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Zhou, Y. and Little, S. (2026) "Britain has never made me feel like my home": raciolinguistic ideologies and heritage language identity among young people with Chinese heritage in the UK. *Applied Linguistics Review*. ISSN: 1868-6303

<https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2025-0170>

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“Britain has never made me feel like my home”: raciolinguistic ideologies and heritage language identity among young people with Chinese heritage in the UK

<https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2025-0170>

Received July 10, 2025; accepted July 21, 2026; published online August 18, 2026

Abstract: This study amplifies the underrepresented voices of multilingual young people with Chinese heritage in the UK, addressing a critical gap in heritage language (HL) research by centring race and racism. Drawing on raciolinguistics and Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit), it offers a novel conceptual framework for understanding HL development as a racialised process among Chinese HL speakers. The analysis is based on 115 identity narratives and 32 interviews with UK-based young people aged 11–18, collected through a larger participatory research project co-constructed with young co-researchers. The findings show that growing up multilingual with a heritage background is deeply entangled with processes of racialisation. Participants described how their language practices were subject to mockery, essentialist assumptions, and pressures to assimilate into monolingual Whiteness, revealing Chinese language and heritage as sites not only of scrutiny, marginalisation, and identity negotiation, but also of resistance and voice. By bringing raciolinguistics and AsianCrit into dialogue, the study advances theoretical understandings of HL identities and trajectories as being shaped by intersecting structures of linguistic and racial injustice. It concludes by calling for more critical and anti-racist approaches across mainstream and HL education, with implications for pedagogy and practice.

Keywords: identity; heritage language; raciolinguistics; AsianCrit theory; Chinese

1 Introduction

The Chinese culture carries beauty, but my skin carries such violence. 为什么会这样? [...] 如果说会英文, 你就算聪明, 可以帮爸爸妈妈翻译。但我不会写自己的语言, 我聪明吗?

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[Translation: Why is that so? [...] If you can speak English, you are smart and can help your parents translate. But I can't write my own language, am I smart?]

I often feel lost – amorphous, displaced, tethered to nothing, suspended in a limbo between East and West. No heritage. No roots. A lot of this is my fault. I spent so long marinating in the racism and vitriol projected onto me, absorbing it into the pores of my being. I rejected all the trappings of my otherness, all the things that jeopardised my quest for assimilation into white Britain.

– Written narrative, Lin Ling, Age 17

The experience of growing up multilingual is often romanticised as an asset, but for many racialised children and young people, it is shaped by tension, exclusion, and structural inequality. The excerpt above, from Lin Ling, a 17-year-old Chinese heritage language (HL) speaker, highlights the complex intersections of race, language, and identity. For young Chinese heritage speakers such as Lin Ling, heritage language and culture often function as racialised markers of otherness that attract scrutiny, mockery, and even violence (Kubota et al. 2023). As her narrative suggests, dominant ideologies surrounding race and language construct English as the language of intelligence and legitimacy (“If you can speak English, you are smart”), while HL is stigmatised, devalued, or quietly erased (Rosa and Flores 2017). Her “quest for assimilation” mirrors the experiences of many racialised HL speakers, revealing how Whiteness and English operate as the unspoken standards for social acceptance, pressuring individuals to distance themselves from their linguistic and cultural backgrounds in pursuit of recognition.

This paper argues that HL identities, maintenance, and trajectories are shaped through racialised processes structured by systemic hierarchies of language, race, and power. HL here denotes a language that carries familial or cultural relevance for young people growing up in a context where that language is not the dominant societal language (Fishman 2001), although such relevance does not necessarily imply acceptance or identification by young people themselves (Little and Zhou 2025). Existing research has explored the identity construction of HL speakers and the relationship between language and self (Leeman 2015; Tseng 2020), yet has rarely foregrounded the role of race, racism, and the broader racialised structures in which HL development occurs. The emerging field of raciolinguistics offers a critical framework for understanding how language and race are co-constructed and jointly perceived (Alim 2016; Rosa and Flores 2017). As Flores and Rosa (2015) argue, racialised speakers and learners are often judged not by their actual language abilities, but through raciolinguistic ideologies, which devalue their linguistic practices because they are perceived to be “spoken by racialised bodies” and heard through the lens of the “white listening subject” (p. 161). However, research at the intersection of race, language, and identity remains limited in relation to Asian HL

speakers, who are frequently positioned outside dominant narratives of racial marginalisation due to the enduring influence of the model minority myth (Chen et al. 2021).

The recent surge in anti-Asian violence after the COVID-19 pandemic urges scholars to address systemic racism and ensure that the historical and ongoing experiences of Asian communities are neither silenced nor forgotten. In the UK context, where “Asian” is often used unevenly and where Chinese and wider East and Southeast Asian communities occupy a particularly ambivalent position in racial discourse (Yeh 2018, 2021), children and young people with Chinese heritage remain strikingly underrepresented in both academic and public debate. Although Chinese heritage students are often perceived as academically successful, culturally assimilated, and able to speak “unaccented” English, they continue to experience discrimination and racial violence. As Yeh (2018) puts it, these communities are often rendered “visible but unseen,” present in the social and cultural fabric, yet marginalised within the social and cultural imagination. To bring these experiences into focus, this paper adopts Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit) (Iftikar and Museus 2018), which offers a crucial lens for understanding the unique forms of racialisation that Asian communities encounter within educational contexts.

Informed by raciolinguistics and AsianCrit (e.g., Iftikar and Museus 2018; Rosa and Flores 2017), this study brings these critical perspectives into dialogue with the experiences of young Chinese HL speakers in the UK, a context largely absent from existing scholarship. Drawing on written narratives and interviews with young people aged 11–18, the study examines how race, racism, and raciolinguistic ideologies shape the identity and language development of Chinese HL speakers. It seeks to demonstrate the racialised realities of growing up multilingual and to foreground the untold stories of Chinese heritage speakers in the UK that have been systematically obscured and silenced. Although situated in the UK, the work is discussed and positioned within international HL research, advancing theoretical understandings of racialised HL identities, maintenance/shift, and belonging, and offering new insights to global conversations on race, multilingualism, and justice.

2 Intersections of language, race, and identity in HL development

Language is a central, yet often overlooked, aspect of racialisation – a key site where racialised identities are constructed, contested, and experienced (Alim 2016; Kubota and Lin 2009). Raciolinguistic scholarship has brought renewed attention to the ways in which language, race, and power are mutually constructed, tracing these

entanglements back to colonial histories and the ongoing maintenance of White supremacy (Cushing 2022; Rosa and Flores 2017). At the core of this inquiry is the critique of raciolinguistic ideologies (e.g., Alim 2016), a set of beliefs that frame the language of racialised speakers as deficient and in need of correction. These ideologies are closely tied to monoglossic language ideologies (García and Torres 2009), which uphold an idealised vision of monolingualism in Standard English as the “norm to which all national subjects should aspire” (Flores and Rosa 2015, p. 151). What is often framed as neutral or appropriate instead reinforces racial normativity, privileging white, middle-class forms of speech and continuing to racialise bilingual speakers, even when they conform to such expectations.

The imposition of racial dominance through linguistic forms of power is often at the cost of racialised students’ HLs. In school contexts, the policing of languages other than English and widespread biases against migrant and minority languages are well documented (Curd-Christiansen et al. 2023; Endo 2016). Within HL research, scholars have begun to explore how HL learning and maintenance are shaped by racialised structures (e.g., Lacorte and Magro 2021; Shin 2016). Studies have shown that racism, exclusion, and marginalisation represent significant aspects of the lives of HL learners and speakers. These individuals frequently encounter discrimination when using their HLs, whether through stares in public spaces, mockery and exclusion at school, or the devaluation of their cultural and linguistic expressions (Endo 2016; Lee et al. 2024). Such personal experiences of racialisation, combined with pressure to shift to English and “speak Whiter,” often constrain HL use and contribute to ambivalent or negative attitudes toward both language and identity (Tseng 2021). Curd-Christiansen et al.’s (2023) work further highlights how raciolinguistic ideologies of othering can erode pride in the HL within migrant families, shaping parental decisions around which languages to prioritise and which to let go. HL shift and loss, therefore, is not simply a matter of personal preference or generational change, but a racialised process shaped by societal hierarchies, institutional norms, and ideologies that devalue minority languages.

Another concern in raciolinguistics is how listening subjects inscribe racial identities onto speakers, drawing on ideologies that link particular language practices to specific racialised bodies (Alim 2016). Inoue’s (2006) concept of the “listening subject,” originally developed in relation to gendered language ideologies, illustrates how interlocutors rely on visible physical features (e.g., skin colour) to assign racial categories to speakers and interpret their language through the lens of these assumptions. For HL speakers, this often results in contradictory and racialised expectations. On one hand, racialised speakers may be presumed to speak “broken” English, and are judged as deficient even when using idealised “standard” forms (Tsai et al. 2024). On the other hand, physical appearance can lead to the assumption that they are, or should be, fully competent in their HL, and failure to meet this

expectation can result in shaming, exclusion, and accusations of inauthenticity (Zhou and Liu 2023). Both assumptions constrain HL identities and reduce people's complex linguistic repertoires to fixed, racialised norms. The racialised logic that links HLs and non-Whiteness to "foreignness" could further marginalise these individuals, positioning them as perpetually out of place, too "other" to belong in English-dominant spaces, yet not "authentic" enough within their heritage communities. As Little and Zhou (2025) argue, heritage children and young people often occupy liminal, limbotic spaces of in-betweenness, neither fully here nor there.

Here, we highlight how racialised experiences constitute a critical dimension of HL learning and maintenance, one that warrants greater recognition in HL scholarship. By adopting a raciolinguistic perspective in this study, we seek to interrogate how race and language are co-constructed in ways that shape HL identities, maintenance/shift, and belonging. While raciolinguistic frameworks shed important light on the broader intersections of race and language, more focused attention is needed to the specific forms of racialisation that shape the experiences of Asian heritage speakers, an area that AsianCrit is well positioned to address.

3 Foregrounding Asian racialisation in HL development: an AsianCrit perspective

Building on critical race theory, AsianCrit addresses the specific ways in which Asian communities are racialised and positioned within dominant racial hierarchies (Iftikar and Museus 2018). It has been used as a theoretical tool to examine the marginalisation and misrepresentation of Asian American students in US educational contexts (e.g., Lee et al. 2024; Shin et al. 2022). While acknowledging the US origins of the framework, we apply it here cautiously to understand the racialisation of children and young people with Chinese heritage in the UK. This caution is important because "Asian" is not a self-evident or homogeneous category. As Chu (2025) notes, pan-ethnic terms such as "Asian (American)" can be politically useful for naming shared experiences of racialisation and building solidarity, but they can also collapse diverse histories, identities, and communities into a monolithic category. This concern is especially important in the UK, where the terms "Asian" and "British Asian" have often been shaped through South Asian diasporic histories and racialisation, while Chinese and other East and Southeast Asian communities have occupied a more ambivalent and less visible position within British racial discourse (Yeh 2018, 2021). We therefore do not apply AsianCrit as a direct transposition of Asian American racial formations, but use it as a critical lens for examining how model minority discourse, perpetual foreignness, and Asian essentialisation shape the

racialisation of multilingual young people with Chinese heritage in the UK. The following tenets are especially relevant to our study, offering both a critique of dominant structures and an advocacy for transformation:

- 1) The normalisation of Asianisation, where Asians are simultaneously positioned as model minorities and perpetual foreigners.
- 2) The essentialisation of Asian identities, where the heterogeneity within Asian communities is overlooked or erased.
- 3) Story, theory, and praxis, which centre the voices and lived experiences of Asian communities, using storytelling as an epistemological tool to inform theory and practice in meaningful ways.
- 4) A commitment to social justice, reflecting AsianCrit's dedication to dismantling systemic oppression and exploitation.

In particular, one of the most pervasive racialised constructions of Asians is the model minority stereotype, which portrays them as hard-working, disciplined, and problem-free (Ng et al. 2007). While seemingly positive, scholars argue that this discourse upholds White supremacy by masking structural inequalities, fuelling misconceptions that Asians do not face racism, and justifying their exclusion from racial justice conversations (Museus 2014; Ng et al. 2007). It also places pressure on Asian students to meet narrow definitions of success that align with dominant cultural expectations. In the UK context, Francis et al.'s (2017) work shows how this imposed identity has been internalised by many British Chinese families as part of their ethnic pride. Parents and children alike have embraced the model minority narrative, placing strong emphasis on academic achievement. These pressures often demand conformity to mainstream norms at the expense of heritage language and culture; as Zhou and Liu (2023) observe, heritage speakers tend to internalise this logic early on, viewing HL learning and maintenance as a low priority while growing up.

However, being positioned as a model minority does not free Asian individuals from racialisation. Ideologies of language, race, and nation continue to construct Asians as racial others and as perpetually foreign in the White imagination (Iftikar and Museus 2018). This perpetual foreigner stereotype persists regardless of birthplace, citizenship, or fluency in English. When intertwined with raciolinguistic ideologies, it positions both Asian bodies and Asian languages as markers of foreignness. Lo (2016) demonstrates that even Asian Americans who speak English fluently are still racialised as linguistically deviant, as mock Asian speech and parodic performances sustain associations between Asian bodies and "Oriental" linguistic features. Similarly, Kubota et al. (2023) show that while speaking unaccented, "White" English may appear to reduce some forms of racial stigma by distancing second-generation

heritage speakers from immigrant stereotypes, their racialised otherness is never erased.

Drawing on this body of scholarship, we propose that the distinct forms of racialisation that simultaneously position Asians as both model minorities and perpetual foreigners – alongside dominant raciolinguistic ideologies – can also shape the lived experiences of British Chinese communities, particularly those growing up with Chinese as a HL. While limited research has applied AsianCrit or raciolinguistic frameworks to the UK context, racism and anti-Asian racism remain deeply embedded in British schools and society. Cushing's (2022) pioneering work demonstrates that language discrimination is woven into the fabric of educational policy in England, revealing how institutional structures and schools operate as sites that reinforce raciolinguistic hierarchies. While his focus is on the racialisation of varieties of English in UK schools, our study turns attention to how minoritised HLs are also subject to racialisation. Given the persistent invisibility of British Chinese communities in racial discourse, this study centres the voices of young people with Chinese heritage and affirms the value of experiential knowledge and storytelling, key tenets of AsianCrit, as tools for challenging dominant narratives. We argue that bringing AsianCrit into conversation with raciolinguistics offers a critical lens for exploring how Chinese HL speakers in the UK experience racialisation, and how race and language are co-constructed in shaping their identities and trajectories of language development. This leads to our central research question:

How do race, racism, and raciolinguistic ideologies shape HL identities, maintenance/shift, and sense of belonging of multilingual young people with Chinese heritage in the UK?

4 Methodology

This paper draws on data from a larger participatory research project titled *Growing up multilingual with Chinese heritage*, designed to explore the perceptions, lived experiences, and aspirations of children and young people aged 11–18 who are growing up with Chinese HL backgrounds. Grounded in a participatory research paradigm, the study sought to challenge conventional hierarchies in knowledge production by meaningfully engaging young people as co-researchers (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor 2015; Pahl 2023). A group of seven young co-researchers, aged 11–16, were involved throughout all phases of the project. To contextualise the availability of data for this paper, we begin by outlining the design of the original research project.

The wider project consisted of two strands, one global and one local, both co-constructed with the same group of seven young co-researchers, who were recruited from a local HL school. The global strand invited young people growing up multilingual with Chinese heritage around the world to submit any text or multimodal artefact of their choosing (e.g., written narratives, drawings, films, collages, photographs) in any language or combination of languages, expressing any aspect of their identities they wished to share (see details in Little and Zhou 2025). The young co-researchers played a central role in shaping the call for contributions, ensuring that the language and framing were accessible, inclusive, and inviting for their peers. Submissions were collected over a six-month period via a Qualtrics survey hosted on a custom-designed website. The website and invitation were shared openly via social media, as well as with a total of 58 Chinese HL schools worldwide. In total, 132 children and young people participated in the global strand, of whom 115 were based in the UK.¹ While identity compositions spanned multiple modalities, this paper focuses on text-based submissions; a separate paper is in preparation on arts-based and multimodal representations.

The local strand was based in a city in northern England, where all co-researchers resided. Participants for this strand were recruited through both local Chinese HL schools and mainstream secondary schools. We conducted six focus group interviews with 32 participants, each lasting approximately 1 h, followed by 30-min individual interviews with six of the participants. The focus group themes and interview questions were co-designed with the young co-researchers. Among the topics co-constructed, issues such as race, racism, and the experience of being racialised were identified as important areas to explore, alongside other collaboratively developed themes such as language use, family language policy, culture and festivals, and Chinese communities. The follow-up individual interviews enabled participants to revisit and expand on insights shared in the group setting and provided a more in-depth exploration of experiences relating to language, race, and identity. This strand of the project also led to a co-authored methodological paper with three of the seven young co-researchers (Little et al. 2026), which reflects on how co-production enriched the research process and how issues of race and racism emerged within a project broadly focused on multilingualism, identity, and belonging. The current paper, in this sense, can be seen as a logical extension of the earlier methodological paper, shifting the focus to the data itself while also reflecting

¹ The term “global strand” refers to the international scope of the open call. Although the call was circulated internationally, responses were concentrated in the UK; for this reason, and because of the paper’s focus on racialisation in the UK context, the present study draws only on the UK-based submissions from this strand.

how, through co-construction, the intersection of language and race became a meaningful theme in the context of HL learning and maintenance.

Taken together, the current paper draws on two sets of data from the larger project: written narratives from the 115 UK-based submissions to the global call, and interview data from 32 participants involved in the local strand. While the broader project addressed a wide range of experiences related to growing up multilingual with Chinese heritage, this paper re-analyses this combined dataset through the lens of raciolinguistics and AsianCrit, with a specific focus on how language and race intersect in participants' everyday experiences, identity negotiations, and HL development.

Participants in both strands included a wide range of Chinese heritage and migratory backgrounds, including British-born Chinese and those who had migrated to the UK with their families. This also covered diverse Chinese linguistic backgrounds (primarily Mandarin and Cantonese) and family heritages, including children from families with two Chinese parents as well as those of mixed heritage. We recognise that HL affiliation is not clear-cut. Rather than applying rigid classifications, we seek to trouble the notion of HL as a fixed, definable attribute (Little and Zhou 2025). We also recognise that "Chinese" itself is not a transparent or homogeneous category. Existing research on Chinese HL education has problematised the umbrella term "Chinese", particularly the ways in which Chinese heritage is often equated with Mandarin, despite the diversity of Chinese varieties in diasporic communities (Wu et al. 2014). Such dominant constructions may marginalise individuals from multiracial, non-Mandarin-speaking, or minority ethnic Chinese backgrounds (Pham 2025). While we did not collect systematic data on participants' perceived Chinese proficiency or formal Chinese learning histories, available background information and participants' own accounts indicate varied relationships with Chinese, including different degrees of home language use and formal learning. In this paper, we therefore honour participants' self-identification as Chinese HL speakers, acknowledge their agentive role in constructing their identities, and recognise the heterogeneity within the group.

Ethical considerations were central to this study, particularly given its focus on language and identity as deeply personal and often sensitive aspects of lived experience, and the recognition that participatory research is not inherently "foolproof" in navigating issues of power and voice (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008). This project underwent three separate ethics approval processes through the institutional ethics board: the first concerned the recruitment and involvement of the young co-researchers, who participated voluntarily and were not offered financial inducements, while the second and third, following collaborative planning with the co-researchers, covered the global and local strands of data collection respectively. In the global strand, children and young people provided informed assent through the

online submission process and were asked to confirm parental awareness of their participation, in line with the ethics procedure approved for this strand. As these submissions also formed part of a public exhibition, participants provided additional consent for their work to be displayed and were given the choice of how they wished to be named to ensure proper credit. These chosen names are used in the findings presented in this paper. In the local strand, informed consent was obtained from both young participants and their parents for participation in the interviews. Participants were reassured that they could withdraw at any point or skip any questions they did not wish to answer. Audio recordings were made with permission and were subsequently transcribed and anonymised, with pseudonyms used throughout this paper.

Both the written narratives and interview transcripts were imported into NVivo and analysed thematically to interpret participants' racialised encounters while growing up with Chinese heritage in the UK. The analysis followed an inductive coding process, in which categories and themes were not pre-determined but were drawn from the data (Marshall and Rossman 2014). This involved coding the data line by line and grouping similar codes to form broader categories and themes. Some of the initial codes included "mockery and teasing of HL," "essentialist language stereotyping," "pressure to linguistically assimilate," and "contesting dominant discourses." These codes were then grouped and refined into broader themes, which are discussed in the following section.

5 Findings

5.1 HL as a site of racialised othering and expectations

Racialised experiences form a significant part of many Chinese HL speakers' everyday realities. Experiences of racism, discrimination, and marginalisation – often based on language, culture, and phenotypical features – emerged as salient themes in both the written narratives and focus group discussions. These ranged from overt racism, including name-calling, eye-pulling gestures, and physical assault, to more subtle microaggressions like exclusion and stereotyping. When asked about racism in UK schools, all focus groups reported some form of experience, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, even participants who had not been directly targeted often expressed a sense of anticipated vulnerability, using words like "luckily" or "fortunately" when reflecting on their experiences growing up with Chinese heritage (e.g., "Fortunately, I was never bullied for my Chinese heritage." Justin, age 12). Such reflections suggest an underlying awareness that these experiences are common and could easily have happened to them. Racialised marginalisation, in this sense, becomes

a background condition of their lives, shaping how young people make sense of their language, identity, and belonging. As Elle Chen (aged 13) wrote in her submission:

During my growing up years, I've experienced various forms of racial discrimination in public places, at school, and on social media. [...] At school, I sometimes face mockery and exclusion from classmates just because my skin colour, language, or cultural background is different from theirs. It makes me feel different, and at times, I even question my identity and worth.

While participants' experiences of racism varied, many were closely tied to language, both in how they spoke and how others expected them to speak. Some participants encountered overt mockery of their HL use, particularly among 1.5-generation speakers who tended to speak more Chinese with peers at school. Lily (age 12), for example, recounted how one of her classmates would "pretend to speak what we are speaking," mimicking their Cantonese conversations with exaggerated and distorted sounds. Multiple participants recalled instances where "Ching-Chong" was used to mock them. This reflects Dovchin's (2020) discussion of linguistic racism, where language, accent, dialect, repertoire, and speech can become targets of explicit verbal attacks such as mocks, slurs, and name-calling. In participants' accounts, the slur turned their perceived language background into an object of ridicule. Chun (2016) conceptualises this more specifically as *Mock Asian*, a type of linguistic parody that mimics the speech of East Asians. These utterances, as Chun argues, serve to remind children of perceived East Asian descent of their racial otherness through exaggerated imitations of an imagined Chinese accent. For Lily, this mockery became even more personal, as her surname, Chong, was turned into the object of a racist joke:

I don't really want people to know my last name, because they sometimes just make fun of my last name... they just start calling me "Ching, Chong, Ching, Chong," because my last name is Chong. I don't know why. Why is it so funny?

Participants also described being subject to essentialised assumptions that linked their language abilities with their racial appearance, including the belief that all "Chinese-looking" young people should be fluent in Chinese, and that all Chinese HL speakers should know Mandarin. This reflects both raciolinguistic stereotyping and broader Asian essentialisation. As AsianCrit scholars point out, White supremacy often collapses diverse Asian identities into a singular, homogenised category (Iftikar and Museus 2018). Kubota et al. (2023) similarly describe this process as being "put into a box," where Asian students are forced into predetermined racialised and linguicised identities that disregard their individual histories and lived experiences. This dynamic was evident in several participants' reflections. Ethan (age 13), a Cantonese heritage speaker, described feeling reduced to a collective identity, noting that "some people think Cantonese and Mandarin [are] the same thing." He further explained:

People think I'm the same as everyone else. They assume I speak the same language [...] It makes me feel like they view us as like, instead of like individuals, they view us as a community.

Lucas (age 15) echoed this frustration, explaining that many people assumed he could speak Chinese as fluently as English, even though this was not the case. These expectations, he said, created a disconnect between how others perceived him and how he understood himself:

It just feels like I have this really high expectation of what I should be like, and by not reaching it, it just makes me feel uncomfortable in a way. [...] It's like they're trying to force open my idea of who I am and like... they're trying to define me as the person that they think I am instead of who I actually am.

For participants who were learning Chinese formally in HL schools, such as Lucas, these assumptions also placed unrealistic linguistic expectations on their language learning and often undermined their efforts and achievements. Lucas further reflected that his success in Mandarin GCSE was frequently attributed solely to his ethnicity, with others saying, "Oh, you're Chinese. You should be getting full marks on that," thereby dismissing the effort he had put in. Taken together, these accounts illustrate how HL can function as a site through which racialised assumptions are projected and reinforced. Whether through mockery, stereotyping, or homogenising expectations, participants' HL becomes a visible marker of otherness, commonly misunderstood, ridiculed, or held to unattainable standards.

5.2 Language shift as a racialised process of assimilation

The racialised experiences discussed earlier often led participants to feel a strong pressure or desire to conform and assimilate. Within this context, language shift from HL to English, along with the perceived need to speak "proper" English, can be seen as part of this broader process. This pattern was particularly evident in the written accounts, many of which were organised chronologically and described a gradual decline in HL use (e.g., "My Mandarin began to suffer as my English improved." Jing Lin, age 15). Similar patterns emerged in the focus groups, where participants recalled struggling to learn English during their early schooling, reporting difficulties such as "not being able to pronounce properly" and "being laughed at when answering questions." Over time, many came to internalise the idea that fluency in English was not just essential for communication, but also key to gaining social acceptance. English was widely perceived as the default and only legitimate language in the UK. As Leo (age 12) put it, "We don't need it [Chinese] in this

country. We only need English.” These beliefs were often reinforced by stories and experiences of racial othering. Reflecting on this, Lucas explained:

I have seen cases where people have been discriminated against... I just felt like I should improve it [English] because of the experiences I've been through and the stories heard from my friends who haven't been as lucky in learning English.

Lucas's reflection illustrates not only the perceived need to improve his English to “fit in,” but also a deeper internalisation of raciolinguistic ideologies. His desire to improve his English was framed in relation to experiences of exclusion, particularly those of peers who, in his words, “haven't been as lucky in learning English.” In this logic, racialised speakers come to accept the notion that the “roots of racial inequalities lie in the linguistic deficiencies of racialised communities,” and that “the solution to these racial inequalities is to modify their language practice” (Flores 2020, p. 24). The belief that marginalisation results from not speaking English “well enough” was echoed in several written narratives. Ziheng (age 14), for instance, recalled witnessing his Chinese friend being bullied and concluded, “He was treated this way simply because his English wasn't very good.” These accounts reflect how raciolinguistic ideologies become internalised through schooling, where English-speaking, monolingual white norms are normalised and privileged (Endo 2016). In this context, multilingual young people may come to see linguistic assimilation as a strategy to avoid racial othering, while HL use becomes increasingly devalued. As Ryan (age 12) expressed, “I don't think we need Chinese that much in England.”

For some participants, the perceived need to assimilate went beyond shifting language use. Racialised experiences also led them to conceal aspects of their HL identity in an effort to avoid judgement or discrimination. Mia (age 15), for example, reflected on how recent experiences of racism affected her willingness to share her heritage language and culture. Comparing her current self to her younger self, she recalled how she used to be eager and enthusiastic when classmates asked her to speak Chinese or teach them something. “I would really be, like, energetic, and like, keep teaching them and to actually share my culture to everyone else,” she explained. However, she noted that she no longer responds with the same enthusiasm. Over time, repeated experiences of both subtle and overt racism had made her more cautious about how she presented herself at school, quieting her HL identity in order to blend into dominant norms:

I used to think that I would like, dismiss it [racism] really easily, because I love my Chinese culture. I'd show up to everyone about how I can speak Chinese, and my culture is so much more rich. [...] but when people start making these comments, you're affected a lot more than you think.

Mia further shared an example from her school's cultural day, where she used to proudly bring in various items that represented her Chinese heritage. More recently, however, she chose to bring items that felt "a lot more bland," explaining, "I would be scared that people would judge me for my culture." Despite her continued pride in her heritage, Mia acknowledged the emotional tension underlying this shift: "I know I shouldn't feel that way, but then it just naturally comes." Her reflections illustrate how identity negotiation becomes a survival strategy, with young HL speakers shifting how they express their linguistic and cultural backgrounds not due to shame, but in response to the realities of everyday racialisation.

5.3 Speaking White, remaining a perpetual foreigner

For many second-generation HL speakers, speaking "unmarked" English may lead others to position them within the "model minority" stereotype – an image of assimilation – yet this positioning does not exempt them from the broader racial hierarchies in which they remain embedded. Several participants described feeling "fortunate" to have acquired unaccented English from a young age. However, even those whose English was never questioned still reported receiving "abusive comments" tied to their heritage, highlighting how linguistic assimilation does not protect against racialised othering.

This negotiation of what has been termed the "perpetual foreigner" syndrome (Tuan 1998) was echoed in many narratives. In one focus group, participants shared that they were frequently asked "Where are you from," a question they understood as referring not to nationality, but to their racialised appearance. All reported replying "I'm Chinese," because they knew the expected answer was an East Asian country. While many brushed this off as harmless curiosity, Mia, in a follow-up interview, offered a more personal reflection: "I feel like because Britain has never actually made me feel like my home," despite being born and raised in the UK. A similar feeling emerged in the written narratives, where one participant wrote, "I have always known that I am different from other kids because I am not white." Although this difference was at times a source of pride, it also raised uncertainty and doubt: "sometimes I felt puzzled about my identity and which country I belong to" (Du Xiaolan, age 13).

Here, we see how ideologies of language and race work together to position Chinese HL speakers as perpetual foreigners. Some participants expressed anxieties around race, language, and belonging, which is shaped by dominant raciolinguistic stereotypes that conflate "Asianness" and Asian languages with foreignness (Lo 2016). This anxiety may also lead to self-monitoring and self-censorship in language use. Mia, for example, shared concerns that her English might be perceived as

influenced by her HL, particularly due to tonal features: “My worst fear is to get English and Chinese mixed up in my head.” Although born and raised in the UK, she described frequently monitoring her speech, even though no one had ever commented on it. She worried that even a hint of tonal interference might lead others to question her linguistic competence or Britishness. As she explained:

To me, I feel like, if they look at me and I have an accent, they might think, “Oh, you weren’t born in England. You’re not used to the things here.” And they kind of, um, it’s like they might think that my English grade isn’t good enough. [...] Like they might think that I don’t know how to speak English, or how to speak good English, because of my weird tones and stuff.

Mia also came to recognise that linguistic stigma was never just about language, and at times, not about language at all:

If you are white, and then you do have an accent, people think, “Oh, you were just born in, like, a separate region of England, your grades are still good.” If I have that accent, and then I’m talking, they’re going to make assumptions. Like, “Oh, maybe she was born in China,” or “maybe she came here recently,” things like that.

As Cushing and Carter (2022) observe, while white children speaking non-standardised English are more likely to be heard as legitimate by white teachers, racialised children – even those who adopt standardised English – are often still perceived as deficient. Kubota et al. (2023) draw on the notion of “reverse linguistic stereotyping” to further explain this phenomenon, suggesting that racialised bodies may trigger negative assumptions about linguistic and academic competence, regardless of how “unmarked” their English may sound. In Mia’s case, despite never receiving direct criticism of her English, she engaged in ongoing self-monitoring. Her experience, along with those discussed above, reveals the paradox faced by many racialised HL speakers: the pressure to assimilate linguistically while remaining excluded from full belonging. Even when their HL is hidden and their English conforms to dominant norms, they continue to navigate a racialised terrain that casts them as perpetual foreigners.

5.4 Reclaiming voice and redefining belonging

While earlier sections highlighted how racialised positioning can constrain young people’s identity development and HL use, the findings also reveal how participants resisted the normative discourses that sought to define or limit them. In many narratives, HL emerged as a site of tension – simultaneously a marker of scrutiny and exclusion, and a source of pride and affirmation. These competing discourses shaped how participants constructed their HL identities. Some also explicitly

rejected being “put into boxes,” actively reclaiming how they were seen and heard. In the interview, for example, when asked whether she was content with the identity she had constructed so far, Ellie (age 12) reflected that while language and appearance often made her “stand out in the crowd,” she was not afraid of looking different and would “not change the way I speak.” As she explained:

So-called “normal” means putting yourself into a shell and fitting everyone into the same mould. As for me, I don’t want to place myself in any predefined category. I wouldn’t say I’m Chinese or British. [...] I’m not afraid of not being seen as English, like white, like Europeans, like what traditionally counts as British.

Rather than conforming to racial or national binaries, Ellie challenges the pressure to inhabit fixed identity categories – such as being either “Chinese” or “British” – by asserting a more fluid and self-defined sense of self. Her words also reflect a resistance to the long-standing association of Britishness with Whiteness and European heritage, unsettling the assumption that Englishness must look or sound a certain way. This perspective was echoed by several other participants. Max (age 15), for instance, remarked that “Now Britain, there’s a lot of different ethnicities, [...] London is one of the most culturally diverse places on the planet,” highlighting how Britain’s diversity disrupts exclusionary national imaginaries and tends to reposition multiculturalism/multilingualism as a central, rather than peripheral, feature of Britishness. Jamie (age 15) similarly expressed pride in his multilingualism, describing it as “kind of like a talent, being able to speak more than one language.” Instead of seeking legitimacy through assimilation, these perspectives reclaim the right to belong without conforming. In this sense, HL and multilingualism are redefined not as deficits but as valid and powerful ways of being British on their own terms.

For some participants, HL learning and maintenance may also operate as a buffer against racialised assumptions and a lens through which to cultivate identity competence. Building on earlier reflections about exclusion and pressure to assimilate, Lucas described how it made him feel it was even “more important to learn Chinese.” As he put it, knowing Chinese helped him “not get swayed by what people think of me” and “help stop other people from defining me.” He elaborated that without this foundation in his heritage, he would have found it much harder to confront the racialised comments: “If I didn’t know that much Chinese, then I would, quite frankly, have a hard time dealing with some of the stereotypes people attached to me.” HL, in this context, appeared to offer Lucas a resource for resisting internalised stigma. Rather than accepting racialised stereotypes as reflections of personal inadequacy, he described Chinese as helping him hold onto a stronger sense of self and resist being defined by others. Lucas’s reflections also extended to the role of

community-led HL schools, which he saw as spaces of solidarity, emotional support, and shared understanding:

It makes me feel like more closely attached to a sort of community I have, like, a community of Chinese learners, a community of people who are dealing with the same sort of problems that I am experiencing. And it makes me feel like relieved that I do have support, and I do have people who know what's going on, and I feel like this community could help educate a community who doesn't know any better, who does unknowingly discriminate against people, and I think that is very important to cut down some of these stereotypes and discrimination.

This account illustrates how HL communities can serve as grassroots sites of anti-racist and anti-monolingual advocacy. Echoing previous research on the role of HL schools beyond language instruction (Liu and Hoare 2023), Lucas's narrative indicates how these spaces could support racial literacy, identity affirmation, and collective resistance. Indeed, in the written narratives, several participants described how HL schools created opportunities for public representation and increased visibility within broader society. For instance, some recalled participating in community events organised or facilitated by HL schools, such as the Manchester Parade, where they proudly represented the Chinese community through symbolic displays such as traditional dress and cultural artefacts. Others recounted moments of civic engagement enabled by HL schooling; Kacy Xia (age 15), for example, described being interviewed by BBC Newsround to address rising anti-Chinese racism: "I expressed my feelings and stood up for the Chinese community."

6 Discussion and implications

This study puts forward the untold stories of children and young people with Chinese heritage and explores how they navigate the complex intersections of race, language, and identity in the UK. We argue that racialised experience constitutes a critical yet often overlooked dimension of young Chinese HL speakers' everyday realities. While HL was frequently positioned as a source of pride and cultural affirmation, it also served as a marker of otherness, scrutiny, and exclusion. This dual positioning reflects how young people's relationships with their HL are shaped through racialised processes, where efforts to maintain one's HL are often negotiated within broader pressures to assimilate into monolingual Whiteness. We maintain that children's HL identities, maintenance, and trajectories are deeply entangled with experiences of racism and raciolinguistic ideologies, ones that not only define certain language practices as deficient but also attribute that perceived deficiency to the racialised bodies of their speakers. By bringing together raciolinguistics and AsianCrit, this study advances current HL scholarship by explicitly foregrounding

race in discussions of multilingualism and illustrating how language and racialisation are co-constructed in shaping young HL speakers' sense of self and belonging.

The findings also show that everyday school life matters for HL maintenance and shift. Participants' encounters with mockery, scrutiny, and racialised assumptions in mainstream school environments shaped how they came to value, conceal, distance themselves from, or reclaim their HL. This suggests that HL maintenance cannot be understood only through family language practices, individual motivation, or access to HL education, but also through the school-based raciolinguistic ideologies that make minoritised languages appear embarrassing, deficient, or illegitimate. Cushing and Govender's (2024) call for anti-racist English education is useful here for thinking about how mainstream school contexts might address the raciolinguistic ideologies through which minoritised languages are devalued. Their raciolinguistic perspective shifts attention away from racialised children's purported linguistic deficiencies and towards the institutional norms and modes of perception that produce linguistic hierarchies. Such work may involve school-wide anti-racist language policies, teacher reflection on positionality, and critical pedagogical work with texts that enables students to examine how language, race, and power shape everyday school life.

At the same time, the findings suggest that, for children and young people who had access to HL/community school spaces, these spaces could function as counterspaces where racialised experiences were named, shared, and reinterpreted collectively. We therefore advocate for a more explicit antiracist pedagogical approach within HL education, one that actively works to dismantle raciolinguistic ideologies (Lacorte and Magro 2021). As Shin (2016) argues, HL learners may unintentionally reproduce colonial ideologies such as internalised Whiteness, which risks reinforcing rather than resisting racial hierarchies. Educators thus play a crucial role in helping students critically examine these dynamics, for example by exploring how the model minority myth functions to sustain dominant power structures. One example of antiracist pedagogy, suggested by Jiang (2024), is the use of counter-narratives in HL classrooms as a way to centre student experiences and foster a more inclusive and critically responsive environment. Practices such as autobiographical writing, oral histories, and digital storytelling offer students meaningful opportunities to voice their lived realities, challenge dominant ideologies, and engage creatively with issues of identity. The multilingual and multimodal (counter)-narratives collected and curated as part of the larger project from which this study draws exemplify how such practices can affirm students' lived experiences (online exhibition link anonymised for peer review). Such narratives, expressed through written essays, poetry, drawings, collages, music, and photographs, can serve as pedagogical resources that encourage translanguaging, emotional expression, and

identity exploration. HL educators may invite students to create similar narratives or use selected examples as entry points for critical discussion.

In contexts like the UK, where the responsibility for HL maintenance is largely placed on immigrant communities themselves and carried out through community-led HL schools, we argue that these grassroots spaces must be recognised as critical sites of resistance to systemic racism and as infrastructures for cultural affirmation, racial literacy, and collective solidarity. The Black supplementary school movement, which began in the late 1960s in the UK, offers a compelling example (Gerrard 2013). These autonomous educational spaces were established as a direct response to the racism Black children experienced in mainstream schools, creating environments where Black identity, language, and history could be affirmed and taught. More recently, scholars have emphasised that HL schools do far more than simply “complement” or “supplement” mainstream education (Cruickshank et al. 2023); they make vital contributions to the positive identity development, well-being, and flourishing of minoritised children (Said 2023; Zhou and Liu 2024). As suggested in the findings of this study, HL schools can serve as potential sites of antiracist and anti-monolingual advocacy, where young people gain the social and emotional tools to confront racialised positioning, reclaim public voice, and take pride in their heritage identities.

While this study recognises the agentic voices of children and young people and the transformative potential of community-led HL schools, it is important to caution against placing the burden for change on minoritised individuals and their communities. Celebrating agency and grassroots efforts must not obscure the structural conditions that make such efforts necessary in the first place. As Flores and Rosa (2019) warn, we must resist approaches that “place the onus on racialised people to undo their own oppression while presupposing that their efforts to inhabit new identity positions will be recognised as such by the listener” (p. 146). The insights offered here should not be read as solutions to structural inequalities, but rather as an entry point for interrogating the broader institutional and ideological systems that sustain raciolinguistic injustice. By documenting the narratives of racialised children and young people, and tracing how they navigate, negotiate, and speak back to these structures, this study takes a small but crucial step toward doing justice to their lived realities and informing further critical work aimed at reshaping the conditions in which HL maintenance takes place.

7 Conclusions

In this paper, we draw on raciolinguistics and AsianCrit to foreground the “visible but unseen” experiences of Chinese HL speakers in the UK. By centring their

accounts, the study shows how racialisation shapes young people's relationships with Chinese in ways that are not always foregrounded in dominant accounts of HL scholarship. Participants described being racialised through language-based mockery, essentialist expectations, and assimilationist pressures. We explore how HL identity construction is entangled with processes of racialisation: how it becomes a site of scrutiny and negotiation, yet also one of resistance and voice. In doing so, we hope to challenge the tendency to treat HL development as apolitical or culture-bound, and call for a more critical, anti-racist approach to HL education and research, grounded in a deeper understanding of how racism shapes young people's relationship with their HL and in a commitment to confronting these structures through transformative pedagogies and practice.

The co-production of this study with young co-researchers was not simply a methodological choice but a political and ethical commitment to centring the voices of those most affected by raciolinguistic injustice. As highlighted earlier, it was these young co-researchers who framed the call for narrative submissions, raised issues of race and racism when crafting interview questions, and helped steer the direction of the inquiry (see Little et al. 2026). As Cushing (2024) contends, transformative justice in applied linguistics requires solidarity and collaboration with communities in ways that prioritise their needs and affirm their epistemic authority. At its core, this study affirms the value of listening closely and responsively to the stories of children and young people whose experiences have too often been marginalised, and it recognises these stories as forms of knowledge that can inform more just futures.

While rooted in the UK context, the theoretical and methodological insights developed here have broader relevance for understanding how raciolinguistic ideologies shape HL identities across diverse migration contexts. By rethinking HL identities and trajectories as a racialised process, and by demonstrating how young people can meaningfully co-produce knowledge about their multilingual lives, this study contributes to a growing global reimagining of multilingual education as a critical site for youth agency and raciolinguistic justice.

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