reflections on her cultural identity. Such activities allow her to express pride in her heritage while fostering connections with others who share similar experiences.

ICTs also act as repositories of cultural knowledge. Haley notes how her family use WeChat groups to exchange articles and videos about Chinese history, art, and traditions. This collective sharing of information strengthens familial bonds and reinforces their cultural identity.

7. Limitations

Based on a single participant’s experiences, this study offers valuable insights into how ICTs facilitate identity maintenance among Chinese immigrants. Although the scale and diversity of the diaspora cannot be fully represented, the detailed case study approach allows for a nuanced exploration of individual experiences, laying the groundwork for future research with broader participant samples. If more participants are recruited, a questionnaire (quantitative) with the same structure as the current study will be distributed, providing a more comprehensive understanding. This focused analysis emphasises the critical role of ICTs in cultural preservation and highlights the potential for deeper, more extensive investigations in this area.

The study also identifies a digital divide, particularly affecting older generations. For instance, Haley’s grandmother, who cannot type, relies on video calls to stay in touch with her family. This gap in digital access demonstrates the barriers some immigrants face in using ICTs for cultural continuity. The reliance on a single case in this study limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should incorporate larger samples and mixed methods to capture diverse experiences.

8. Conclusion

This study uses qualitative research to explore how ICTs preserve cultural and personal identities among Chinese immigrants. Haley’s case study examines how digital tools foster cultural heritage preservation and inclusion in dual cultural contexts. Integrating theory and interview data highlights ICTs’ transformative impact on identity formation, addressing generational gaps and digital access disparities. In addition, it contributes to discussions on globalisation, cultural continuity, and inclusive technology design for diverse users.

The dynamic nature of transnational identity is explained through key theories and studies. Hall’s framework of “being” (connection to roots) and “becoming” (adaptation) highlights identity’s fluidity, reinforced by Grosjean’s work on bicultural bilinguals and Hall-Lew’s analysis of “FOB styles” among Chinese Americans. Parvin critiques “Chineseness” as constraining, while Ang highlights societal biases shaping imposed identities. Levitt and Glick Schiller’s “simultaneity” theory shows ICTs bridging homeland ties and

host integration. Studies by Shi and Ip reveal that ICTs aid heritage preservation and adaptation, offering insights into identity's dynamic complexity.

Comparative studies across immigrant groups could provide broader insights into the relationship between ICTs and identity. Through digital communication technologies, Chinese immigrants can maintain ties to their cultural and ethnic identities back home and feel a sense of belonging even when they are abroad. In contrast, some studies suggest that ICT may have an erosive effect on the identity of young Malaysians. This discrepancy may be because most Chinese living overseas have not left China psychologically or at least have not entirely escaped the influence of the concept of Chinese civilisation. The Chinese name for overseas Chinese, "Huaqiao," symbolises the status of Chinese expatriates temporarily living outside of China, emphasising their ethnic identity rather than nationality.

In this study, Haley's case underscores the critical role of ICTs in maintaining cultural and ethnic identity. By facilitating virtual proximity, supporting language use, and enabling participation in cultural practices, ICTs help immigrants maintain connections with their home countries and reinforce their cultural identity. Additionally, Haley's statement, "I'm forever Chinese," after the interview reflects her deep-rooted sense of belonging to Chinese culture, which is sustained and strengthened through digital tools in a cross-cultural context. It is noteworthy that Haley emphasises the importance of Mandarin, which differs from previous studies, potentially due to the increasing global influence and market value of Mandarin. These findings provide valuable insights for future research, highlighting that ICTs are not only tools for cultural preservation but also play a significant role in shaping the evolving cultural identity of immigrants.

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