

The Teacher's Stories at a Chinese Maintenance School

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Abstract

In this study, the authors discuss the nature of a teacher's stories in a Chinese maintenance class and examine how the teacher positions herself and her students in class, and its broader sociocultural context through her storytelling. Using participant observation as a lens, the authors aim to gain insights into what meaning the teacher makes of those stories and for what purposes, and to understand the context in which these stories are shared and interpreted. The study reveals that the teacher's stories function in several ways, which include engaging the students in learning Chinese language and literacy texts, reinforcing positive attitudes toward learning Chinese, and enriching students' understanding of their native language and Chinese culture. The various purposes and functions of storytelling in this study suggest that language teachers and teacher educators should be more aware of the potential, power, and cultural connotation of their stories.

One Sunday morning in the piercingly cold winter, Ms. Lin,¹ a teacher at a Chinese maintenance school, commented on the students' handwriting and asked how they could improve it. One student answered quickly, but another murmured, "I don't know." "Here I'd like to tell you a story about Mi Fu, a

famous calligrapher in the Song Dynasty," replied Ms. Lin. "Mi Fu practiced hard three years, but he was not satisfied with his penmanship. One day he met a skillful writer ..."
(Fieldnotes, January 30, 2005)

Ms. Lin's noisy classroom suddenly grew quiet as the students became curious about what happened next to Mi Fu. For these students, learning Chinese in the United States is a process not only of learning to communicate in the language, but also of connecting to the society from which the language comes. Mi Fu, who lived hundreds of years ago, entered their imagination by means of the story. While students interpreted its meaning by drawing on their experiences in both cultures, Ms. Lin echoed not only the voices of others but also her own (Dyson & Genishi, 1994). We became intrigued by the stories told in this Chinese maintenance class.

Background

Stories, in this study, refer to narratives that "cover both the imaginary tellings of fiction and the recounting of real-life factual experience" (Cortazzi, 1994, p. 158). Seminal studies by linguists such as Labov (Labov, 1972; Labov & Waletzky, 1967) have laid a solid foundation regarding the social functions of oral narratives. For example, linguistic analysis shows that oral narratives, or stories, have two basic social

¹ All names are fictitious.

functions: the referential function and the evaluative function (Labov, 1972). The former provides information, whereas the latter gives meaning to the information. In the field of education, stories of personal experience, historic events, or fiction have been used extensively in language teaching. Storytelling activities, in which children tell their own stories or listen to those of others, are often designed to boost children's interest in the language, confidence in mastering the language, and participation in language learning activities (Lockett & Jones, 2009). Moreover, storytelling plays a vital role in socializing young children into the meaning systems of their culture as they interact with peers, teachers, parents, and other members of their cultural and linguistic communities (Dyson & Smitherman, 2009). While many studies focus on personal storytelling in community settings (Miller, Cho, & Bracey, 2005; Miller, Wiley, Fung, & Liang, 1997), less attention has been paid to classrooms, where storytelling is a rich cultural practice. Teachers' storytelling can be a powerful tool that helps students shape their perception about who they think they are and who they think they can be (Fairclough, 1995), and helps parents and teachers in heritage language education (Sehlaoui, 2008). However, little is especially known about how Chinese teachers use stories in their classrooms in the United States, what kinds of stories are shared, and what impact storytelling has on the teaching of Chinese in a heritage classroom.

Storytelling is a traditional teaching tool deeply rooted in Confucianism. Research finds that personal storytelling has been widely practiced in Chinese families and

schools, where it is considered a traditional means of instilling moral values, social conventions, and appropriate behaviors in children (Miller & Mangelsdorf, 2005). Yet, there is a lack of research as to how Chinese teachers adopt stories for classroom teaching and whether their purpose is solely didactic or multifold (e.g., entertainment, affirmation, etc.). What is it like for a Chinese teacher to adopt the Chinese tradition of storytelling in a heritage classroom in the United States? This study aims to fill the information and research gap about Chinese teachers' storytelling practices in America (Fan, 2011; Goodwin, 2005; Rong & Preissle, 1997).

In this study, we explore a teacher's storytelling situated in a classroom where Chinese immigrant students learn advanced Chinese at a Chinese Sunday school. The teacher, a native speaker of Chinese, told stories through which she engaged her students in learning the language and culture. By examining the teacher's stories, we try to gain insights into the nature of the teacher's stories and the important roles they played in the Chinese maintenance classroom with regard to learning the heritage language and its associated culture. Using participant observation as a lens, we unfold a fascinating world of storytelling by entering into Ms. Lin's classroom.

We ask the following questions: What types of stories are told and what functions do those stories perform? How does the teacher position herself and the students regarding teaching and learning Chinese through stories? Seeking answers to these questions would help understand the challenges and resources Chinese language teachers have in teaching heritage students overseas.

Research Method

Site and Participants

The Chinese Sunday school where Ms. Lin worked was established by Chinese immigrant parents who lived near a comprehensive public university in the American Midwest. Nine grade-level Chinese language (K-8) classes, four mathematics classes, and occasionally one or two art classes were offered at the school. The advanced Chinese language class (level 8) was designed for native Chinese students whose Chinese competence levels (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) were relatively high, based on their performance on an entrance exam or their prior test records in lower grades. Ms. Lin was a graduate student at the university where the Chinese Sunday school was located. Before coming to the United States, she taught

Chinese at a high school for three years in Southern China and earned a B.A. degree in Chinese literature and a secondary teaching credential in Chinese. She taught Sunday school to support her graduate studies. In her late twenties, Ms. Lin taught Advanced Chinese (Level 8) during the course of the study. Information about student participants is listed in Table 1.

Ms. Lin's class was held every Sunday morning for two hours through an academic semester. All students were required to speak Chinese during the lesson, but were often found chatting in English during breaks. Ms. Lin had the final say on textbooks and learning materials, which allowed her not only to give the students opportunities to practice reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills, but also to add her instructional strength, in this case, storytelling.

Table 1
Student Participants

	S1 Qi	S2 An	S3 Ye	S4 Xiao	S5 Rui	S6 Feng	S7 Shu
Age	11	15	14	12	12	11	11
Sex	F	M					
Years in U.S.	4	13	12	4	3	1.5	0.5
Functional English	Native-like					Basic	Basic functional English
School Experience in China	K-2	None	None	K-4	K-5	K-6	K-6
Experience in U.S. school	Regular class					Pull out ESL program	ESL program, visiting student for 2 years
Parents	Chinese natives				Mother: Chinese native	Chinese natives	

Data Collection

In this study, the second author was responsible for collecting site data. She was more an observer than a participant, because her focus was on Ms. Lin's storytelling. Participation might have influenced Ms. Lin's choice of stories and frequency of use, as the second author had made her goal of studying stories clear to Ms. Lin before the study started. The downside of the second author's observational role was that it offered fewer opportunities for her to build rapport with Ms. Lin's students and develop a sense of membership of the class community.

Four kinds of data were collected in this ethnographic study (Watson-Gegeo, 1988). Observation started from the first day of the school's spring semester in January

2005. During the following three months (January - March), nine of 10 class sessions taught by Ms. Lin were observed. Fieldnotes on routine activities, interaction that involved stories, and observer memos were recorded (Erickson, 1986). The central focus was the specific stories Ms. Lin used in various activities, how these stories were shared, with whom, and for what purposes (Hymes, 1974). Details of classroom interactions helped interpret how Ms. Lin and her students used language as a symbolic tool to make meaning out of stories. Most fieldnotes were written in English. Chinese was used to document key words spoken by the teacher and students. The second data source was audiotapes of the nine classes and transcripts of all stories told by the teacher.

The third data source came from transcribed interviews with the teacher and students. The interview questions for the students were designed to obtain personal background information, while the questions for the teacher were intended to gain insights into her meaning-perspectives on her students' ethnic identities, and learning Chinese. The second author conducted a one-on-one hour-long interview with Ms. Lin in April 2005. She also recorded the informal talks with the teacher in the field. A group interview of five students was conducted in March 2005. This was followed by 20-minute-long one-on-one interviews with four of the five students — Feng, Qi, Rui, and Xiao — in April 2005. Not all students received an interview due to various personal reasons. Ms. Lin, Feng, and Qi chose Chinese while Rui and Xiao answered the questions in English. In the group interview the students and the second author communicated in Chinese, which the second author later transcribed and translated into English. The last data source was curriculum materials Ms. Lin developed, which provided a context for the researchers to understand Ms. Lin's storytelling.

Data Analysis Procedures

We identified Ms. Lin's stories as oral narratives that illustrate personal experiences, historic events, and fiction. These stories revealed temporal, spatial, and personal relations in order to recreate an event that happened, was happening, or would happen (Georgakopoulou & Goutsos, 2000). The temporal order might not be obvious in those narrated events, but characters in each story carried on intentions for their actions as they related to people, contexts, and consequent actions.

Initially, we looked through the fieldnotes to identify the teacher's stories and then drew on audiotaped data from the nine classes to further identify them. Based on all translated and transcribed data, 117 stories were identified. When we went through each story, we looked for its theme and purpose. Next, each story was categorized on the basis of its purposes. We acknowledge that any particular story is likely to have more than one purpose; however, in order to understand how stories were utilized in Ms. Lin's classroom, we classified all stories based on their functions during instruction (See Table 2).

Table 2
Data Analysis - Story Categories

Category	Number
Check-in stories	2
Instructional stories	84
[To start a new lesson]	6 of 84
[To explain characters and phrases]	49 of 84
[To provide cultural and historical background information]	3 of 84
[To understand literary texts]	18 of 84
[To demonstrate academic terms in literature]	4 of 84
[To connect texts with the teacher's personal experiences]	2 of 84
Stories for enriching Chinese language	19
Pedagogical stories*	12

*Seven of the pedagogical stories were also identified belonging to stories of other categories.

Findings

We argue that stories were the main sources from which the teacher drew when teaching Chinese in a Chinese Sunday school. They performed two major functions in the classroom: an instructional function and a cultural function. The teacher used stories to start the lesson, transition to a new lesson, explain language specifics, and contextualize literacy texts. Ms. Lin's storytelling also had cultural functions, including enriching Chinese language and

setting cultural expectations. Through the stories Ms. Lin projected what it is like to be Chinese onto her students. In what follows we discuss these findings in detail.

Instructional Functions of Storytelling in the Classroom

Starting the day. In two classes, Ms. Lin used stories to initiate a lesson. On the first day of the spring semester, Student Feng was writing “welcome (欢迎, huanying)” and “warm (热烈, relie)” in

Chinese on the chalkboard when Ms. Lin came in. During the subsequent conversation about holidays (Christmas and Chinese New Year), Ms. Lin explained the Chinese lunar calendar, shared her Christmas experience, and then gave the students the floor to tell their Christmas experiences.

Lin: I was in the same place with Ye at Christmas.

Ye: Guess where.

Shu: Florida?

Lin: Yes.

Shu: So was I.

Lin: Oh, you were? I remember on the night of Christmas I was standing in front of the Magic Kingdom Castle. Did you go there? [pause] All right, how did you spend Christmas? Who wants to start first? [students share their experiences informally]

Lin: It seems that Christmas was not much fun for this class. Perhaps we will enjoy *our* Chinese New Year more! By then, we will talk about ways to celebrate it.

(Story 1. Transcript, January 16, 2005)

Ms. Lin used her personal Christmas story to connect with her students who seemed in need of a transition from English and Christmas to Chinese and the Chinese New Year after a month-long break.

Transitioning to a new lesson. In five out of nine classes observed, Ms. Lin used a story to introduce a new lesson and to connect the students to the texts. On the first day following the Christmas sharing time, Ms. Lin read to the class a story in Chinese about how O’Henry, author of *The Gift of*

the Magi, began writing stories. “This true story happens in 1899. A prisoner in Columbus, Ohio wants to buy a Christmas gift for his daughter, but first he has to figure out how to make money to buy the gift. He decides to write something to sell” (Story 2. Transcript, January 16, 2005). This story contained pertinent information about Christmas, its celebrations, and writing. In addition, the notion of buying and sending gifts to loved ones also related to the students who were getting used to the practice in their neighborhood and community. “In O’Henry’s story, the couple, Della and Jim, give their most valued possessions to each other. Similarly, in O’Henry’s real life, he wrote the story of *The Gift of the Magi* to buy his daughter a Christmas gift” (Story 2. Transcript, January 16, 2005). Christmas, a theme incorporated in the teacher’s personal story, the story about O’Henry, the students’ personal stories, and the story about Della and Jim related the text to the students.

Explaining language specifics. The majority of instructional stories were used to explain Chinese characters and phrases. For example, when Shu asked Ms. Lin what “Da Yaji (打牙祭)” (having a good meal occasionally) meant, Ms. Lin described the cultural history of the third character, “Ji” (祭), and connected this phrase with the life of the Chinese in the United States.

Lin: We know Yaji (牙祭) refers to a delicious and rich Chinese dish. Why? Let’s take a closer look at this character, “Ji, 祭.” What does the top part on the left mean? We learned it before.

Ye & Shu: Meat.

Lin: Very good.

Rui: Pork rib.

Feng: All is meat.

Lin: You're right. In ancient times [pointing to the upper left part of the character] represents meat. The right side, which we haven't learned, means hand.

An: Oh, I see.

Shu: Hand holds meat.

Lin: Good! Look at the part below.

Shu: [Pronouncing the lower part of the character, 示]. SHI. It sounds like a persimmon. Persimmon is delicious.

Lin: [Pointing to the character] In the middle, doesn't it look like a table?

Qi: Mm, a table.

Lin: In ancient China, people offer sacrifice to their ancestors at Chinese New Year's Eve. They put chicken, duck, fish, and pork on the table for worshipping ceremonies. So "Ji" presents an offering with wine and meat.

Ye: Oh.

Lin: So, adding "Ya (牙, teeth)," the phrase literally means letting teeth have a good and rich dish. OK. (Story 12. Transcript, January 30, 2005)

Ms. Lin situated the phrase in its historical and cultural background in order to engage her students through logographic descriptions of ancient Chinese rituals in worshipping ancestors. According to Ms. Lin, "Ji (祭)" represented a man kneeling down and placing meat on a table as a way to show his respect to his forefathers. On the following Sunday morning, Ms. Lin brought up the phrase again, this time in the context of Chinese immigrants' life in the United States. She mentioned the scarcity of good

Chinese restaurants in this university town, and the adaptive strategy used by immigrants: they would have in-house parties and cook delicious family dinners for themselves. Because most of Ms. Lin's students came to the United States with their parents, they related to this experience well. Ms. Lin reinforced her students' understanding of the phrase by linking it to their personal experiences.

Contextualizing literary texts. Ms. Lin used stories to not only relate to students' lives, but also prepare them for literary texts in the curriculum. For example, when reading the short story, *The Gift of the Magi*, she told the story of the Queen of Sheba and the Gift of the Magi in the Bible so that the students could make sense of the metaphors in O'Henry's story. Stories used to help students understand a literary text formed the second largest subcategory within instructional stories. Ms. Lin narrated such stories in six classes. Another example came from discussion of *The Gift of the Magi* on January 23, when Ms. Lin asked the students for their opinions about Jim, a character in the story, in a scene where Jim notices that his wife, Della, is staring at some beautiful combs when they are in a shop on Broadway. With Ms. Lin's detailed illustration of the scene, Qi argued in Chinese that Jim was a gentleman because he cared about his wife. Ms. Lin often retold, reconstructed, and recreated scenes and contexts through such kinds of stories to help her students articulate their analysis of the texts.

Cultural Functions of Storytelling in the Classroom

Ms. Lin's stories became a vehicle for

her to engage her students in Chinese culture and history. During storytelling, Ms. Lin communicated her understanding of the Chinese and American cultures and languages.

Enriching Chinese language. With a degree in Chinese literature from a Chinese university, Ms. Lin has maintained a Chinese journal during the four years after she arrived in the United States. In her eyes, the Chinese language is full of beauty and meaning. Ms. Lin explained that she wanted her students to know and appreciate the beauty of the Chinese language with which many stories are constructed, because “[e]ach culture has its own set of stories and legends that sustain its people and nurture its children. As groups immigrate to other lands, they cherish these stories and legends while creating new ones of their immigration experience” (Chin, 2005, p. 2). As a passionate teacher, Ms. Lin saw herself as a storyteller who transmitted the Chinese traditions to her students in the melting pot of American culture. Some of Mr. Lin’s stories, especially stories for enriching language, illustrated this point.

The majority of these stories were told during the Chinese Lunar New Year celebrations, which usually lasted for 15 days, with New Year’s Eve at the beginning and the Lantern Festival at the end. Ms. Lin shared several stories related to the Chinese New Year and the Year of Rooster. Some, for example, came from ancient poems that described the scenes of the celebrations. On February 13, Ms. Lin invited Qi to translate the poem to the class:

Qi: [Translating the first line] An old

year passes and people hear fireworks. The second line says that when the spring =

Shu: = is coming.

Qi: When spring is coming, everything is fresh. Then Tu Su (屠苏) --

Lin: What is Tu Su? Rui?

Rui: I don’t know.

Lin: Tu Su is a rice wine for people to drink, especially on first day of the lunar New Year. It is said to bring protection, health, and luck. Who would like to try next line?

Feng: I know. Every household hangs a large red lantern and put red couplets on doors. Everything is in red.

Qi: People make couplets with wood.

Lin: People put new couplets. Tao Fu (桃符) refers to couplets engraved in a piece of peach wood. (Story 1. Transcript, February 13, 2005)

This ancient poem by Wang Anshi (王安石) unfolded a scene for students of the Chinese New Year: people lighting fireworks, drinking rice wine, hanging red lanterns, and putting up new couplets. Tu Su rice wine, Ms. Lin said, was a symbolic practice to bring fortune and health in traditional prayers for the new year, which has impacted generations of Chinese throughout history. The description in the poem and Ms. Lin’s stories about celebration rituals helped bridge students’ life experiences with the historical account of Chinese New Year celebrations. The stories particularly contextualized cultural symbols (rice wine, fish, colorful lanterns, and sweet dumplings) as they reflect the values of Chinese culture (Chin, 2005).

“Stories are an important tool for

proclaiming ourselves as cultural beings” (Dyson & Genishi, 1994, p. 4). With a close connection to Chinese language and literature, Ms. Lin used stories as an important means to present herself as Chinese and to help her students embrace their Chinese identity. “I am attached to those stories and the information they bring to students. Those about Chinese New Year Eve celebrations [are important because] no matter how long you have been in a new country and how much Americanized you believe you are, it is a tradition to observe. That’s cultural heritage. You can’t cut it off” (Interview Transcript, April 22, 2005).

On the first day of school, Ms. Lin explained the Chinese lunar calendar, along with the Zodiac signs for each year. The year 2005, the Year of Rooster, was Yi You year (乙酉年) according to the Chinese Era (天干地支). Ms. Lin compared holiday celebrations across cultures and countries. For example, by juxtaposing Chinese New Year and Christmas, Ms. Lin set up a context for her students to discuss the distinction between “we” as Chinese and “they” as Westerners. She used the words, “we” and “our” to refer to her students and herself, while pointing out Christmas is “their” holiday. During an interview, Ms. Lin confirmed that she saw all her students as Chinese because “most of my students received some years of education in China. The early years’ experience is important for people” (Interview Transcript, April 22, 2005). By contrasting stories of holiday celebrations, Ms. Lin stressed such traditional Chinese values as harmony, community, and respect, which were reflected in the details of the celebrations. Interestingly, her students An and Rui

identified themselves as both Chinese and American — in other words, as Chinese-Americans. For them, Christmas may be both “ours” and “theirs,” a Christmas filled with Chinese food and family get-togethers.

Setting cultural expectations. Although Ms. Lin was ambivalent about teachers imparting strong morals to students through stories and literary texts, she used stories implicitly to promote positive attitudes toward learning Chinese. What we would call her pedagogical stories represented her expectations of and assumptions about what should be valued in her class and how her students could better attain Chinese literacy. In what follows we will examine the key stories in detail.

***Work by fits and starts* (一暴十寒).** The class was studying a translated version of *A Bowl of Noodles*, a novel by a Japanese writer. During an individual read-aloud activity, most students had difficulty pronouncing many words, phrases, and even sentences in the chapters. After assisting Ye, Ms. Lin said to the class, “Remember the story of *work by fits and starts*? If you do not practice Chinese at home and rely only on these two hours, you probably won’t get very far” (Fieldnotes, February 20, 2005). Ms. Lin told the story of *work by fits and starts* on the first school day to teach students to be persistent and persevering in learning Chinese given the fact that Chinese lessons were only offered at weekends to her students, who spoke English most of the time.

Lin: This story is about two bright young men learning to play a Chinese Go game in ancient times. One of them took the game seriously and practiced it everyday; the other was absent-minded, and more interested in hunting wildlife. It did not take long for the former to excel and for the latter to fail the game, because it is not a matter of intelligence but your determination. The second man failed because he learned by fits and starts. (Transcript, January 16, 2005)

Through the story, Ms. Lin showed the students that success was possible only if one concentrated and never gave up. She held up the first man in the story as a good model for students. As for learning Chinese, Ms. Lin held the same expectation for her own students. However, she faced a dilemma.

In our informal conversation, Ms. Lin expressed her disappointment in Chinese native parents who did not actively support their children's Chinese learning, as she found out that they did not make an effort to provide or enforce a Chinese-speaking environment at home. Some parents even used English at the Sunday school. It became all the more difficult for the teacher to shoulder all the responsibility of educating her students in Chinese, given the lack of parental support and limited instruction hours. "You would assume that the students would be happy to learn something new at weekends, but if I were one of them, I wouldn't want to study because the class was so isolated. It is inevitable I feel frustrated and embarrassed" (Interview Transcript, April 22, 2005). In a way, the story of *work by fits and starts*

mirrored Ms. Lin's limitation of not being able to follow through as a teacher.

Mi Fu learning calligraphy (米芾学书).

Ms. Lin told this key story to teach handwriting and calligraphy, which are an integral part of Chinese education. Chinese characters are made of a complex structure of strokes. Students need to grasp the panoramic structure of a character before they start to write.

To encourage diligent handwriting practice, Ms. Lin introduced the story of *Mi Fu Learning Calligraphy*. This is about how a famous calligrapher who practiced to write one Chinese character. When Mi Fu was young, he was devastated that he could not master the art of calligraphy no matter how hard he tried. A calligraphy master who happened to stay in Mi Fu's house sold a very expensive piece of paper to Mi Fu and asked him to write only one character: "Yong" (永). Because of the rare paper and with only one character in mind, Mi Fu determined to write a good "Yong." After three days of analyzing the structure of the character, he finally wrote it beautifully. Ms. Lin said to her students, "The moral of this story is that all of us can and will write good Chinese characters. To build this skill, we need to use our brain and heart. You need to have insight into the spirit and beauty of the character" (Story 1. Transcript, January 30, 2005).

After two weeks Ms. Lin was happy to find that her students' handwriting began to improve. "I want to praise all of you. I appreciate that you made the effort to practice and improve your handwriting. And I am glad Mi Fu may have helped you!" (Fieldnotes, February 13, 2005). When

asked why she chose two ancient Chinese stories, Ms. Lin said, “Ancient stories sound more like fables that contain wise messages to us. I hope those stories push them to think” (Interview transcript, April 22, 2005).

Discussion

In this paper, we have discussed the functions and content of a teacher’s stories in a Chinese maintenance class and examined how the teacher positioned herself and her students both in the classroom and also in its broader sociocultural contexts through her storytelling. The teacher’s stories functioned in several ways. She used stories to engage the students in learning Chinese language and literary texts, to reinforce positive attitudes toward learning Chinese, and to enrich students’ understanding of their native language and culture. As the teacher commented, stories attract students because of their theatrical plots, which in turn help construct and recreate contexts for students to understand language, literary texts, and the sociocultural world.

“Stories are expressions of cultural values, norms, and structures passed on through the tellers” (Rex, Murnen, Hobbs, & McEachen, 2002, p. 791). As valuable forms of discourse, stories are an important lens for teachers to understand their socioculturally diverse students in today’s American classes (Dyson & Genishi, 1994). The stories that are embedded in Chinese culture and history provided sources for the teacher to share her interpretation of the world with her students and to prompt them to see themselves in light of their native culture and the world they left behind. Stories told in a native language can be

significant sources for immigrant students or bilingual students to make sense of and interact with the cultural worlds they live in (McKeough, Bird, Tourigny, Romaine, Graham, Ottmann, et al., 2008).

The various purposes and functions of Ms Lin’s storytelling in this study suggest that language teachers should be more aware of the potential, power, and cultural connotations of the content of their stories and the ways they share them. Most of Ms. Lin’s stories were adapted from various Chinese literary texts, among them poems, short stories, and folklore. She preferred ancient fiction and non-fiction (and mythical) figures as role models for her students as opposed to contemporary people because of the strong influence of education in ancient Chinese history, language, and culture Ms. Lin herself received as a student. Her process of sharing those stories, mostly in a teacher-centered lecture format, reflected the didactic aspect of storytelling – an educational tradition passed down since Confucius.

Many teachers like Ms. Lin tend to use stories as both a management and a teaching tool because of their personal knowledge and preference for storytelling. On some occasions, storytelling arose spontaneously as a response to unexpected classroom situations. Ms. Lin’s ability to use storytelling to address ongoing situations came from her prior teaching experience in both China and the United States, as well as from her personal preference. Although the stories seemed to be used randomly without thorough planning, the purpose, according to Ms. Lin, was to motivate students to (re)engage and changed the pace of instruction. On other occasions, Ms. Lin

planned her stories ahead of time to motivate students and help them contextualize major language points, along with traditional values — for instance, promoting effort instead of high achievement in academic work, paying respect to ancestors and older generations, and learning as a result of both effort and thoughtful planning.

In addition to being a means of motivating students to learn the Chinese language, Ms. Lin used the didactic aspects of storytelling to instill a sense of pride in learning, hard work, and cultural identity. She told stories of her own past experience. In a way, as Miller and Mangelsdorf (2005) put it, she “model[ed] narrative sense making and convey[ed] specific messages (p. 56)” about herself and her students themselves. Considering herself and her students as Chinese, Ms. Lin brought her own understanding of identity to her immigrant students. We have observed that she made a distinction between being Chinese and being American. She used ancient Chinese wisdom stories to represent her pedagogical stance toward learning Chinese and persuaded her students to act according to the wisdom reflected in the stories. The fact that some parents downplayed the importance of learning Chinese trapped her in a predicament, however. She wished parents would support their children in learning Chinese at home while at the same time she realized it was unrealistic to expect parents and her students to do so.

Although storytelling as a teaching tool has deep roots in Confucian educational philosophy, it is also important to note that storytelling has a long tradition in the United

States. For example, starting from kindergarten, teachers create oral events in which they show and tell personal stories, and solicit feedback and stories from students (Miller & Mehler, 1994). Researchers argue that stories should be valued more highly in classrooms because they bring pleasure to learning, are a constant bridge that connects students’ home culture and tradition, and are artful instructional tools (Miller et al., 2005). Moreover, stories can be “woven densely but almost invisibly into the fabric of” students’ social experience (Miller & Mangelsdorf, 2005, p. 55). Therefore, language teachers should become more aware of the versatility of stories and develop their pedagogical intuition by purposefully reflecting on relevant stories to share with their students. They should also be open to a more communicative environment where all members of the community, including the classroom of students, are given opportunities to tell stories of their own.

Sharing stories is particularly crucial in heritage language education, a field that has grown greatly since the start of the new millennium (Valdés, 2005). Whereas most research focuses on the Spanish language and some strategic languages like Arabic, we need to know more about what Chinese teachers and researchers have to say. The Sunday school where Ms. Lin worked is one of the many in the country that aim to help develop Chinese language competence and cultural pride in a new generation of students. This new generation is growing up in a country where English-only is still dominating policy discourses; therefore, Chinese teachers need to share cross-cultural

teaching experiences (Yang, 2008) with their heritage students. Sunday school teachers like Ms. Lin are working primarily on their own to bring about a greater appreciation of language and life skills to students. They need professional support and development to share teaching experience and concerns about making materials and instruction relevant to students, given the sharp contrast between the student-centered classroom that is promoted in the United States and the teacher-centered classroom in Chinese culture.

This paper describes how one teacher uses stories to deepen her students' understanding of Chinese culture and language, to teach positive attitudes and values towards learning, and to connect to students on a personal level. The limitation

of the study lies in its comparative lack of attention to Ms. Lin's students in terms of their reactions and contribution to the stories shared in class, as well their perspectives on storytelling. Future studies need to shed more light on how students interpret themselves in stories (Miller & Mangelsdorf, 2005), a process in which they learn who they are in relation to others both in and beyond the stories they tell. Native language maintenance classes in which teachers tell stories can be rich sites to observe the sociocultural nature of classroom teaching and learning, and to think about how they play an important role in creating and reworking classroom interactions. More research is therefore needed in terms of how to make storytelling a shared practice among all students of the classroom community.

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