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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

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"A Total Warp"? Negotiating teacher authority in a Chinese heritage language classroom

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of a novice teacher in a Chinese heritage language classroom who reexamines and reconceptualizes her understanding of teacher authority as her pedagogical practices are met with resistance from students. It highlights how differing expectations between teachers and students shape classroom interactions, teaching practices, and learning opportunities. Through a collaborative action research model, this study makes visible the process of negotiating teacher authority in a heritage language class and the pedagogical adjustments that followed. The findings not only underscore the importance of teacher reflexivity in supporting professional development but also contribute to our understanding of how teacher-student relationships can be negotiated and developed in heritage language classroom contexts.

Keywords teacher authority, Chinese heritage language teacher, practitioner action research, cross-culture teaching, teacher-student relationship

1. Introduction

> *I came back from my first class exhausted. My students talked freely, ran around the classroom, and kept playing paper airplane or drawing pencil moustaches on each other. They ignored my direction and refused to participate in the activities, telling me, "This is weird," "you're not supposed to do it that way," or simply "I don't want to do it." It disrupted the flow of my teaching. The class was completely out of control, and I felt challenged. Why didn't they show any respect for me as the teacher?* (Teacher reflection)

Chinese heritage language (CHL) schools have great potential to provide a resourceful space for exposing learners to the Chinese language and culture, thus supporting their bilingual and bicultural development (Paradis, 2023; Yang, 2024). However, to realize this potential, CHL teachers need to address cultural clashes between teachers and students and implement strategies to make learning in CHL classrooms more engaging and enjoyable for students (Smith & Li, 2022). Studies on CHL education abound with descriptions about negative learning experiences (Chiang, 2000; Curdt-Christiansen, 2006; Duff et al., 2017; He, 2004b; Jia, 2006; Li, 2011; Li & Pu, 2010; Mizuta, 2017), often citing mismatched expectations between teachers and CHL learners regarding their roles and behaviors. CHL learners commonly describe their Chinese teachers to be serious, strict, and boring, and Chinese teachers generally feel that Chinese American children lack the respect for teacher authority typically observed in students in China (Jia, 2006; Li & Pu, 2010). Educated within a Confucian value system, teachers from China often view "honoring the teacher and respecting [his/her] teaching" (尊师重道) as a core virtue integral to all educational pursuits. Consequently, teacher authority is frequently assumed to be an inherent aspect of the position (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). However, most CHL learners are "experientially displaced" from Chinese culture (He, 2004a, p. 575), and it is understandable that they may not share the same cultural values as their teachers. This disparity is further compounded by the fact that CHL teachers are often volunteers from local Chinese communities, many of whom lack formal teacher education training in the United States (He, 2004a; Smith & Li, 2022). Moreover, CHL teachers often report that their students do not take CHL classrooms seriously or see them as legitimate teachers (Chiang, 2000; Jia, 2006; Li & Pu, 2010; Mizuta, 2017) due to the lack of formal institutional recognition for the heritage language schools within the broader educational system (Lee & Wright, 2014). Thus, cultural tensions inevitably emerge in CHL classrooms.

This study was undertaken as a collaborative action research project by the practitioner-researcher (first author, Wang) in partnership with another researcher (second author, Lee) whose scholarship focuses on heritage language education. After the first few classes

teaching at a Chinese School, Wang sought Lee's guidance to address the challenges she was encountering in the CHL class, such as a lack of teacher authority and resistance from students. Jointly, the two authors decided that an action research study would be an effective approach to uncover the underlying causes of these challenges and explore potential solutions. The questions to be addressed are: (1) How is teacher authority constructed and maintained in the CHL class? and (2) What effect does the construction of teacher authority have on shaping learning opportunities for students?

2. Teacher Authority in CHL Classrooms

The events in the first few classes taught by Wang revealed a mismatch in expectations between her and the students in the CHL classroom regarding the roles and behaviors of class members. This raised a critical question: Should heritage language education programs impose cultural norms from the homeland, or should they adapt to the norms that U.S.-raised students are socialized into? In the U.S. educational culture, which values egalitarianism, questioning, challenging ideas, and expressing individual voices are commonly encouraged (Pace & Hemmings, 2007). However, studies have shown that teachers trained in China often perceive such behaviors as forms of disrespect and non-conformity (Hu, 2002; Zhang & Liu, 2013). Similarly, Wang interpreted her students' resistance to planned activities and their unruly behavior as direct challenges to her teacher authority. Having been educated and trained in China, Wang expected her authority as a teacher to be inherently recognized and respected. When this expectation was not met, it prompted her to reflect on the questions such as: "What is teacher authority?", "Why is it important?", and "How can it be constructed?"

Pace and Hemmings (2007) argue that teacher authority should not be taken for granted but rather understood as a "social construction that is built, taken apart, and rebuilt by teachers and students" (p. 21). The process of constructing teacher authority is further complicated by such factors as race, gender, cultural differences and linguistic power (Brown et al., 2009; Creese et al., 2014). For instance, a teacher's authority can be compromised or nullified due to various factors such as the heritage language teachers' English proficiency (Creese et al., 2014), their teaching styles (Chiang, 2000; Curdt-Christiansen, 2006; Jia, 2006, 2009; Li & Pu, 2010; Mizuta, 2017) and the subject matter they teach (Li, 2011; Li & Zhu, 2014; Mizuta, 2017). Metz's (1978) ethnographic work revealed that students do not passively accept teacher authority; instead, they test and challenge it in various ways, particularly when they perceive their teachers as lacking expertise. Similarly, Wills (2006) found that teacher authority is shaped by daily interactions with students. When students feel their questions, comments, and opinions are valued, and when classroom communication is dialogic, they are more likely to support their teacher's authority. However, this trust can be undermined by pedagogical designs that are either unauthentic or overly teacher centered. In other words, authority is neither a possession that teachers inherently own nor a fixed state once established (Waller, 1932). Teachers need to continually employ various strategies such as embracing opposing perspectives and encouraging participation to negotiate and co-construct authority with their students (Brubaker, 2012; Kim, 2022; Pace, 2003). In this sense, teacher authority is an "interactional accomplishment" constructed between the teacher and the students (Wills, 2006), and understanding teacher authority is essential for gaining insights into how classrooms function (Macleod et al., 2012). In this paper, we understand authority as a multidimensional sociocultural construct that is vital for guiding a group towards a shared learning goal (Macleod et al., 2012; Metz, 1978; Pace & Hemmings, 2006). Accordingly, we aim to explore how teacher authority can be constructed in a heritage language classroom and examine the ways in which the negotiated constructions of teacher authority influence students' learning experiences.

3. Methods

3.1. Practitioner Researcher

Wang is from Northern China. She was a second-year doctoral student in Education and in her late 20s at the time of the study. Wang held a teaching certificate in Teaching English as a Foreign Language from China and had some experience teaching beginner-level English to adults. However, this was her first time teaching young children in a heritage language classroom in the United States. Knowing Wang's interest in second language education, Lee introduced her to the local CHL school. Wang volunteered her services and was invited to teach a beginning-level class. No training, orientation, or curriculum was provided. The class was simply handed over to her with the general instruction to help young students develop their oral and literacy skills in Mandarin Chinese.

3.2. Action Research

Given the challenges Wang faced in class and her willingness to better understand her teaching practices, her students, and the teaching context, she decided to engage in action research. Action research enables teachers to understand teaching as a reflexive practice through which they can make better and informed decisions about teaching (Corey, 1953; Elliott, 1976-77; Farrell, 2007; Fischer, 2000; Matthews & Jessel, 1998; Zeichner, 2001), transform practices and promote educational change (Carr & Kemmis, 2004; Elliott, 1991; Kemmis et al., 2013). Dewey (1933) defines reflexive practice as an action that involves active, thoughtful, and careful evaluation of beliefs or knowledge based on their supporting evidence and potential consequences. Schön (1983) further distinguishes between reflection-in-action, the reflexivity that occurs while in the moment of teaching, and reflection-on-action, the retrospective analysis of teaching performance to derive knowledge from experience. This study incorporates both reflection-in-

action and reflection-on-action. Through self-reflection, teachers can gain insights into their own intentions and motives, as well as a deeper understanding of their students and the school environment. However, there is also the risk that the teacher's analysis of his/her own classes might be biased or distorted (Hammersley, 1993). The partnership between Wang and Lee enabled cross-checks in the analytic and interpretative process, helping to minimize the potential bias that may stem from Wang's dual positionalities as the teacher and the researcher. The strength of this collaboration lay in the critical and collaborative discussions during data collection and analysis, where the integration of emic and etic perspectives allowed the researchers to explore a broader range of interpretations.

Through reflection and regular discussions with Lee, Wang gained a deeper understanding of students' learning styles in the United States. She realized that her difficulty in asserting teacher authority was likely a result of her reliance on a memorization-oriented and drill-based teaching approach, which students described as "very boring." Therefore, as we began the present study, Wang decided to replace word and sentence drills with games and activities she considered age-appropriate, aiming to better engage students' interests. For each class, she designed a game or activity related to the day's theme to review vocabulary or practice sentence patterns, such as the Pinyin and Character Bingo games shown in Table 2. The hope was to observe an improvement in the teacher-student authority dynamic through this pedagogical adjustment.

However, despite adjusting the classroom activities, students' resistance continued to grow. As the quarter progressed, Wang realized that changing teaching practices alone could not solve her authority" struggles. Wang's conceptualization of teacher authority also mattered. Through this action research, we aimed to trace how Wang's understanding of teacher authority evolved and to figure out how teacher authority can be constructed in class in a way that not only enables the teacher to maintain a functional classroom but also actively engages students in learning.

3.3. The Classroom and Students

The class was a part of a small CHL school in central California nested in a suburban city with a small Chinese population. It was a community program established, managed, and funded by local Chinese parents. The parents paid a nominal fee for tuition and donated snacks and materials for the children. There were about thirty students and eight teachers at this school. Classes were held on Sunday afternoons in a local community church. The teachers were volunteers from community groups ranging from students' parents, graduate students from the nearby university, and local Chinese immigrants. Most of the teachers at this school did not have a teaching credential nor were they provided with any professional development opportunities to prepare them for their teaching role.

This program consisted of language and cultural classes in Mandarin Chinese for mainly ethnic Chinese students. Classes were held once a week for three hours; two hours for language instruction and one hour for cultural activities such as folk dance and Chinese chess. The students were placed in the language class by their self-reported Chinese proficiency levels. The program followed a three-quarter academic calendar with each quarter running between eight to ten weeks. There were no formal assessments, grades or credits given in any of the classes.

The data for this study come from a beginning-level Chinese language class. The students were all Chinese Americans born in the United States. Using the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2012), the students' speaking abilities in Chinese were rated by their parents and confirmed by Wang as listed in Table 1 for the purposes of the research project.

Table 1. Participants' Linguistic Backgrounds

Participants (Pseudonyms/gender)	Age	Dominant Language	Chinese Proficiency
Jack (M)	9	English	Novice
Clara (F)	5	English	Novice
Yun (M)	5	Chinese	Intermediate
Amy (F)	6	English	Novice
Emma (F)	5	Chinese	Intermediate
Charlotte (F)	6	English	Novice
Wang (F) (teacher-researcher)	28	Chinese	Native language

Among all the students, only Yun and Emma reported speaking primarily Chinese at home and had the strongest proficiency in Chinese among the students. Yun had just started to learn English at school when the study was conducted. Emma also acquired English at school, and she was the only student who often code-switched between Chinese and English in class. Jack and Clara, siblings, were raised speaking English because their parents feared poor English proficiency might hinder their education. Amy, cared for by a Spanish-speaking nanny due to her parents' busy schedules, quickly learned Spanish but never fully developed her Chinese. Charlotte, who spoke only Chinese at home before attending an English-only preschool, soon forgot Chinese, leaving her unable to communicate with her grandparents in China.

3.4. Data Collection

During data collection, Wang was the sole instructor and collector of the data, while Lee supported the research design and contributed to the joint analysis and interpretation. With consent from the principal and parents, Wang video-recorded every class for three consecutive quarters, resulting in 16 recordings totaling 32 hours for analysis. After each class, she kept a reflective journal on her teaching and classroom events and held monthly discussions with Lee to review lesson plans, address pedagogical challenges, and discuss data collection issues. Wang also collected student work to track how her teaching adjustments influenced student learning. However, the systematic analysis of the data did not take place until the end of the school year, when Wang and Lee were able to compile and organize the full data set.

3.5. Data Analysis

Guided by Wang's reflection notes, the video recordings were sourced by the authors to identify interactions where students displayed resistance to instruction, that is, where Wang was not able to gain students' voluntary compliance to the instructional design (Weber, 1947). The identified moments of authority struggles became telling cases and rich points (Agar, 1994; Green et al., 2012) to analyze what authority means and looks like in the classroom. These episodes were transcribed and translated based on the transcription convention adapted from Bloome et al. (2004). Each line in the transcription represents a turn taken by the teacher or the student. Gestures, facial expressions and other contextualization cues such as pauses, stress and intonation, speed of delivery, stylistic and volume changes were also noted in the transcripts to fully capture the teacher-student meaning making process (Bloome et al., 2004; Gumperz, 1992). Discourse analysis was employed to examine the situated meaning of teacher-student interactions and to uncover how authority was negotiated (Gee & Green, 1998).

4. Wang's Journey of Constructing Teacher Authority

This section presents the results and discussion, using telling cases to illustrate Wang's evolving understanding and construction of teacher authority. Wang's journey is divided into three interconnected phases: 1) stepping away from teacher-centered thinking, 2) accepting students' constructive resistance, and 3) involving students in co-constructing knowledge. As this study traces the journey of a novice teacher reconceptualizing and rebuilding authority, each phase is presented from Wang's first-person perspective to highlight her experiences and growth as a teacher in the CHL context.

4.1. Stepping away from Teacher-centered Thinking

As I mentioned earlier, my initial understanding of teacher authority was teacher-centered, rooted in a traditional perspective that I had practiced in my classrooms in China. I expected students to follow my instructions simply because of my role as their teacher. However, I soon realized that imposing my ideas and enforcing my rules on students did not build my authority but undermined it, as demonstrated in the following two telling cases.

To support Chinese character recognition and vocabulary development, I designed two "Bingo" activities inspired by the traditional Bingo game. The goal was to make the learning activity engaging while adapting the rules to align with the learning objectives. The rules for the Pinyin "Bingo" and character "Bingo" are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Rules of the Two "Bingo" Games

Game/Time	Learning Objectives	Materials	Rules
Pinyin Bingo	Recognize Pinyin	Bingo cards; Flash cards of animals	◆Each pair of students are provided with one bingo card with 25 Pinyins of animals in a 5*5 table; ◆Every pair gets the same Bingo card; ◆Students need to recognize the Pinyin of animals on the bingo card first and then find the picture of the animal accordingly in a pile of flash cards; ◆The first pair who finds the animal cards in a vertical, horizontal, or diagonal line wins.
Chinese Character Bingo (five months after the Pinyin Bingo)	Review Chinese characters and the sentential context of using these words	Bingo cards	◆Each student is distributed a bingo card with 25 Chinese words in a 5*5 table; ◆The card given to each student is the same; ◆The teacher randomly reads these Chinese words. The student who first finds the word needs to shout out "我找到了" (I found it) and use it in a sentence. Then he or she could mark that spot; ◆The person who marks five spots in a vertical, horizontal, or diagonal order wins.

The Pinyin[1] "Bingo" is different from the original Bingo in the way that students all had identical Bingo cards, and the Pinyin words were not read out loud. Similarly, in the Character "Bingo", students were provided with the same "Bingo" cards and there were added rules requiring students to shout out "我找到了" (I found it) and create a sentence using the word. While I believed the rules were similar enough to justify calling the two activities Bingo, the modifications led to authority struggles during classroom interactions, as illustrated in the following example.

[1] Pinyin is the Romanization system for Mandarin Chinese, representing the pronunciation of Chinese characters.

Excerpt 1. Introducing Rules of the Pinyin "Bingo"

Line	Speaker	Utterance	Contextualization cues
1	Wang	我们做一个游戏好不好? (Let's play a game! OK?)	W turned around to get materials. Jack went to the bathroom.
2	Charlotte	OK.	Low voice
3	Wang	*Bingo*	Saying "Bingo" playfully
4-8[2]	*Lines 4 to 8 are omitted. Clara and Yun were saying that they don't like Bingo.*		
9	Wang	你们可以看到，老师给你们拿了很多漂亮的卡片哦。(You can see that I brought many pretty cards.)	W took out flash cards with animals on them.
10	Charlotte	**Is it a different bingo?**	W and charlotte were looking at each other.
11	Wang	我也不知道和你们玩的 bingo 一不一样哦，|| 就是老师这里有很多的卡片，这里呢，有很多拼音。比如这里有蝴蝶，你们就在卡片里找到蝴蝶。找到一行或者一列的动物，就赢了。|| 老师给那个小组的小朋友们一个球好不好? (I don't know if it is different from what you play. Here I have many cards, and on the bingo card, there is Pinyin. For example, if on the bingo card you see there is húdié, butterfly, then you need to find the butterfly card. When you find all the animals in a horizontal, vertical line, you win. I will give the winners a ball. OK?)	W was showing the flash cards and the bingo cards to explain the rules, and the students were looking at W.
12	Ss	好。(OK.)	Low voice
13	Charlotte	**I wasn't sure XXXX**.	Jack walked into the classroom.
14	Wang	哦，就是你们老师有很多的动物，给你们看。(OK, it's just there are many animals. I'll show you.)	W was showing a flash card.
15	Jack	**Is this thing Bingo? ↑**	W did not respond to his question.
16-22	*Lines 16 to 22 are omitted. W was repeating the rule, agreed that students could do diagonal, but not zigzag, and then she assigned students into groups.*		
23	Wang	I will put all the cards here, everywhere.	W put the cards on the table.
24	Jack	**And we have to find the animals that you say? ↑ And put a check mark on it after you find it? ↑**	W was distributing Bingo cards to each group. Jack was looking at the Bingo card.
25	Wang	Yes.	W kept distributing cards.
26	Charlotte	蝴蝶。 (butterfly.)	All the Ss started to work on the task.
27	Emma	没有一个我们有。(We don't have any of the flash cards.)	Emma and Amy were checking on the Pinyin on the "Bingo" card and pairing them with the flash cards.
28	Wang	有啊，告诉老师你想找哪一个。(You do. Tell me which one you want to find.)	W walked to Emma but stopped when Jack spoke.
29	Jack	**Wait, aren't you supposed to say it and we'll try to find it? ↑**	Jack was looking at his Bingo card.
30	Wang	You can || choose according to this. You need to recognize the Pinyin first. ||| You can also see this side. It has Pinyin on this side.	W was pointing to Jack's Bingo card. Then showing the backside of the flash card to students.
31	Amy	Try to find as many. || 蝴蝶。 (butterfly.)	Amy was talking to herself while saying "butterfly" and went to the pile of the flash cards.
32	Clara	XXXX 知道怎么玩。(XXXX know how to play.)	XXXX sounds like 我(I know) or 不(I don't know). It was hard to tell whether she is saying "I know" or "I don't know" how to play.
33	Jack	**This is really not the way how to play bingo. OK, then let's just play it anyway.**	Soft voice. Jack was blocked by the teacher in the video.

I expected the students to recognize that the rules of Pinyin Bingo were different from the traditional version of Bingo. However, I did not anticipate this to be an issue, as I assumed that if the game were interesting, students would be willing to participate. Unfortunately, adapting the Bingo rules and arbitrarily naming the activity "Bingo" without providing an explanation led to confusion, as seen in Lines 10 and 15, when Charlotte and Jack noticed the discrepancies. Jack struggled to clarify his understanding of the new rules in Lines 24 and 29 and eventually

[2] For the sake of space, some lines in the transcripts that were not essential to the main focus of the episodes have been omitted. However, brief explanations of what happened in those lines are provided.

questioned the authenticity of the activity in Line 33, stating, “This is really not the way to play Bingo.” Despite this, students proceeded to participate in the activity, which led me to overlook the impact of not explaining the rationale behind the new rules on their perception of my teacher authority and expertise. This realization only became clear five months later when I introduced another Bingo-based activity, Chinese character “Bingo.”

Excerpt 2. Introducing Rules of the Chinese Character “Bingo”

Line	Speaker	Utterance	Contextualization cues
1	Wang	Now let’s play a Bingo game!	Increased volume to attract attention Taking out the Bingo cards
2	Ss	Yeah	Low volume
3	Jack	**It usually turns out to be a total warp**.	Stressing “total” and spoke very slowly while saying “total” The teacher did not respond to his comments.
4-14	*Lines 4 to 14 are omitted. W regulated the classroom order.*		
15	Wang	I have some numbers here. I will draw a number and read the word in that spot. When you hear it, when you hear it...|| **I have my rules**, OK? ↑||| When you hear it...|| first shout out “我找到了” (I found it) and make a sentence with this word.	Holding the bingo cards Students were not paying attention. Rising tone; Stressing “my rules” Stressing “我找到了” (I found it) Pointing to the Bingo card when saying “我找到了” (I found it).
16	Jack	**Why? Then that’s not bingo.**	Stressing “why” He was drawing something on a piece of paper and did not show interest in the game.
17	Wang	**That is the updated version of bingo**.	Stressing “updated” and spoke slowly when pronouncing “updated”
18	Jack	**No idea.**	Low voice, murmuring Jack kept drawing.

In this version of “Bingo,” when I introduced the activity in Line 1, Excerpt 2, Jack immediately commented, “It usually turns out to be a total warp.” The word “usually” referenced previous games, which, in Jack’s view, were neither authentic nor well-designed. The students’ lack of enthusiasm in Line 2, following my proposal of “Let’s play a Bingo game,” further supported Jack’s critique. Despite Jack’s challenge, I proceeded to explain the rules, emphasizing in Line 15 that “I have my rules” to move the activity forward. However, Jack refused to acknowledge this “warped” version of Bingo as legitimate, continuing to question the rules in Lines 16 and 18 while showing no interest in participating. His stance was very firm and implied that he knew how to play Bingo, but I did not. When this tension arose, I insisted that it was an updated version of Bingo in Line 17 and students should play it. However, rather than encourage participation, my top-down enforcement of “my rules” impeded the implementation of the activity.

At the time, I did not understand why this was happening; I only felt that these students were challenging my authority. It wasn’t until Lee and I discussed this instance that I connected it to what had occurred five months earlier during the initial Pinyin “Bingo” game. Upon reflection, I recognized that, although I was aware my students and I brought different cultural perspectives and expectations of teacher authority to the classroom (Macleod et al., 2012), it was difficult for me to translate this awareness into practice. I struggled to move away from the teacher-centered thinking deeply ingrained in my own cultural socialization as a teacher. In both episodes, I relied too heavily on what I assumed to be the traditional conception of authority, rooted in being an adult, a native speaker of Chinese, and a teacher (Weber, 1947). I expected students to follow my directions unquestioningly and to accept my motivations and knowledge without challenge. I conflated being authoritarian with having authority, which ultimately undermined my intention to gain students’ voluntary compliance and actively engage them in learning. It was through students’ resistance that I realized the need to step away from my teacher-centered mindset.

Through deeper refection and discussions with Lee, I came to realize that the tensions arising from the “Bingo” activities were likely not isolated instances. The lack of institutional legitimacy of a parent-run community Chinese school, coupled with my teaching methods differing from those of their regular schoolteachers, may have contributed to the students’ resistance to placing their confidence in me as their teacher. Additionally, my modifications to the “Bingo” rules appeared to raise doubts among the students about whether I truly understood how to play the game. This, in turn, further diminished their confidence in my competence as a teacher capable of designing effective classroom activities. These two “Bingo” activities revealed that I had not gained the trust and consent from my students yet.

4.2. Accepting Constructive Resistance

The second “Bingo” activity marked a pivotal moment of realization for me. I began not only to recognize the negative effects of my teacher-centered ways of thinking, but also to understand the negotiable nature of teacher authority. Students’ resistance was sometimes not

intended to be disruptive but could serve as a starting point to refine a classroom activity. However, when I clung to my teacher-centered mindset, I failed to recognize the constructive potential of their resistance and missed the chance to turn it into a learning opportunity as shown in Excerpt 3.

Excerpt 3. Clarifying Rules in the Chinese Character "Bingo"

Line	Speaker	Utterance	Contextualization cues
1	Charlotte	**I have the same one** XXXX, in the same order.	Very low and soft voice
2	Wang	Yeah.	Looking at Charlotte
3	Jack	**I think all of ours are in the same order.**	Increased volume; stressing "all" All other students started to look at each other's bingo cards.
4	Wang	Yeah, I think || I think you all…yeah	Low volume W did not finish her sentence.
5	Clara	**Then we all got the answer.**	
6	Wang	**It all depends on your speed, OK?** ↑	Stressing "speed" Looking at Jack and Charlotte
7	Amy	So you just have to say it first? ↑	W did not respond.
8	Clara	**What if someone says it at the same ti+me as another person?**	Stressing "time;" Elongated the vowel in "ti+me" Looking at and talking to W
9	Charlotte	Then *they won*	Talking playfully
10	Clara	*Then they do paper-rock-scissors? *	Talking playfully

Before the game began, Charlotte and Jack noticed that each "Bingo" card was identical, as seen in Lines 1 and 3. Charlotte quietly mentioned that her card was the same, possibly because she was confused by the activity materials; however, I did not perceive this as an issue that needed immediate attention. Jack's higher-pitched reaction in Line 3 further indicated his surprise at having identical Bingo cards. Drawing on their understanding of the original rules of Bingo, they argued that there could be no winner if everyone had the same card. Amy then attempted to clarify the newly introduced rule in Line 7, but she appeared uncertain herself. Clara also expressed confusion, asking, "What if someone says it at the same time as another person?" This led the students to spend additional time discussing whether the winner should be determined by speed or by playing paper-rock-scissors.

In hindsight, the fact that the students identified a problem with the activity and engaged in a discussion to resolve it was a rich but missed opportunity for student-centered learning to happen. When I began to embrace students' constructive resistance and make pedagogical adjustment in response, it marked the turning point where students became more willing to participate in the activity, as shown in Expert 4.

Excerpt 4. Negotiation of Rules of the Chinese Character "Bingo"

Line	Speaker	Utterance	Contextualization cues
1	Wang	OK, the first one shouting out the sentence can mark the word. OK? ↑ Let's try.	Stressing "try"
2	Clara & Emma	**I don't want to play it. I'm not playing it.**	Low voice
3	Amy	I am, even though **I don't want to**.	Lowering her head
4	Charlotte	**I don't like competition**.	Shaking her head
5	Wang	OK, how about this? ↑ We do not do it like a competition. You just find the word and mark it.	
6	Clara	Well, it is like…|| it's not…|| Well…||Someone still has to say it first? ↑	Pausing a lot
7	Wang	No, you just mark it.	Speaking to the whole class
8	Clara	**It is not a winning game.**	
9	Wang	It is not. It is just we do the practice and review the words. OK? ↑	Speaking to the whole class
10	Clara	**Just a way to learn**	Stressing "way"
11	Wang	Yes, a way to learn.	Stressing "learn," nodding
12-18		*Lines 12 to 18 are omitted. T and Ss all agreed that they did not need to shout out the words.*	
19	Charlotte	**We changed the game || a lot**.	Charlotte spoke with increased volume to Jack who went to the bathroom. The teacher went to Jack to explain the new rules.

After being instructed that they still had to shout out the sentence, in Lines 2-4, almost all the students expressed their disinterest, "I don't want to play it." Their active resistance prompted me, in Line 5, to soften my stance and revise the rules after recognizing the issues inherent in the design of the activity. I decided to remove

certain rules such as shouting out “我找到了” (I found it) and creating sentences with the word. In addition, in Line 9, I explained that there was no winner because the purpose of the activity was not about winning but about reviewing the words we had learned. Clara immediately understood the rationale behind this activity and responded, “just a way to learn” in Line 10, signaling her willingness to engage. In Line 19, Charlotte told Jack who had returned from the restroom that “we changed the game a lot” to invite Jack to participate in the revised game that made more sense to the group. Notably, Charlotte used “we” instead of “the teacher” to describe the changes, emphasizing that the new rules were agreed upon by the members in the class. This was the moment when I realized the transformative potential of shifting from a teacher-centered approach to a co-constructed model of teaching and learning.

The revised Character “Bingo” game was successfully played in class. Charlotte, Amy and Emma excitedly told each other, “找着了” (I got it) or “I got it” when they found a word. Amy waved her pencil and asked for more words to identify, showing her eagerness to continue the game. Students were also actively counting the words they needed to complete a Bingo, chanting phrases like, “I need one. I need one.” These were positive indicators that they had taken ownership of the activity and were engaged in the learning process.

Upon reviewing this teaching episode and discussing it with Lee, I realized that the source of my frustration was not my students’ reactions to the activity but my own rigid expectation of teacher authority as a static, non-negotiable construct. My students’ resistance was not an act of defiance intended to undermine my authority as a teacher but rather an expression of their agency to become active learners rather than passive students. This, in fact, is what teachers should strive to foster in class. Students’ resistance was constructive (Shor, 1996) and the negotiation process provided me with the opportunity to co-create reasonable game rules with my students for practicing Chinese characters. This experience allowed me to recognize the value of embracing flexibility and shared authority in the classroom to enhance students’ learning experiences.

After the Character “Bingo” episode, I continued to adapt my pedagogical approach by creating opportunities for students to contribute suggestions for classroom activities. As I became more open to students’ questions, critiques and resistance, their voluntary participation in activities increased. Over time, I sensed a growing trust in my teaching competence, as demonstrated in the following activity that was implemented two months after the Character “Bingo” activity.

Excerpt 5. Introducing Rules of Pinyin Reviewing Activity

Line	Speaker	Utterance	Contextualization cues
1	Wang	OK, let's do an activity. It's called "to look for your friend", "look for your friend"↑, and each of you can randomly, randomly have two or three cards, I guess.	Jack, Yun and Clara were walking around after they finished the task of writing characters on the board. Charlotte and Amy were sitting at their spot, listening.
2	Clara	**I don't want to play this game.**	Clara kept walking around.
3	Jack	What do you mean?	Jack went to W, standing in front of her. Yun went back to seat and ran away again.
4	Wang	T: Umm, you need to, you need to find the cards in other students' hands, so you can put them together to form a word.	W pointed to students at the table while saying "other students’ hands". Yun was making noise.
5	Amy	**Oh, this's gonna be cool.**	Stress "cool." Amy stretched her arms while saying "cool."
6	Jack	So if someone has his own, they can't put them together, because... |||	Jack paused and did not finish his sentence.
7	Wang	They cannot. Yes. But if you do this...Yeah, I mean, you can find your friends anyway. How about three then? OK, Jack, randomly, randomly.	W modeled how to make two pairs by collaborating with friends, if they have one right pair on his/her own. W was Looking at Jack while saying “three.” Jack nodded, and others did not disagree. W started to distribute the Pinyin cards.
8	Jack	**Qng, Qng...||| I have a Qng? ↑ Is that a word? ↑ Is this a word? ↑**	Jack started immediately to try to combine the Pinyin cards he had and pronounced them. He was smiling and waving the cards while he asked W if he had formed a Chinese word correctly. Other students were at their spots, working on this activity. W went to Clara who was walking around to explain the rules.

The goal of the activity in Excerpt 5 was for students to review how to pair onsets and rimes to pronounce Pinyin, which they had learned at the beginning of the quarter. I introduced the rules in Line 1, explaining that students needed to pair their own cards of Pinyin, whether they were onsets or rimes, with those of their classmates’ to form the correct pronunciation of a Chinese character. In Line 2, Clara expressed reluctance, saying she didn’t want to play, but Jack’s clarifying questions prompted me to reconsider the procedures and provided other students an opportunity to reflect on the activity. As I demonstrated openness to their input by answering questions and elaborating on the explanation, Amy responded positively, calling the game “cool” in Line 5, and Jack became eager to

try out the game as soon as he received his cards.

The development of my teaching skills and the growth of my students' trust in my teaching were closely interconnected and part of an ongoing process. The cyclical process of accepting constructive resistance, reflecting, making changes, and reflecting again allowed me to refine my pedagogical approach over time and enabled my students to recognize how my pedagogical design could support their interests and learning goals, which to me was a signal that my teacher authority was gradually established. Through this journey, I came to understand that teacher authority is relational in nature. I discovered that students' resistance could serve as a valuable resource, providing insights into what was not working and suggesting potential directions for improvement (Brubaker, 2015; Lee & Bang, 2011). With this understanding, I continued to incorporate students' suggestions to co-construct the rules of classroom activities. This approach not only contributed to achieving the overall learning objectives but also aligned with students' cultural expectations, fostering a more collaborative and effective learning environment.

4.3. Involving Students to Co-construct Knowledge

Initially, I believed professional teacher authority came naturally to those with subject-matter expertise (Blau, 1974; Oyler, 1996). As a native Chinese speaker, I assumed my linguistic and cultural background was enough to establish authority as a CHL teacher. However, I overlooked how teacher authority is influenced by the broader social and political context (Bizzell, 1991; Pace & Hemmings, 2006). For CHL students, Chinese holds comparatively less value than English within the sociolinguistic context of the United States. (He, 2008). Young students often lack a strong connection to their heritage language or an understanding of its importance (Li, 2024; Little, 2020). Consequently, they do not prioritize learning Chinese, as shown in Excerpt 6. In this context, my teacher authority was not legitimized by the perceived value of the subject (Bizzell, 1991).

Excerpt 6. Discussion of the Importance of Writing Character

Line	Speaker	Utterance	Contextualization cues
1	Wang	The order is very important in writing a Chinese character. Remember? ↑	Clara, Emma and Amy were practicing the stroke order on the white board. Jack and charlotte were at their spot. Yun was playing paper airplane.
2	Clara	Which to write characters is not important || in China.	Clara went to the teacher.
3	Wang	It's very important in China.	W looked at Clara. Stressing "very."
4	Clara	**Not important, not important *in America*.**	Clara walked around the table, saying the utterance playfully.
5	Emma	***Not important for America*.**	Emma turned around and looking at her classmates and smiled, saying the utterance playfully.
6	Jack	Not important for Emma.	Ss laughed.

As shown in Excerpt 6, Clara and Emma dismissed the importance of correct stroke order, stating that writing Chinese characters is "not important in America." They saw little value in investing in Chinese literacy. As their teacher, I firmly believed in the positive effects of character writing in facilitating Chinese literacy development and enhancing spatial thinking (Perfetti et al., 2013; Tong & McBride-Chang, 2010). However, without the students' buy-in regarding the significance of the subject matter, my authority in teaching the subject was undermined. This realization led me to focus on constructing teacher authority through leveraging my expertise in the Chinese language.

One approach I adopted was to make the writing process more accessible by explaining the structure or etymology of Chinese characters. For example, when practicing the character "鱼" (fish), I explained, "We start with its head, then the body, and then the tail," so that students can have a clear understanding of the general principle of arranging strokes—from left to right and top to bottom. Amy responded enthusiastically, "Oh, that is easy to write," while Emma repeated, "head, body, tail" to herself as she completed the character. When introducing characters such as "山" (mountain), "水" (water), and "家" (home), I illustrated their evolutionary process from pictographs to their modern forms. These visual explanations helped students connect with the cultural and historical significance of the characters, making the learning process more engaging and meaningful.

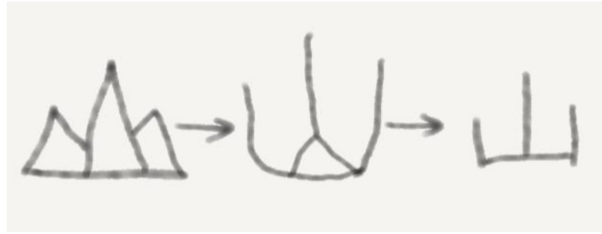

Figure 1. The evolutionary process of the character 山 (mountain)

As this routine became familiar, students eagerly explored the origins of new characters. For example, Amy asked about "电" (electricity), and Charlotte inquired about "坐" (sit), showing their growing interest in Chinese characters. This approach showed my students that mastering Chinese characters didn't have to rely solely on rote memorization of strokes. Instead, they could engage with the stories or use their imagination to create concrete images associated with the characters.

However, I did not realize that I was still enacting the teacher-as-knowledge-transmitter role as I relied on my expertise to construct teacher authority. Positioning

myself as the sole expert on Chinese language and culture in the classroom limited students' opportunities to co-construct their learning. This moment of realization occurred when Clara asked me how to distinguish the characters "姐" (elder sister) and "妹" (younger sister). Although I believed that the best way to address this question was to introduce the concept of semantic-phonetic compound characters, where one component conveys meaning and the other indicates pronunciation, I hesitated to delve into the explanation, assuming it might be too challenging for the students to grasp. Thus, I simply briefly mentioned the concept. Unexpectedly, Clara proposed her own way of remembering "妹" (younger sister). She creatively associated "妹" with a girl in a skirt, which resonated with the class and resolved their confusion. To my surprise, during a later class, when reviewing the character "妈" (mother), Amy pointed to it and said, "One part is the meaning, and one part is the pronunciation," demonstrating her grasp of the concept of semantic-phonetic compound characters. This experience made me realize that my students were more capable than I had assumed—not only in constructing imaginative associations with characters but also in understanding linguistic concepts I had thought were too complex for them. Their active role in generating knowledge and creating learning opportunities for one another highlighted their ability to contribute meaningfully to the learning process as well as challenged my teacher-centered assumptions.

I gradually understood that my role as a teacher should not center on merely transmitting knowledge but on serving as a guide who facilitates interactions, allowing students to collaboratively build understanding. My interactions with students demonstrated that teacher authority is most effectively established when students are encouraged and supported to actively contribute to the learning process by providing input on how they wish to learn and be taught, which in turn allowed me to gradually earn students' trust and consent, thereby strengthening my teacher authority.

5. Conclusion

This study describes one novice teacher's evolving understanding of teacher authority and demonstrates how action research supports both teachers' professional growth and students' learning. For Wang, this action research enabled her to move away from teacher-centered thinking, embrace students' constructive resistance, and involve students to co-construct knowledge to establish teacher authority. This shift affected how she designed and implemented classroom activities. When she adhered to absolute authority associated with the teacher's role, cultural clashes and tensions in teacher-student interactions were exacerbated, and valuable time was diverted away from meaningful learning to address challenges posed by students. Through continuous reflection, she came to see teacher authority as a dynamic and negotiated construct that gets established and reshaped through interactions with students. The co-construction of knowledge and rules of classroom activities brought a positive impact on student engagement, as their participation became more voluntary and active. This shift in student involvement further reinforced their trust in Wang's teaching competence, leading to a stronger recognition of her teacher authority. In CHL classrooms where teachers and their students hold different cultural understandings and expectations, recognizing the relational nature of teacher authority is particularly important (Li & Pu, 2010; Wu, 2011). Achieving this requires CHL teachers to engage in critical reflection to foster an awareness of their own conceptualization of teacher authority and other "cultural ways of being," which enables them to adapt effectively to their teaching contexts (Uzum, 2017, p. 242). Building on this idea, this paper provides actionable insights into how CHL teachers can navigate cultural clashes and co-construct knowledge with their students, which has implications not only for teacher training and professional development but also for enhancing the overall effectiveness of CHL programs in promoting bilingualism and biculturalism among heritage learners. However, this study also has its limitations. First, it mainly relies on Wang's reflections and classroom observations, which may introduce subjectivity despite Lee's involvement in data analysis to provide an etic perspective. Second, the study's time frame may not fully capture the long-term effects of Wang's pedagogical changes. Given the evolving nature of teacher authority and classroom dynamics, a longitudinal study would be needed to assess whether the observed changes are sustainable and how they affect learning outcomes over time.

Transcription Conventions

↑ rising intonation at end of utterance
XXXX = undecipherable
Stress
|| short pause
||| long pause
[Line 1 = overlap
Line 2]
Vowel + = elongated vowel
* = voice, pitch or style change
Words = boundaries of a voice, pitch or style change
() translations of Chinese
Ss = many students speaking at once
(Adapted from Bloome et al., 2004)

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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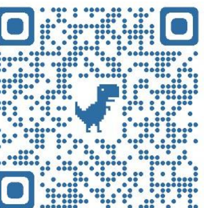

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