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THE PARENTS TRYING TO PASS DOWN A LANGUAGE THEY HARDLY SPEAK

Losing your family's language can feel like an inevitable side effect of immigration—but it's one I want to prevent.

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My mother used to tell a certain story at family parties when trying to explain why my sisters and I didn't really speak Cantonese, my parents' primary language. It's probably a familiar narrative, especially to kids of immigrants in America. Still, it stung every time I heard it.

When my oldest sister, Steph, was in her suburban-Connecticut kindergarten, she returned home one afternoon embarrassed and upset, and insisted that our parents talk to her only in English. Steph was young and doesn't remember the specifics, though the scenario is easy to imagine: some kid, probably oblivious but still cruel. Our parents, who came to the United States separately from Guangzhou, China, in the late 1960s and early 1970s by way of Hong Kong, spoke mostly the Chinese dialects Cantonese and Taishanese to us, but also possessed fluent English from their education in colonial Hong Kong. They conceded to Steph's request, my father told me, and we became a primarily English-speaking household. Although my sisters and I could understand and speak some Cantonese (mine was the most limited, because I was the youngest; I was born a few years after Steph's kindergarten incident), the ability faded as we aged.

The term for what my sisters and I experienced—the forgetting of a language by a once-proficient speaker and a family's subsequent intergenerational dilution of the skill—is *language attrition*, and research shows that it occurs rapidly. Linguists say that in many cases, a heritage language becomes all but extinct by the time a family's third generation is living in a new country. The reason is simple, according to scholars I

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spoke with: A language stays alive when used out of necessity. And the longer a group lives in a new country, the more likely another language will take its place.

Attrition can feel like an inevitable side effect of immigration. For me, though, the outcome also feels dire. The thought of future generations of our family having even less of a connection to my parents' language than I do stirs a specific melancholy in me, a sense of relinquishing something greater than myself—a shared history, perhaps. For a long time, I experimented with different methods of learning Cantonese, as well as Mandarin, the most common Chinese dialect and the one for which learning resources are easier to find. I tried a college course, a tutor, online classes, Duolingo, watching films from Hong Kong. Throughout, I asked myself: What was the hole that I was trying to fill by attempting to absorb my family's language? And was it possible to reverse this attrition, so that the next generation wouldn't have to experience it?

Three and a half decades after my sister Steph renounced her Chinese, these questions return to me when I'm visiting her in the suburbs of New York City. I'm helping her take care of her children, who suffer none of my language anxieties.

Her 3-year-old daughter is home from day care and hunched over an iPad that is playing *Frozen II* in Mandarin. She turns to me beseechingly. "*Wo yao li*," she says. Translation: She wants something, though I don't know what.

"*'Li'? 'Li' shi shenme?* What is '*li*' in English?" I ask her, translating myself.

She studies me with a cool, appraising expression. She knows the English word for *li*. She's just hazing me, Steph will confirm later. Bored, my niece turns back to the movie.

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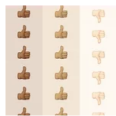
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I type different fruit names into Google Translate. After a few minutes, I learn with sheepish amusement that *li*, spoken in a rising tone, means "pear."

My niece and her 5-year-old brother speak mostly Mandarin to their parents. My sister's in-laws—Mandarin speakers—live nearby and often look after the kids, which has helped reinforce the dialect as the household's dominant language. That, plus the Saturday Chinese school the kids attend every week. And—crucially—my sister's hard work.

Steph primarily speaks to her children in a mix of English and elementary, self-taught Mandarin. She has spent hours translating her kids' books and labeling mundane objects around the house with their Chinese names, memorizing the characters for "light switch" and "refrigerator" in the process. The family watches the Mandarin versions of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood*, *Bluey*, and *Moana*, and in her free time, Steph uses Duolingo for her own lessons.

The result is that I'm constantly amazed by my niece's and nephew's linguistic abilities. I've also had a preview of the incredible parental labor required to raise children in a language one is also learning.

Much of it involves making peace with being outsmarted by children who toggle seamlessly between two languages, and who, in my case, sometimes correct my pronunciation. My nephew and niece sense that my Chinese is lacking, and converse with me in English. This behavior isn't a snub, but kind of feels like a cause for shame, because it comes from a child. I try to cobble together my broken Mandarin to keep up. I realize that I can no longer joke that my Chinese is "toddler level," because my toddler niece has far surpassed my abilities.

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Steph has told me that having her children speak Chinese—whether that's her Cantonese dialect or her husband's Mandarin—is one of the most meaningful ways for them to engage with their lineage. To be proficient in a language makes you not merely a cultural spectator that passively enjoys food or classic films with subtitles, but an active participant. You can contribute information to a conversation; you can entertain others with your wit; you can give rather than just take.

I've always wondered about the relationship that any future children of mine might have to their family history. Yet there's a comfort in what my sister has achieved. To me, she has wrested back some semblance of control. Her kids—and maybe even Steph herself—are connected to their past in a manner that I am not.

THE KEY TO REVERSING LANGUAGE ATTRITION is simple in theory and difficult in practice: Expose your children to the language. "It's really about *time* with that language—and *high-quality* time," Krista Byers-Heinlein, a psychology professor at Concordia University, in Montreal, whose work focuses on infant development and language acquisition, told me. "When we say 'high quality,' we mean interactions with real people, with the things that parents and adults normally do, so just talking back and forth."

Byers-Heinlein said the figure varies, but a child typically has to have a minimum of 20 to 25 percent of their waking time with those high-quality interactions in order to be able to speak a second language proficiently. She walked me through a hypothetical scenario: Say a kid attends a three-hour Chinese school each Saturday, and hears Chinese only in that environment. If this child were to sleep 12 hours a night (optimistic!), that would mean they were awake for 84 hours that week. The child would need at least an additional 14 hours a week of Chinese interactions.

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The challenge is how to boost a child's exposure when the parents don't speak the language well themselves. In these cases, a parent's key resource is a community, Maria M. Carreira, a Spanish professor at California State University at Long Beach and a co-founder of the National Heritage Language Resource Center at UCLA, told me. For parents to rustle up the 20 to 25 percent of waking hours needed in a language, perhaps they can rely on schools or day-care centers that teach in multiple languages, extended family close by, play groups or library storytimes, caregivers who speak the language.

Of course, so much depends on where someone lives in the U.S. and how many generations their family has been in the country. A nationwide survey that Carreira and colleagues conducted from 2007 to 2009 analyzed people learning their heritage languages, among them Spanish, Mandarin, Cantonese, Russian, Korean, Vietnamese, Tagalog, and Persian. Carreira and the late UCLA professor Olga E. Kagan noted in a subsequent report on their findings that Spanish-speaking respondents had some of the highest levels of proficiency, which they attributed to the closeness of Latin America to the U.S., as well as to the country's large population of Spanish speakers. Though most Mandarin and Cantonese heritage-language learners surveyed were—like the Spanish speakers—born in the U.S. or had arrived before age 11, their exposure to their heritage language "was considerably more limited than that of Spanish speakers." The researchers pointed out some potential reasons: Compared with Spanish speakers, fewer Mandarin and Cantonese speakers visited their (or their parents') birth country each year, and nearly half of them reported never having read in their heritage language.

These data fed my curiosity about how Asian American parents in particular navigate teaching their children a heritage language they've lost. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 allowed an influx of newcomers from Asian countries, my

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heritage. And we're also, by virtue of being born here, indelibly American. How we raise children—and in what language—can feel like an inflection point for our cultures.

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These challenges are hardly unique to Asian Americans, however. Silvina Montrul, a linguist at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, notes in her recent book, *Native Speakers, Interrupted*, that "in the United States, English is the language of power and the language children choose to speak with their peers." She nods to the work of colleagues who found that in Miami, some children who grew up speaking Spanish at home and English and Spanish at school still chose to converse in English outside school.

Montrul, who is Argentinian, went to remarkable lengths to make sure that her two daughters spoke Spanish. She formed the University Language Academy, an after-school and summer immersion program for children ages 4 to 17. She recalls that she was particularly firm in making Spanish the primary language she used to interact with her daughters, even when one—in an echo of my sister Steph's story—begged her not to. Montrul says that if a child picks up another language before puberty, there's a good chance they'll sound like a native speaker with continued exposure and use. But without that practice, the language can just as easily fade. "As I say in my work, children are great language learners," Montrul told me over the phone, "but they are also great language losers."

EVEN THOUGH AMERICA IS FULL OF IMMIGRANTS and descendants of immigrants, Americans tend not to speak multiple languages. According to the nonprofit American Councils for International Education, only 20 percent of K–12 students take foreign-language classes. In Norway, Romania, and

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learning a foreign language far outpace the U.S.: Greece with 87 percent, Portugal with 69 percent, and Belgium with 64 percent. Large immigrant populations have historically brought new languages to America, yet as the scholars Rubén G. Rumbaut and Douglas S. Massey note, the country has a "well established reputation as a graveyard for immigrant languages." This is no aberration; it is grounded in decades of policy and sentiment.

Efforts to suppress languages other than English were present even in the country's earliest days. Starting in the 1800s, Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their homes and sent to so-called residential schools to be educated according to white American standards; they were punished for speaking their own languages.

In 1915, speaking at Carnegie Hall on Columbus Day, President Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed that there was "no room in this country for hyphenated Americanism." He would proclaim four years later in a letter to the American Defense Society that the U.S. had "room for but one language here, and that is the English language." Roosevelt's words foreshadowed a posture of monolingualism. The following century of American hegemony allowed this approach: People in other countries have had to learn English to apply to study at American colleges, to conduct business with American companies, or to understand the nuances of Hollywood films. Americans have felt far less pressure to reciprocate by learning foreign languages.

Today, true fluency in multiple languages is uncommon in most of the United States, even as it exists in English-speaking countries such as the United Kingdom and Canada, where the government weaves multiple languages into daily life through street signs and official forms. Legislation in Wales and Quebec have established Welsh and French, respectively, as official languages. In Wales, nearly 30 percent of people age 3 or older can speak Welsh—about 900,000 people—according to a population survey from 2022. In Quebec, just under 86 percent of people said in a 2021 analysis that they spoke French regularly at home.

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Compare that with Hawaii, where U.S. authorities banned teaching in the native language in the 19th century. Not until 1978 was the state constitution amended and Hawaiian recognized as an official language; prior to this change, fewer than 2,500 people spoke Hawaiian, most of them 60 years or older, according to Larry Kimura, a professor of Hawaiian language and Hawaiian studies at the University of Hawaiʻi at Hilo. To try to save the language, educators created a nonprofit preschool, ʻAha Pūnana Leo, a Hawaiian immersion program that has become a model for indigenous-language revitalization around the world. ʻAha Pūnana Leo and its Hiʼipēpē Infant Program now have more than 6,000 alumni, and the organization has offshoots that extend Hawaiian immersion schooling all the way to college. If language can be decimated by government policies, efforts around the world have shown that language can also be saved from extinction, even if progress is often fragile.

IN THE U.S., bringing a heritage language back into a family usually comes down to the efforts of individuals. The parents I spoke with who taught their children a heritage language that they themselves didn't speak fluently had essentially organized their own lives around the effort.

Betty Choi, a pediatrician who lives outside Santa Barbara, California, and is the author of the children's book *Human Body Learning Lab*, is another remarkable example of just how far a dedicated approach to language instruction can go. Choi grew up in Syracuse, New York, and wanted to connect her two young children to the memory of her late parents, who spoke various dialects of Chinese, and to her husband's family, who live across the country and speak Korean. So Choi set about teaching herself and her children Mandarin *and* Korean.

Over a few years, she cycled through different methods: enrolling herself in language classes; seeking out multilingual child-care providers; and exposing her children to books, songs, and videos in those languages. (Few other Asian Americans live where Choi does, which presents a particular challenge, she told me, in her effort to expose

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own curriculum, which she parlayed into what is now Chalk Academy, an online resource for raising multilingual children that includes worksheets; articles; and suggestions for books, toys, and activities that help facilitate learning Chinese and Korean.

Choi's children are now conversational in Mandarin and have retained a small number of Korean words. ("It was painful to watch my children forget Korean so quickly," Choi wrote in an email, sharing that the Korean words they mostly say now are: *ttong* (poop), *bang-gu* (fart), and *saja* (lion), referring to a favorite stuffed animal.) She's worried they will start to lose their Mandarin, too, as the English terms they're learning at school and with friends outpace the amount of self-taught Mandarin she can speak to them at home. "But my kids know that Chinese language is a family value, not simply an extracurricular activity. As such, Mandarin is still the primary language that I speak with my children," Choi wrote. Still, the children might reply in English, Mandarin, or a mix of the two.

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There is, of course, another alternative to either total fluency or abandoning a language. Hieu Truong, who lives in Baltimore, Maryland, and grew up in the area, has a 4-year-old son and a six-month-old baby. She's slowly trying to introduce her children to Vietnamese, but has remained realistic about their potential bilingualism and her own abilities.

Truong, whose parents left Vietnam for the U.S. in the early '80s, says she can understand, speak, and read only a little Vietnamese—enough to order in a restaurant, but maybe not enough to digest the newspaper. Truong sometimes reads her son children's books in Vietnamese—through those books, she learned the words for, say, "zebra" and "giraffe" herself, and he's now familiar with basic Vietnamese

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books and flashcards sold online; resources such as the SEAD Project, a Minneapolis-based organization that offers Hmong, Vietnamese, Khmer, and Lao language courses, and emphasizes the history and culture of the Southeast Asian diaspora through its programming.

For her son, "fluency isn't necessarily the goal," Truong told me. She knows personally how hard it is to maintain proficiency and doesn't want to add that pressure. "But I do want him exposed to it. I want him to go into a Vietnamese restaurant and be like, 'Okay, I know what's going on.' I want him, when he talks to his older relatives, to know how to properly greet them—know how to say 'Thank you.'"

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Ultimately, Truong said that a big part of teaching her son Vietnamese is "untangling" the objective for herself versus the one for her toddler. Here, I relate to her, even though our goals differ. Being far from family and a network of Cantonese speakers with whom I could interact on a daily basis makes the goal of everyday fluency difficult to attain. But I long for the emotional closeness that comes with an ease of interaction. Having only a vague familiarity with a language is like navigating the world with blurred vision. Everything appears with softened edges, and I am forever grasping for true meaning, deciphering fuzzy translations. I can see the outline of things, but I can't be confident that I truly know what I'm seeing.

Fluency would sharpen my focus. It would allow me to see and participate in the small details of my life that are rendered in Cantonese: the textures of a conversation with extended family, the jokes that unfold at the dinner table, the subtext that is begging to be teased out with a gentle question. I'm seeking to know more of these tiny moments.

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This is what I want for any potential children of mine, too. I don't desire fluency for them merely to compensate for what I lost as a kid. Rather, I yearn for them to have a closeness to the culture and the little joys of everyday life that such proximity can reveal. Language facilitates many things: at its most basic, a transfer of information, and at its most complex, an exchange of emotion. But perhaps what I value above all else is that it grants intimacy.

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