Monica M. Trieu, Purdue University

Drawing from fifty in-depth interviews, this research examines the role of existing parental language knowledge on the ethnic identity negotiation of two ethnically distinct children of immigrant groups—Vietnamese and Chinese–Vietnamese—whose families have emigrated from Vietnam to the Southern California region of the United States. While previous research focused primarily on the influence of premigration status on first-generation immigrants, this article considers how a central aspect of premigration status (intranational ethnicity) applies specifically to the children of first generation immigrants. By taking the premigration approach of comparing the experiences of different ancestral-origin groups from a single nation (the intranational ethnicity perspective), this analysis suggests that a family’s premigration ethnic status shapes the 1.5 and second-generation’s ethnic self-identification choices through the mediation of parental language knowledge. Specifically, for the children of immigrants with twice-minority status (Chinese–Vietnamese Americans), parental language knowledge serves as an easy ethnic identity default during these children’s early self-identification process.

Introduction

From the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, a series of Northern California news articles emerged that discussed the lives of a distinct subethnic group, the Chinese–Vietnamese Americans¹ (Chang 2006; McLaughlin 1996; Shioya 1994). This group of “new” 1.5² and second-generation Asian Americans were different from their peers because of their access to multiple cultural worlds, which included the world of their ancestors (China), the world where either they or their parents were born (Vietnam), and the world where they were raised (the United States). Caught in the nexus of multiple ethnic and national identities, members of this group commonly struggled with their response to the question: What is your ethnic identity? In one of the news articles, the author captures this complexity when she writes:

While both sides of the family lived in Vietnam for at least two generations, the Lys have constantly reminded their children that they are culturally Chinese. That has made it challenging for the children as they try to find their identities, not only as Asians but also as Asian Americans. “It’s like pieces, you know?” says John [a second generation Chinese-Vietnamese American]...“There’s Chinese, there’s Vietnamese and there’s American – and you feel like you’re not really 100 percent anything” (Shioya 1994).
John’s statement reflects a common theme among many children of immigrants. These children struggle with their identities because they feel they exist marginally within multiple worlds (Park 1928). However, because of his family’s migration history, John’s assertion of a fragmented sense of identity does not fit within a singular ethnic category. Moreover, this is further complicated by the placement of the Chinese–Vietnamese experience within the academic scholarship. For the sake of convenience, the Chinese–Vietnamese experience is oftentimes couched beneath the umbrella of the “Vietnamese American experience” (Chan 2006; Zhou and Bankston 1998). For example, some scholars cited running into methodological complications in trying to understand the subjectivity of the Chinese–Vietnamese ethnic identity and thus have opted to define this group based on their national (Vietnamese) origin (Yu and Liu 1986). Consequently, sparse literature exists on the Chinese–Vietnamese experience in the United States.

In this article, I argue that it is important to examine the Chinese–Vietnamese American experience as their narratives reveal an area in the field of immigration that is understudied: the relationship between an immigrant group’s pre-migration ethnic minority status on their postmigration adaptation (Espiritu 1989). While scholars have examined premigration status and postmigration adaptation with respect to types of migration and human capital prior to migration (Alba and Nee 2003; Bean and Stevens 2003; Bloemraad 2006), research has only recently begun to empirically examine the existence of multiple ethnic group identity from one nation state (Bozorgmehr 1997; Light et al. 1993; Rumbaut 2007b). The existing sparse scholarship that examines the influence of premigration ethnic status (or, whether immigrants were a part of the ethnic majority or minority group in their home countries) finds that an immigrant’s premigration status in the home country is potentially influential in their socio-economic, political, and identificational adaptation in the host country (Bozorgmehr 1997; Espiritu 1989).

This article adds to the aforementioned literature on premigration status in two primary ways. First, it introduces the intranational ethnicity perspective as one useful approach to examine premigration ethnic status variation. Previous research illustrates that there are different intranational ethnic groups hidden beneath seemingly homogeneous ethnic or national categories. To tease out potentially diverging processes of acculturation, it is important to distinguish within broad ethnic categories (Bozorgmehr 1997). The intranational ethnicity perspective draws from the conceptual ideas of previous research (Bozorgmehr 1997; Desbarats 1986; Espiritu 1989) and examines different ancestral-origin ethnic groups found within a national origin, namely Chinese–Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans.
Second, this article extends previous research on premigration status (Bozorgmehr 1997; Desbarats 1986; Espiritu 1989) by considering its influence on the children of migrants. Previous research suggests that premigration status often shapes the first-generation’s postmigration adaptation (Bozorgmehr 1997). In this vein, this article considers a broad but new question: if premigration ethnic status shapes the first-generation’s postmigration adaptation, does it also shape the adaptation of their children in the United States? The majority of research on the children of immigrants has focused primarily on postmigration components of adaptation (Jiménez 2008; Lopez and Espiritu 1990; Portes and Rumbaut 2001, 2006; Yancey, Ericksen, and Juliani 1976), but it is plausible that premigration factors also play a crucial but understudied role. This article is among the first to consider such a possibility.

Specifically, this study draws from fifty in-depth interviews with 1.5 and second-generation Chinese–Vietnamese (whose families had the premigration status of ethnic minorities in Vietnam) and Vietnamese (whose families had the premigration status of ethnic majorities in Vietnam). The following questions frame this article: Does the premigration ethnic status influence the 1.5 and second-generation’s ethnic self-identification? How does knowledge of the parental language (the language used at home by parents) play a role in this identity negotiation? What does the data suggest about the salience of intranational ethnicity for each group in the United States? Results from this research highlight the importance of taking an intranational ethnicity perspective in examining the children of immigrant experience. By taking the premigration approach that compares the experiences of different ancestral-origin groups from a single nation (the intranational ethnicity perspective), this analysis reveals important nuances in how different groups utilize parental language knowledge, and how these differences shape the negotiation of their ethnic self-identification(s). This study finds that a family’s premigration ethnic status shapes the 1.5 and second-generation’s ethnic self-identification choices through the mediation of parental language knowledge.

Before delving into the theoretical discussions and empirical results, it is important to first establish the historical narrative that defines these two Southeast Asian populations to elucidate the existing distinctions between the two groups. The following section will provide a brief history of both groups in Vietnam, and their subsequent journey to the United States.

**Historical Background**

The history of the Chinese (Hoa) in Vietnam traces as far back as 111 BC. However, it was not until the nineteenth century that the Chinese population—consisting of five major dialect groups: Cantonese, Teochew, Hakka, Hokkien, and Hainan—surged under the French colonial rule in Vietnam.
Beginning in the 1860s, the French occupiers actively encouraged Chinese economic and population growth in Vietnam. This resulted in a predominantly urban Chinese population positioned as the “middle-man minority” within Vietnam’s urban economy (Gold 1994; Whitmore 1985). In the 1950s, Vietnam gained independence from France and started a nationalism campaign. In South Vietnam, the Diem regime sought to assimilate the population by declaring all Chinese birth in Vietnam automatic citizens and requiring all those engaged in economic ventures to register for Vietnamese citizenship (Desbarats 1986; Gold 1994; Pan 1999). The Diem regime imposed major restrictions on economic, travel, and educational activities of non-citizens.

In the mid-1970s, circumstances for the Chinese in Vietnam changed again. Immediately following the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, the newly established Socialist Republic of Vietnam created new economic policies that sought to sabotage capitalist activities. Many wealthy business owners, including a large portion of the Chinese population in the Saigon region, were stripped of their land holdings and arrested (Pan 1999). By the late-1970s, the rise of the communist regime coupled with the unstable relationship between China and Vietnam (which culminated into the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979) led many Chinese–Vietnamese to join their Vietnamese compatriots in fleeing the country en mass to escape the social, political, and economic persecution (Chan 2006).

The movement out of Vietnam and, in this particular case, into the United States can be split into three large major waves. The first wave, which began in 1975 and lasted until 1978, consisted of mostly intact family units and educated Vietnamese (Rumbaut 1989). Many were employed by either the South Vietnamese or U.S. government and fled during the surrender of Saigon to the North. According to the 2000 US Census, only 13.5 percent (110,854) of the total foreign-born Vietnamese population in the U.S. today entered during this period, with the majority coming after 1980 (Ima and Rumbaut 1995). Likewise, only 9.2 percent (15,900) of the total foreign-born Chinese-Vietnamese population currently living in the United States entered during this period.

While the fall of Saigon in 1975 ignited the migration of the largest wave of Vietnamese refugees all over the world, the mass exodus of the Chinese–Vietnamese refugees did not begin until the second wave, which started in 1978 and lasted until 1982. This wave included both Vietnamese and Chinese who mostly fled via two popular methods—(1) by foot into neighboring countries, or (2) by bribing Vietnamese officials, chartering small fishing boats, and then taking clandestine journeys across the South China Sea. Individuals from the latter group became known as the “boat people.” Those who survived the treacherous boat journey ended up in refugee processing camps in first asylum countries throughout Asia. In these countries, the refugees waited for word of
sponsorship from individuals and volunteer organizations overseas (Chan 2006; Whitmore 1985). Compared with the first wave, the second wave was more ethnically and economically diverse (Rumbaut 1989; Takaki 1989). The largest flow of Chinese–Vietnamese entering the United States occurred during this period.

Finally, the third wave started in 1982 and continues to the present day. While the first two waves are comprised of political refugees, the final wave consists of people with various statuses, including Amerasians (children of American military servicemen and Vietnamese women), former re-education camp detainees and their families, war brides, and others who left under the Orderly Departure Program.4

In the years following the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, the Vietnamese population in the United States rapidly increased from below 10,000 persons in 1970 to 1.3 million in 2000. According to the 2000 US Census, a little over a million Vietnamese and fewer than 200,000 Chinese–Vietnamese5 currently reside in the United States. While these two groups share similar refugee experiences, their immigration patterns in the United States diverge along numerous demographic and cultural lines. For example, the majority of Vietnamese immigrants entered after 1980, whereas approximately half of the Chinese–Vietnamese foreign-born population living in the United States today entered the United States by 1981. Also, while the two groups share similarities in their top two states of residence (California and Texas), they differ in where they resettled within California (see Table 1). The largest Chinese–Vietnamese population (25%) is located in Los Angeles-Long Beach metropolitan area, whereas the largest Vietnamese population (12%) is found in Orange County.

While numerous distinctions exist between the two groups, this article focuses primarily on the role of language because language is central to an immigrant’s identity. Language is a powerful measurement of identity and adaptation to U.S. society and is an important gatekeeper into national and ethnic communities (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Previous research has revealed that, especially for children of immigrants, children’s levels of proficiency in their native language can precipitate either acceptance or marginality from their respective communities (Kibria 2002; Rumbaut 2002; Zhou and Bankston 1998). In the following section, I will further explore the literature on ethnic identity and linguistic acculturation.

Theoretical Background

Premigration Status and the Intranational Ethnicity Perspective

Previous research on immigrant ethnic identity can be divided into two approaches: (1) the commonly employed postmigration approach, which
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metropolitan area</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Metropolitan area</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orange County, CA</td>
<td>131,286</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>Los Angeles-Long Beach, CA</td>
<td>47,790</td>
<td>25.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Jose, CA</td>
<td>94,799</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>SF-Oakland-Vallejo, CA</td>
<td>23,866</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles-Long Beach, CA</td>
<td>71,007</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>San Jose, CA</td>
<td>16,844</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston-Galveston, TX</td>
<td>63,654</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>Orange County, CA</td>
<td>10,026</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington, DC-Baltimore</td>
<td>44,904</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>New York-New Jersey</td>
<td>9,480</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dallas-Fort Worth, TX</td>
<td>42,993</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>Seattle-Tacoma-Olympia</td>
<td>5,973</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SF-Oakland-Vallejo, CA</td>
<td>39,070</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>Washington, DC-Baltimore</td>
<td>5,356</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seattle-Tacoma-Olympia</td>
<td>37,999</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>Houston-Galveston, TX</td>
<td>5,355</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Diego, CA</td>
<td>31,589</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>Sacramento, CA</td>
<td>5,332</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York-New Jersey</td>
<td>29,428</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>San Diego, CA</td>
<td>5,258</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. 2000 Census, 5% PUMS. Figures are weighted estimates from a sample.
examines the incorporation of immigrants and their children, including how they create and maintain their identity within the context of the host country (Jiménez 2008; Lopez and Espiritu 1990; Portes and Rumbaut 2001, 2006; Yancey, Ericksen, and Juliani 1976); and (2) the premigration approach, which examines an immigrant group’s home-of-origin ethnic majority/minority status and its influence on their postmigration adaptation (Bhachu 1985; Bozorgmehr 1997; Desbarats 1986; Espiritu 1989). Most adaptation research on the children of immigrants has been informed by the postmigration approach. Notably, this research illustrates how external racial/ethnic labels and the various social contexts found within the postmigration environment shape the salience of ethnic identity (Espiritu 1992; Gans 1979; Kidria 1999, 2002; Sarna 1978; Waters 1990; Yancey, Ericksen, and Juliani 1976). However, in this article, I argue that premigration factors, especially premigration ethnic status, may also influence how the children of immigrants come to understand their identities.

According to Desbarats (1986:406), there are “noticeable intragroup differences among immigrants from the same nation,” and this fact highlights the importance of examining “the notion of ethnicity, as opposed to that of nationality.” In other words, there are ethnic differences within nations that can be lost if individuals are grouped solely by their nationality. Thus, to better understand “intragroup differences,” some scholars have examined groups that they categorize as “twice migrants,” or migrants who engage in secondary migration to another country (Bhachu 1985; Espiritu 1989). In her work, Espiritu (1989) distinguishes between immigrant groups that were part of the ethnic majority or ethnic minority in the home country—the former becoming “first-time minorities” and the latter becoming “twice-minorities” in the host country. Espiritu hypothesizes that because twice-minorities have previously experienced ethnicization in their home country, they arrive to the United States as a “relatively cohesive” group that was “not fragmented and weak upon arrival” (1989:60). This pre-existing solidarity, which can translate to social capital, can potentially lead to an economic and political advantage over the first-time minorities.

Bozorgmehr’s (1997) work expands on this perspective by adding that the premigration lens also reveals the relevance of “internal” ethnic differences (e.g., religion or language) among the host country ethnic group’s incorporation. In his research on Iranians in Los Angeles, Bozorgmehr finds that “in the destination country, the immigrant subgroups who were already minorities in the country of origin are less assimilated than the immigrant subgroup which was part of the majority population” (1997:387). In other words, those with a premigration status as an ethnic minority (an Iranian Jew) in the home country possess a more salient ethnic identity than their first-time minority (Iranian Muslim) counterparts. Therefore, the strong relationship ties among Iranian Jews in Los Angeles challenge the assimilation perspective that ethnicity loses
strength after the immigrants settle in the United States. In summary, both Espiritu and Bozorgmehr argue that twice-minorities are more likely to retain their ethnic identity in the host country.

This research extends the theory of the existing literature by combining the conceptual ideas of previous research—Desbarats’ argument for examining intragroup differences, Espiritu’s concept of “twice-minorities,” and Bozorgmehr’s concept of “internal ethnicity”—to formulate an intranational ethnicity perspective. I define the intranational ethnicity perspective as the examination of different ancestral-origin ethnic groups found within a national origin. While internal ethnicity can encompass many ethnic distinctions, intranational ethnicity strictly examines ancestral-origin groups within a national identity, specifically from an ethnic majority or minority viewpoint. The intranational ethnicity lens reveals a distinction between the Chinese–Vietnamese, who were ethnic minorities in Vietnam and became twice-minorities in the United States, and the Vietnamese, who were ethnic majorities in Vietnam and became first-time minorities in the United States. In thinking about the ethnicization process of the Chinese–Vietnamese as “twice minorities,” the question becomes: how does this affect the ethnic identification of their children?

**Linguistic Assimilation and Ethnic Identity**

Language knowledge is a core component in the formation of an ethnic identity (Phinney et al. 2001). One of the major themes in the linguistic acculturation literature is the debate on the role and impact of ethnic language retention (Bean and Stevens 2003; Huntington 2004; Portes and Hao 2002). Prior to the 1960s, studies on bilingualism concluded that bilinguals possessed poor academic achievement and low intelligence (see for example, Brigham 1923). However, since the emergence of Peal and Lambert’s (1962) landmark study, which argued that bilingualism correlated positively with cognitive ability, subsequent scholarship discovered a beneficial relationship between parental language retention, socioeconomic outcomes and ethnic identity for children of immigrants (Gibson 1988; Golash-Boza 2005; Kasinitz et al. 2008; Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Zhou and Bankston 1998). Furthermore, studies found bilinguals to feel more of “an affinity” to their ethnic identity than monolingual English speakers (Imbens-Bailey 1996).

Yet, the overall finding of linguistic acculturation in the United States has remained relatively static since the arrival of the first dominant wave of immigrants at the shores of Ellis Island. The definitive plotline has been that ancestral language knowledge and use drastically declines with each generation in the United States (Alba 1985, 1990, 2004; Alba et al. 2002; Espiritu and Tran 2002; Portes and Hao 1998; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and Schauffler 1994; Rumbaut 2007a; Smith 1997; Waters 1990). For example, prior to World
War I, German Americans, who made up the largest non-English-speaking group during the first major wave of immigration in the 1820s, were extremely proactive about retaining their culture. They opened German language schools and created ethnic organizations. However, during World War I and II, anti-German hysteria emerged in the United States. As a result, many Germans discarded their ethnic practices, including ethnic language use (Kamphoefner 1996).

In another study of descendants of early Europeans immigrants, Alba (1985) concludes that only a small portion of Italian Americans who are third-generation and beyond use Italian in their everyday lives. Echoing similar results, Waters’ (1990:116) study on third- and fourth-generation white ethnics finds that despite the role of language in sustaining “solidarity and integration [for the] ethnic group,” language is also “one of the first elements of the immigrant culture to disappear over the generations.” In fact, the role of ancestral language is symbolic on occasion and mainly considered a “private affair” that belongs to the personal realm. Thus, Waters (1990:117) argues, by the third generation, ancestral language does not serve as a link between generations, but instead, as “a link to the remembered past.”

Children of post-1965 immigrants, the majority of whom hail from Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean (Silvia and Rumbaut 1996), also have diminishing knowledge and use of the ancestral tongue (Portes and Hao 1998; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Rumbaut 2007a; Tuan 2001). Children of immigrants rapidly lose their home country language abilities and become predominantly English-speaking monolinguals (Alba 2004; Portes and Hao 1998; Rumbaut, Massey, and Bean 2006). In a recent study on children of post-1965 immigrants from the Los Angeles metropolitan area, Rumbaut, Massey, and Bean (2006) found that “language life expectancies” were short-lived, as non-English ancestral language practically dissipated between the second and third generation.

Thus, while the dominant research has chronicled ancestral language loss among the children of immigrants, this article contributes to the literature by considering the role of existing parental language knowledge on ethnic identity negotiation, specifically for individuals with differing premigration ethnic statuses (i.e., Chinese–Vietnamese versus Vietnamese Americans). This research poses the question: What is the role of existing parental language knowledge on the 1.5 and second-generation’s ethnic identity negotiation?

Methods

This study draws on fifty in-depth interviews conducted between 2005 and 2007 of the 1.5 and second-generation Southeast Asian Americans from Orange and Los Angeles Counties in Southern California. I interviewed thirty-two Chinese–Vietnamese and eighteen Vietnamese Americans, ages 19–33, with a
median age of 23. Eighteen of the respondents are 1.5-generation, while thirty-two of the respondents are second generation (see Table 2). The interviews lasted between 1 and 3 hours and were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using the qualitative research software NVivo. I omitted personal identifiers to maintain the confidentiality of the respondents.

At the onset of all interviews, I asked respondents the close-ended question: Currently, how do you racially or ethnically identify? Respondents were then asked to elaborate on their self-identification later in the interview through a series of open-ended questions found in two particular sections of the interview instrument: “ethnic identity” and “language” (from the subsection of family and culture; see Appendix 1). I then coded the responses in four broad categories: National/Ancestral Origin, Hyphenated-American, Racial/Panethnic, and American for the second part of this article. Most respondents brought up the issue of ethnic language while discussing their ethnic identity. This unprovoked action further solidified the importance of parental language in ethnic identity formation.

Geographically, twenty-seven respondents were from Los Angeles County and twenty-three respondents were from Orange County. According to the 2000 US Census, Los Angeles County and Orange County houses the largest Chinese–Vietnamese and Vietnamese populations in the United States, respectively. The oldest and largest Little Saigon is located in Orange County, and numerous Chinatowns are located throughout Los Angeles County. The presence of an ethnic enclave is important, as it helps sustain the persistence of cultural dimensions (Zhou and Bankston 1998). While I had access to a larger pool of Vietnamese and Chinese–Vietnamese individuals because of location, it was still a challenge to find respondents. I began with convenience sampling through recruiting study participants via e-mails sent out to a number of student organizations at 2- and 4-year postsecondary institutions throughout Los Angeles and Orange Counties, local Vietnamese community events, and word of mouth. I then snowball sampled from these initial contacts. In some instances, respondents referred me to their friends, co-workers, partners, or family members. After exhausting the first batch of respondent referrals, I started anew by recruiting from other sources. During this second phase, I sent out more recruitment e-mails and also made announcements during classes at several universities in Southern California. These approaches yielded successful results.

The gender distribution was relatively equal with twenty-four men and twenty-six women. The sample was made up of entirely college-educated young adults—each respondent was either currently in college or college-educated. The majority of the respondents grew up in a working-class background. While this sample provided a previously unexamined in-depth look into a segment of the 1.5 and second-generation Vietnamese and Chinese–Vietnamese
Table 2
Selective Characteristics of Interview Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Chinese-Vietnamese</th>
<th>Vietnamese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LA County (19)</td>
<td>Orange County (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median age</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religious preference</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Buddhist</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Catholic</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Other</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% No Religion</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Educational attainment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Currently in college, AA degree</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% College graduate</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Advanced degree</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* Fifty in-depth interviews.
American experience, it is important to note that the data were bounded by group size and regional context. Thus, findings cannot and should not be generalized to the entire Southeast Asian population in the United States.

Findings

**Parental Language as a Symbolic Tool: Ethnic Identifier and Cultural Bridge**

While there is evidence that the Chinese–Vietnamese and Vietnamese 1.5 and second-generation young adults are losing their knowledge of the parental language, its use remains highly salient in their lives. Interestingly, the two groups discuss parental language in very distinct ways. The Chinese–Vietnamese express the role of language as a crucial factor that influences their early-life ethnic identification choice. The particular language knowledge that they possessed in early stages of their lives often determined how they ethnically identified. The Vietnamese, on the other hand, utilized language as a cultural bridge. Unlike the first group, Vietnamese respondents were not riddled with self-doubt regarding their ethnic identity. Instead, they referred to the Vietnamese language as a way to connect with the ancestral culture and the older generation. While parental language served as a cultural bridge for some Chinese–Vietnamese respondents, they mainly spoke about parental language knowledge (whether Chinese or Vietnamese) as the ethnic identity default. The following sections will provide a more in-depth discussion of each group’s experiences.

The Chinese–Vietnamese’s Ethnic Identifier:

“Because I speak Vietnamese at home, I must be Vietnamese.”

Ethnic language serves as an influential factor in shaping how Chinese–Vietnamese children identified themselves while they were growing up. Faced with multiple ethnic choices, many employed language to legitimize their chosen ethnic identity. This was the case for Steve, a 25-year-old, second-generation, ethnic Chinese–Vietnamese male who was born in Los Angeles, California. Steve’s grandparents migrated from Guangdong, China to Vietnam to escape the Japanese occupation during World War II. In 1977, Steve’s family fled Vietnam and became part of the “boat people” movement. The family was rescued at sea and a church group in Hawthorne, CA, sponsored them. Steve, who now lives in Hawthorne with his family, grew up identifying as Chinese. Steve explains:

I’ve always identified myself as Chinese growing up just because I know how to speak Cantonese, and I was born and raised learning how to communicate…and also the cultural things that my parents shared with me…their religion, the ancestral worship and rituals were mostly Chinese. Whenever we hang out at family functions, their friends were all Chinese and I
knew that they came from Vietnam. At the same time, I had a hard time understanding “hey, why is it that we are Chinese but you’re born in Vietnam?” So I had this huge dilemma, and never really got a chance to figure it out until later in my life. I’ve also always had this huge gap with American culture just because it is really hard for me to associate with the American culture. At the same time, it was hard for me to associate with the Chinese culture. So, I was kind of standing on very fine sand, and not being able to find “home.”

According to Steve’s response, language knowledge is used as the first justification for his asserted Chinese identity. Although other “cultural things” also played important roles in Steve’s ethnic identification, Steve’s response points to the use of language knowledge to navigate his complex ethnic identity choice/confusion while he was growing up. Steve shares that his parents knew Vietnamese but chose not to teach him. Instead, his parents sent Steve to a Mandarin language school and taught him Cantonese at home. In college, Steve had the opportunity to meet other Chinese like himself, other children of the Chinese Diaspora. It was then that Steve realized he was “normal.” Currently, embracing this self-proclaimed normalcy, Steve identifies as Chinese–Vietnamese American.

Britney, a 23-year-old second generation who grew up in Los Angeles County, shares a similar experience. Britney’s family escaped Vietnam by boat in the early 1980s. Britney’s parents, who were both born and raised in Vietnam, constantly remind her that they are Chinese. Britney says:

My parents did teach us Chinese and not Vietnamese…they sent us to Chinese school and we spoke Chinese to them. Growing up, even though most of the Asian Americans I knew in school were Chinese-Vietnamese or Vietnamese, there was a clear distinction about whether you were Chinese or Vietnamese based on what language you knew. So, I was always Chinese growing up.

While ethnic language is not the sole cultural component that makes up Britney’s ethnicity, it is important to note that she uses language knowledge as the central justification for her ethnic self-identification growing up. Similar to Steve, Britney had a life-changing college experience. In college, Britney learned about her family’s twice-migration history through college courses, and she also interacted with the larger Chinese population from the United States and overseas. In recounting how this college experience influenced her self-perception, Britney notes:

I think it was when I first went away to college, it was really apparent with the greater diversity of Asian Americans that I met—with the Chinese population—I didn’t feel like there was a place for me. I wasn’t in the same position as some of the other Chinese Americans who were at college. My parents had different immigration experiences. I had different experiences growing up and I think it was just understanding that history more, and realizing that Vietnam is a big part of my family’s life—a big part of my life, and that I should honor that too. And, especially after I went to China to study abroad. I was getting all these nationalistic
kind of propaganda thrown at me, and I was like, this is not how I’m self-identifying as a Chinese person.

These subsequent interactions revealed to Britney who she was not. Furthermore, in addition to attending Chinese language school as a child, Britney also took Mandarin language courses in college. Currently, she possesses basic Chinese reading and writing skills and is fluent in conversational Cantonese and Mandarin. While Britney strengthened her Chinese language skills in college, the acquisition of her family’s twice-migration family history in college prompted her to make the decision to embrace and “honor” the past by identifying as Chinese–Vietnamese American.

Similarly, Bobby, a 20-year old, second generation from Los Angeles County justified his “Chinese American” ethnic self-identification by stating, “I don’t feel like I’ve been in any part connected to Vietnam other than the foods. I feel like the way my mom raised me…I mean, I speak Chinese with her.” Bobby learned Cantonese in the household and is currently fluent in conversational Cantonese. Bobby further solidifies the central role of parental language knowledge on ethnic self-identification by stating: “Actually, if my parents taught us Vietnamese, I would think then I would have more of an incentive to consider [myself] Vietnamese, Vietnamese–Chinese, more so than just being Chinese.” This statement reveals that Bobby would be more inclined to identify differently had his parents taught him the Vietnamese language. However, it is important to point out that Bobby’s “Chinese” identity, similar to Britney’s, is one created in the United States (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Similar to previous respondents, Bobby shares how he differs from Chinese nationals from China:

It’s hard for me to relate actually. I’ve met many people who were born in China and I would try to talk to them in Cantonese, and I can’t talk to them. It’s just weird…I mean, they speak Chinese a lot better than I can…[and] all the values are different.

These statements highlight that while some Chinese–Vietnamese may self-identify as Chinese based on language knowledge, they still make distinctions between being Chinese from Vietnam and being Chinese from China. This separation speaks to the flexibility and variability of ethnic categories (Nagel 1994).

Meanwhile, Chinese–Vietnamese children who grew up speaking predominantly Vietnamese had the inverse experience. This was the case for Alex, a 25-year-old, second generation who was born in Monterey Park, CA. Alex’s family history is similar to other Chinese–Vietnamese respondents. His grandparents migrated from China to Vietnam during World War II and his family fled Vietnam by boat in 1979. In addressing his ethnic identification, Alex states, “In junior high, I was like, because I speak Vietnamese at home, I must
be Vietnamese, so I would always say Vietnamese.” Moreover, Alex’s narrative supports the resonating theme of ethnic self-identification as a fluid construct. Specifically, Alex experienced an intranational ethnic identity shift from early childhood into early adulthood. In high school, he switched from identifying as Vietnamese to embracing the Chinese identity because he saw himself as different from his Vietnamese peers. Alex explains:

Why the switch? I know I had a lot of friends who were Vietnamese… and I couldn’t really identify with them, especially the way they talk and everything. My mom says we speak [countryside] Vietnamese. And the friends that I hang out with speak more of the proper Vietnamese [so] it was really hard to identify with them. And at the same time, we were brought up differently. I could tell a lot of the Chinese [traditions] kind of fit in with the Vietnamese that I hung out with—like Chinese New Year, and the way they do things. There are certain small things that kind of really separate us, and that’s when I really think like I don’t really fit in…and then the same way with the Chinese [culture] too, especially when I don’t speak the language. And the friends that I hang out with do speak predominantly Chinese. I went to a wedding two weeks ago and there was a tea ceremony and it was in Chinese and I didn’t understand a thing […]. Yeah, so I think language is a huge thing in culture, and to not pick up the language is, you know, you’re missing a huge part of the culture.

Throughout his statement, Alex repeatedly returns to language knowledge as a measurement of ethnic identity and as a gatekeeper to ethnic culture. As he has grown older, Alex has become more cognizant of language’s correlation to ethnic identity. However, this time, language is a marker of his “outsider” position as he realizes that his lack of fluency bars him from cultural access. As a result, Alex—who has not sustained the limited conversational Vietnamese he learned as a child—currently identifies as Asian American rather than a particular ethnic identification.

Numerous other respondents share similar “Vietnamese” narratives. For example, Van, a 25-year-old second-generation from Orange County, justifies his Vietnamese identity choice by stating, “We just always spoke Vietnamese at home.” Vu, a 26-year-old 1.5-generation from Los Angeles County, explains his early childhood Vietnamese identity choice by noting: “In the elementary school, I always just thought, ‘Okay, I’m Vietnamese’ just because I speak it.” Today, Vu is fluent in conversational Vietnamese and asserts a “Vietnamese” identity. Thus, similar to the previous respondents, these narratives show that regardless of their multiple cultural backgrounds, individuals identified as Vietnamese because, when they were growing up, language knowledge was the most accessible marker to use as an ethnic identity default.

Moreover, an additional distinction emerged among the 1.5-generation in this particular subgroup. In comparison with their second-generation counterparts, the 1.5-generation accessed and utilized their birthplaces as additional rationale and supporting evidence for identifying as Vietnamese. For example, Vu, who is
mentioned above, cites both his language knowledge and his place of birth as reasons why, when he was growing up, he identified as Vietnamese. He shares, “[L]ooking at what language I speak, [and] where I was born and where my dad was born, I would say, ‘Okay, I’m Vietnamese.’” Hai, a 28-year-old 1.5 generation from Los Angeles County who identifies as Vietnamese American, shares similar views with Vu. Her parents taught her Vietnamese and she is currently fluent in conversational Vietnamese. Hai explains that, as a child, one of the other reasons why she identified as Vietnamese was because, “I consider myself Vietnamese, I guess, because I was born in Vietnam.”

Findings in this section show the significant influence of ethnic language knowledge as the mediator between the Chinese–Vietnamese respondents’ pre-migration ethnic status and their ethnic identity negotiation and formation in the United States. For the children of immigrants with twice-minority status, parental language knowledge became an easy ethnic identity default during their early self-identification process. Furthermore, findings confirmed the fluidity of ethnic identity as the members of this group asserted an ethnic identity (between Chinese or Vietnamese) partly of their choice (Nagel 1994; Yancey, Erickson, and Juliani 1976). Specifically, members of the 1.5-generation saw their birthplace of Vietnam and their language knowledge as indicative of their ethnic identity. This finding is unique to the 1.5-generation Chinese–Vietnamese experience. However, as respondents matured, the exposure to their family’s twice-migration history and to other Chinese and/or Vietnamese individuals heavily influenced their shifts in identities. For many of the Chinese–Vietnamese Americans growing up, they were what they spoke.

The Vietnamese’s Cultural Bridge:

“I pursue the language so that I can speak to more people…”

In comparison, the Vietnamese group did not have multiple ethnic minority identities or parental languages from which to choose. For this group, the emergent themes were to treat ancestral language knowledge as a utility to connect with the older generation, maintain ancestral culture, and sustain their ethnic identities.

This was the case for Linh, a 23-year-old 1.5-generation Vietnamese American from Orange County. In 1988, when Linh was 5 years old, she and family left her birthplace, Bien Duong, Vietnam, for political and economic reasons. Her family became a part of the third wave to enter the United States. While Linh was growing up, Linh’s parents conveyed to her the importance of learning the Vietnamese language. They strictly conversed with their children in Vietnamese. In addressing the role of language in her self-identity, Linh credits her Vietnamese language fluency for enabling her access to the older Vietnamese community. In daily routines such as dropping her grandfather off
at the senior center, Linh states, “If I didn’t have that fluency, I’d be like, ‘Okay Grandpa, bye!’ Like no communications [or] interaction with older people.” When I ask her whether her Vietnamese language skills have strengthened her ethnic identity, Linh responds, “Yeah, it definitely has. If I wasn’t fluent in Vietnamese, I wouldn’t be able to talk to people who are from an older generation. I wouldn’t get a chance to hear stories.”

Minh, a 21-year-old second generation from Los Angeles County shares similar sentiments. Minh currently identifies as “Vietnamese American.” His parents taught him Vietnamese when Minh was a child. Minh is now relearning Vietnamese in college so that he can improve his relationship with his parents. He shares:

Ever since I went to college...I talk to [my parents] on the phone and come home on the weekends, so my usage of Vietnamese got less and less. My vocabulary knowledge just went down... I do want to relearn Vietnamese so I can actually talk to them more often. I want to be able to have a better family [relationship] with them...so we can actually have a more meaningful conversation, if anything.

Dat, a 21-year-old second-generation Vietnamese American from Orange County, arrived at a similar realization. Unlike his coethnic peers in the region, Dat’s family was not immersed in the Vietnamese community in the area. His neighborhood and circle of friends were predominantly white and Latino. Dat identified as “Vietnamese” growing up because he knew people expected him to identify that way. However, he recalls a period when he did not want to be Vietnamese. Like many other respondents, a pivotal change came in college when he took a trip to Vietnam. His trip to Vietnam, and the subsequent encounters there, prompted Dat to confront his American identity. In recalling the experience, Dat states:

Over there [in Vietnam], I was like “Oh yeah I’m Vietnamese! I’m Vietnamese!” But people kind of look at me like, “You’re not Vietnamese.” So I realized that I was more American to them. That’s when I began to understand what Vietnamese American meant. I actually think Vietnamese, American, and then Vietnamese American are three very distinct categories. You can’t add Vietnamese and American and get Vietnamese American.

Upon his return to the United States, Dat began to identify as Vietnamese American. Though it is clear, especially in the case of Dat, that postmigration external racial labeling plays a key role in ethnic identity formation, so too does the role of key premigration factors like parental language knowledge. In addressing the role of language in his ethnic identification, Dat—who describes his current Vietnamese speaking skills are “rudimentary”—shares, “My pursuit of [the Vietnamese] language is so I can speak to more people, like my grandparents and the people their age and adults.”
Additionally, beyond connecting with the older generation, Vietnamese respondents spoke about acquiring and maintaining language knowledge to reinforce their ethnic identity. One respondent, Lien, a 22-year-old second generation from Los Angeles County, explains that she was “Vietnamese American” because of language and cultural traditions. Thus, she places effort in retaining her “heritage” because she did “not want to totally assimilate,” or become culturally indistinguishable from the dominant group culture. Growing up, Lien attended Vietnamese language school during the weekends. Currently, she is fluent in conversational Vietnamese with elementary writing and reading skills. Lien is conscious about maintaining her Vietnamese culture. She says, I guess just… retaining the language, actually going out and educating myself about my cultural background and following traditions like Tet [Lunar New Year] and stuff like that…I don’t know, speaking to my grandparents and family in Vietnamese and not really forgetting about it.

Despite their own declining ancestral language skills, many Vietnamese respondents in this study equate the loss of language to the loss of culture and the ability to identify with the older generation. Through the numerous responses, the role of language for this particular Vietnamese group appears to be reminiscent of Waters’ (1990:117) finding of language as a “link to the remembered past.” However, in these instances, parental language serves as a vehicle to access the remembered past, and to the past that they have yet to hear about. Thus, the Vietnamese language knowledge serves as a tool to access the cultural past and, for many, helps sustain the salience of their ethnic identity. In establishing the different ways in which these intranational ethnic groups experience parental language knowledge as a mediator of ethnic self-identification, I will now turn to each group’s overall self-identification patterns. What does the data suggest about the salience of intranational ethnicity for each group in the United States and in what ways do they differ from one another?

Being Ethnic, Being (Sub-) Ethnic American, and Being American

Ethnic or racial identification, whether asserted or assigned, is an important component in understanding where individuals and groups are positioned within a host society. Previous scholars have utilized this variable as one avenue of understanding an individual’s level of assimilation in a host society (Feliciano 2009; Gordon 1964; Rumbaut 1994). This section will unpack the various levels of self-identification exhibited by the two intranational ethnic groups. The question addressed here is: What is the ethnic self-identification pattern exhibited by each group, and what does it suggest about the role of ethnicity in their lives?
Table 3 provides the frequency breakdown of the subethnic group by the current self-identifications of all respondents. The four main identificational categories are based on Rumbaut’s (1994:763) four main types of ethnic self-identities that he found among children of immigrants. They include the following categories: national origin (e.g., Vietnamese), hyphenated-American (e.g., Chinese American), racial/panethnic (e.g., Asian American), and American. The national origin category is amended in this article to include ancestral origin to more accurately encapsulate the Chinese–Vietnamese ancestral-origin background. In previous literature, these four categories served as a proxy measurement of the level of Gordon’s (1964) concept of “identificational assimilation”—the assumption being that those who assert an “American” identity are more likely to identify with U.S. American culture than those who assert a “national/ancestral origin” identity (Feliciano 2009; Rumbaut 1994). In this article, I use the four categories to understand the salience of ethnic identity rather than to measure assimilation. This is an important distinction because, for contemporary children of immigrants, the existing salience of an ethnic identity does not necessarily translate to the reduction of a U.S. American identity or culture (Portes and Zhou 1993).

While the previous section addressed the respondent’s ethnic self-identification while growing up, Table 3 provides a breakdown of all respondents’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-identifications</th>
<th>Chinese-Vietnamese</th>
<th>Vietnamese</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National/Ancestral origin</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pan-subethnic</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyphenated-American</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese-Vietnamese American</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese American</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial/Panethnic</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Fifty in-depth interviews.
current self-identification. As previously stated in this article, one of the first questions asked at the beginning of all interviews was about current self-identification. Elaborations on self-identifications were asked later on in the interview as open-ended questions (see Appendix 1). An assessment of current self-identifications reveals that the two groups differ in how they identify themselves.

Table 3 shows that children of both immigrant groups assert a national/ancestral origin (21 total) and a hyphenated-American (21 total) identity. In other words, most respondents assert a national/ancestral origin and an ethnic and American identity. This finding corresponds with how the respondents stress the importance of ethnic language maintenance in discussing the factors that influence their ethnic identity choice. Prior research has found that bilingual children of immigrants, more than monolingual children, are more likely to feel an affinity with their ethnic identity (Imbens-Bailey 1996). However, when using the intranational ethnicity lens, three significant distinctions between the two subethnic groups emerged. First, a larger number of Chinese–Vietnamese (18 total), compared with the Vietnamese (3 total), identify solely with their national/ancestral-origin identity, without a “hyphenated-American” identity attached. As shown in Table 3, the eighteen Chinese–Vietnamese who identify with a national/ancestral-origin identity consist of nine pan-subethnic (e.g., Chinese–Vietnamese), seven Chinese, and two Vietnamese. This result supports Bozorgmehr’s (1997) findings that ethnic identity is complicated and sustained in different ways for those from a twice-minority background versus those from a first-time minority background. While Bozorgmehr’s study focuses on the first generation, this finding suggests that the influence of premigration status extends to their children.

Secondly, a closer look at those who adopt the specific national/ancestral-origin labels shows that seven Chinese–Vietnamese assert the “Chinese” ethnicity while only two individuals assert the “Vietnamese” ethnicity. Why are more Chinese–Vietnamese asserting a Chinese ethnic identity? Evidence from the interviews suggests that this is a direct reflection of parental premigration ethnic minority-status influence. For example, in the statement below, Annie and Lance, who both grew up asserting “Chinese” identities, speak about how their parents “push” the Chinese culture while sharing their ethnic minority status past. Annie, a 20-year-old second generation from Los Angeles who identifies as “Southeast Asian Chinese,” says:

I think [my parents] have a little spite towards the Vietnamese, you know, knowing their history and stuff. And they push on us, “Oh, you’re not Vietnamese, you’re Chinese…” I know they mentioned, you know, back when they were in Vietnam, they said that the Vietnamese would be really hostile toward the Chinese, you know? Like they would make them feel like outsiders, like they weren’t part of the country…like they would have words, like derogatory,
demonizing words they would use to call the Chinese people, so I guess that’s something that contributed to that hostility.

Another respondent, Lance, shares a similar experience. Lance is 26 years old and a second generation from Los Angeles County who identifies as “Chinese.” He shares:

I sort of remember when we were younger, [my parents] would often tell us not to play with the Vietnamese kids too much. […] I would ask my mom, “What the hell?” or “Why?” And she would say something like, “When your dad was in Vietnam, the Vietnamese people took away all of our belongings,” and stuff like that. I think that’s the bitterness that they still kind of have.

Both statements indicate how the premigration ethnic status of parents can influence the ethnic socialization they place upon their children. Both sets of parents pass the narrative of being a discriminated ethnic minority-status group onto their children. Although the children internalized these past narratives in varied ways, these parental acts linked the children to the particular culture and traditions the parents actively chose to pass on. In many instances, parents chose to reinforce Chinese language and traditions. Annie’s parents placed her in Mandarin language school growing up, and she learned Cantonese in the household. Similarly, Lance was sent to Cantonese language school, and his parents “nagged” him about speaking Chinese in the household. Both Annie and Lance remain fluent in conversational Cantonese and still identify with their Chinese background today. As is evident in previous sections, familial language preference (or the language that the children learned at an early age) plays a crucial role in the child’s ethnic self-identification as he or she grows up. Thus, the immigrant’s premigration experience as ethnic minorities reinforces their ethnic identity, linguistic retention, and linguistic preferences. The family’s language preference, in turn, shapes the ethnic identification of the 1.5 and second generation.

Lastly, there is a huge dispersion of identity selections in how the Chinese–Vietnamese defined themselves in comparison with the Vietnamese. While the majority (13 total) of all Vietnamese respondents identify as hyphenated-American, the Chinese–Vietnamese’s ethnic and racial self-identifications include a variety of identities. These identities include various ancestral origin, ancestral, pan-subethnic, hyphenated-American, racial, and American identities. This variety in identity choices reflects the Chinese–Vietnamese’s search for an identity, as well as the malleable nature of their ethnic identity in general. Cindy, a 23-year-old second generation from Los Angeles County, further illuminates this point by saying:

I think I went through a whole lot of different stages with identification. When I was in elementary school, I identified myself just as Chinese...and then it wasn’t until college, I
identified myself as Chinese American, from Asian American Studies. Then, in my third or fourth year in college, that’s when I learned about the Southeast Asian experience and how it was integrated into my family’s experience and so I called myself, “ethnically Chinese and then culturally Vietnamese.” At this point, I think I’m just really comfortable with calling myself Teochew [a Chinese dialect] because that’s just my ethnic background and how I really, really see myself and my family.

Cindy’s statement pinpoints the nuanced and dynamic nature of ethnic identity for individuals from the pre-migration status as twice-minorities, as they have multiple frames of historical references to draw from. Similar to many of the other respondents, Cindy’s statement highlights the influential role that college played in shaping her identity during her young adult years (Feliciano 2009; Kibria 1999). Interestingly, Cindy settled on her Chinese identity, specifically Teochew, which was a Chinese dialect that she learned as a child from her parents.

Finally, with a little over half of the Chinese–Vietnamese respondents asserting a national/ancestral self-identity, ethnic identity appears to be highly salient in the lives of the Chinese–Vietnamese in this study. This is not to argue that ethnic identity is not also a factor in the lives of Vietnamese respondents in this study—as nearly three-quarters of the Vietnamese still assert a hyphenated-American identity. Instead, the ways in which the Chinese–Vietnamese have to confront and assert their identity are sustained in different ways.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research took the less dominant premigration approach to examine the role of an immigrant’s premigration ethnic status on the 1.5 and second-generation’s postmigration acculturation in the United States. From this perspective, I draw from previous scholars (Bozorgmehr 1997; Desbarats 1986; Espiritu 1989) to define the intranational ethnicity lens. The intranational ethnicity perspective distinguishes between different ancestral-origin groups within a national origin, in interrogating the immigrant experience. This distinction reveals the existence of different ancestral-origin groups within a national identity, specifically from an ethnic majority or minority viewpoint. In the case of this study, the application of the intranational ethnicity lens highlights the existence of at least two intra-ethnic groups within the umbrella “Vietnamese” ethnicity—the Chinese–Vietnamese and the Vietnamese.

Many of the findings in this study lend additional support to previous research. For instance, the Chinese–Vietnamese’s ability to assert multiple ethnic identities reflects the constructive and flexible nature of ethnic identity (Lyman and Douglas 1973; Nagel 1994). Moreover, the ways in which both groups shifted ethnic identification later on in early adulthood confirms the fluidity of ethnic identity throughout the life course (Feliciano 2009; Nagel 1994).
Their experiences during later teen/young adulthood showcased the constructive nature of ethnic identity, one that is based on constant negotiation of an internal self-definition and external labels (Nagel 1994). Vietnamese and Chinese–Vietnamese respondents were influenced by their postmigration experiences. Specifically, members of both intranational ethnic groups highlighted the college years as the most formative period for influencing their identity formation. This lends additional support to previous postmigration approach research on the viability of the college setting for the cultivation of racial and/or ethnic identity (Espiritu 1992; Kibria 1999, 2002).

However, the goal of this study was to examine how premigration status might also influence the identity negotiation of 1.5 and second-generation Chinese–Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans. For methodological expediency, previous research has combined these two groups under the broader label “Vietnamese” (Chan 2006; Zhou and Bankston 1998). In this article, however, I illustrate that these groups are distinct from one another and that they arrive at different understandings of their own ethnic identities. Specifically, the findings show that each group’s premigration status (as minority or majority status in Vietnam) directly influences how they experience ethnic language differently and how this experience shapes the salience of their ethnic self-identification. Thus, findings show that in addition to postmigration factors, premigration ethnic status shapes how the Chinese–Vietnamese and Vietnamese negotiate their ethnic identification in different ways through the mediating role of parental language knowledge.

Specifically, the Chinese–Vietnamese experience is uniquely nuanced because of their twice-minority background. While identity formation for the Chinese–Vietnamese is complicated by many factors due to their premigration ethnic minority background, parental language knowledge appears to assist in their navigation of multiple cultural realms. Parental language knowledge is utilized as an identity default during their early-age ethnic self-identification because it was the most accessible way to settle their identity choice. Although a number of the 1.5-generation Chinese–Vietnamese respondents used language to connect with their ancestral heritage, they mainly used language to support their choice in ethnic self-identification. To a lesser extent, these respondents identified as Vietnamese because of the fact that they were born in Vietnam.

In comparison, the Vietnamese Americans experienced ethnic language knowledge as a means to connect or reconnect with their ancestral heritage, culture, and people. Thus, parental language for this group of 1.5 and second-generation Vietnamese Americans, serves as a vehicle to access the remembered past (Waters 1990). Unlike the Chinese–Vietnamese, the Vietnamese did not rely on parental language knowledge to determine ethnic identity, as they did not grapple with multiple ethnic identities; rather, they struggled with identifying themselves based on their ethnic (Vietnamese) or national (American) identities.
Furthermore, this research argues that the added component as “twice-minorities” to Chinese–Vietnamese ethnic identity formation complicates and sustains their ethnic identity in ways that are distinct from the Vietnamese experience. In using current self-identification as an indicator of ethnic salience, the findings show that many “Vietnamese” respondents assert both ethnic and American identities. However, by using the intranational ethnicity lens and separating the groups, we see a larger percentage of the Chinese-Vietnamese asserting their national/ancestral-origin identities compared to the Vietnamese. The Chinese-Vietnamese pre-migration narrative as an ethnic minority, and the specific language and cultural practices passed on from parent to child, influence their ethnic self-identification as they grow up. This influence is reflected in the constant shifts in their ethnic identity, with many seeking alternative identities as young adults. This finding suggests support for previous findings that ethnic identity is more salient for twice-minorities in the host country (Bozorgmehr 1997; Espiritu 1989). In short, the Chinese–Vietnamese’s pre-migration ethnic minority status shapes their family’s linguistic preferences, which in turn, appears to influence the 1.5 and second-generation’s postmigration ethnic self-identification.

As the new second-generation comes of age in the United States, it is critical to examine the diversity of this cohort and the various factors that impact their adaptation process. This article addressed one aspect of this diversity: how children of immigrants from a twice-minority background possess multiple historical origins and cultures. Similar to the experiences of those born of multiple racial backgrounds, persons from multiple ethnic backgrounds also possess multiple historical origins. More research is needed on groups possessing multiple ethnic and historical narratives to better understand the diverse ways that children of immigrants adapt in a host society. What will future studies from the intranational ethnicity perspective reveal about the diversity within ethnic groups from other regions of the world living in the United States? How will all this manifest in the third-generation? Will both subgroups share the same trajectory in sustaining their ethnic identity, or will their ethnic identities become symbolic (Gans 1979)? In the thriving field of immigrant adaptation research, there is still much to be learned about intranational ethnic distinctions.

ENDNOTES

*Please direct correspondence to Monica M. Trieu, Ph.D., Department of Sociology and Asian American Studies, Purdue University, 700 W. State Street, West Lafayette, IN 47907, USA; e-mail: mtrieu@purdue.edu
The Chinese–Vietnamese American is an objective label that I assign to this group, as this might not necessarily be their self-identification. I define the Chinese–Vietnamese Americans as individuals with both parents from Vietnam, but with one parent who is of Chinese ancestry.

Rumbaut and Rumbaut (2005); Rumbaut (1976) constructed the term to define the school-age preadolescent children who entered the United States between ages 6–12. As children of immigrants, the 1.5-generation are unlike their U.S.-born counterparts, the second generation, because for the most part, many “1.5-ers” still have a tangible connection (language, culture, etc.) to their ancestral land.

For the purpose of this article, the term “premigration status” refers to a group’s ethnic minority/majority status in Vietnam and how this status influences the group’s children as they grow up in the United States.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees established the Orderly Departure Program in 1979 in an effort to provide a safer route out of Vietnam. Under the program, the United States accepted close family members of Vietnamese refugees and immigrants who already lived in the United States, and individuals closely affiliated with, or were former employees of, U.S. government agencies prior to 1975 (Chan 2006).

The Chinese–Vietnamese population in the United States is enumerated by creating a recode syntax using variables mentioned in Rumbaut’s (2007b:6) article in which he explained combining “self-reported ‘race’ with birthplace, ancestry, and language spoken in the home” to extract the Chinese–Vietnamese from the US Census. Following this formula, my recode syntax also combined self-reported race, language, first ancestry, second ancestry, and birthplace, in a multitude of ways to extrapolate the Chinese-Vietnamese population from the US Census.

Chinese-Vietnamese are defined as individuals whose parents are both from Vietnam, but at least one parent is of Chinese ancestry. While this study examines the experience of both Vietnamese and Chinese–Vietnamese American, the predominant literature on the second generation is based on the Vietnamese American experience. Thus, much of the review of the literature will be focused on the Vietnamese American experience.

REFERENCES


II. Ethnic Identity

**Background**

What is your family’s ancestral background?
What is your parent’s background? Where was their place of birth?
What is your grandparent’s background? Their place of birth?
Your identity
How do you identify yourself? Has this self-identity changed over the years?
What does it mean to you, to consider yourself [x]?
How important is this identity to you?
Would you describe for me how being [x] is different from being American, if at all?
What do you think of the term Asian American? What does it mean to you?
[IF MIXED ANCESTRY:] Do you identify with one ethnicity more than the other? Why? Do you ever feel more one than the other? When?
Can you think of instance where you were treated differently based on how you identify

III. Family and Culture
Language...
What language do you know? Fluency?
What do you feel most comfortable with?
If learned another language at a later age—when?
Do you use a particular language in particular contexts/situations? Explain.
Do you see a correlation between language and your ethnic identification? Why or why not?

Appendix
(Continued)