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Citation for published version:

Hall-Lew, L & Starr, RL 2010, 'Beyond the 2nd generation: English use among Chinese Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area', *English Today*, vol. 26, no. 03, pp. 12-19.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078410000155>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1017/S0266078410000155](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078410000155)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

English Today

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Cambridge University Press 2010. Lauren Hall-Lew and Rebecca L. Starr (2010). Beyond the 2nd generation: English use among Chinese Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area. *English Today*, 26, pp 1219. The final publication is available online at: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0266078410000155

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English Today / Volume 26 / Issue 03 / September 2010, pp 12 - 19
DOI: 10.1017/S0266078410000155, Published online: 24 August 2010

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0266078410000155

How to cite this article:

Lauren Hall-Lew and Rebecca L. Starr (2010). Beyond the 2nd generation: English use among Chinese Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area. English Today, 26, pp 12-19 doi:10.1017/S0266078410000155

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Beyond the 2nd generation: English use among Chinese Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area

LAUREN HALL-LEW and REBECCA L. STARR

English pronunciations among Chinese Americans in San
Francisco reveal new local and transnational identities

Introduction

The concept of immigrant generation is complex. Americans use the ordinal designations first-, second-, third-, even '1.5'-generation to refer to individuals' varying relationship to their family's moment of immigration. But these terms are much more fluid in practice than the rigidity of the numbers implies, and the nature of that fluidity is changing over time. Furthermore, different waves of immigration mean different experiences of generation identity; a first-generation immigrant in the 1880s entered an American community that was drastically different than the one a first-generation immigrant enters today.

One example of these shifts in the meaning of immigrant generation is among Asian Americans across the country, particularly those in California. In this paper, we discuss the relationship between language and immigrant generation with respect to Chinese Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area of Northern California, the region of the United States with the longest history of Chinese immigration and settlement. We focus in particular on the pronunciation of English, drawing on data collected in the Bay Area from 2008–2009 to argue that Chinese cultural and linguistic practices are gaining currency in the wider community. Our discussion looks at the experiences of third and higher immigrant generations, especially as they interact with more recent waves of immigrants, and the resulting dominance of

Chinese and other Asian identities across the Bay Area. The layered and rapidly shifting Chinese American experience suggests potential future directions for the study of other immigrant communities in the United States.

Asian Americans and English in the United States

Until recently, Asian Americans' pronunciation of English had been largely neglected by sociolinguists researching ethnicity and linguistic variation. When Asian Americans had been included in studies, they were often assumed and/or shown to share the same patterns of phonetic production as their White counterparts (e.g., Hinton, et al., 1987; Hagiwara, 1997). In later work on Asian Americans, Wong (2007) found that Chinese Americans in New York City produced some, but not all, of the vowel features attributed to White New York City English. Studies on young Korean Americans (Chun, 2001; Reyes, 2005) and Laotian Americans (Bucholtz, 2004) have shown some speakers producing features previously attributed to African American English varieties. Chun's work (2002; 2009a; 2009b) on Mock Asian styles analyzes the phonetic (as well as other linguistic) resources employed to form a Mock Asian accent; nearly all of these features were characteristic of, but not limited to, non-native English pronunciation. Other studies have analyzed phonetic perception,

investigating listeners' abilities to distinguish Asian American voices from White voices (Podberesky, et al., 1990; Hanna, 1997; Newman et al., 2007; Newman & Wu, ms).

This latter strand of research points to the primary reason for the lack of attention to Asian Americans' phonetic production – scholars and laypeople alike have long considered Asian Americans to not have an 'ethnolect,' or a variety associated with an ethnically marked community that stands in contrast to a mainstream community. In other words, Asian Americans do not appear to fit the 'distinctiveness-centered models of language and ethnicity' (Bucholtz, 2004:130) that have driven much of the work on sociophonetic variation and ethnicity in U.S. English. One reason for the apparent absence of a unified, distinctive variety may be that Asian Americans hold

more positive ideologies about mainstream U.S. English than are typically found among other non-White ethnic groups. Another reason might be exactly the feature that makes 'Asian America' most interesting for analyses of language and ethnicity: the extreme variability of Asian American identity. The influences of heritage languages on the English production of Asian Americans are numerous, and are many more than Chicano English, for example, which is primarily influenced by Mexican Spanish. Asian American identities are highly diverse, as well as rapidly changing, particularly in areas like the San Francisco Bay Area. English pronunciation is just one symbolic resource for the negotiation of cultural identity across these multiple ethnic groups and immigrant generations.

In part because of the scarcity of research on Asian Americans' phonetic variation in U.S. English, and also because of the tremendous diversity of heritage languages, most of the sociolinguistic analyses of Asian American groups have focused on one ethnic subgroup in particular, e.g., Korean Americans, Cambodian Americans, or Japanese Americans. Another motivation for limiting the scope of a given study is that many urban communities may be dominated by one subgroup, due to immigration histories and settlement patterns. More importantly, there tends to be a great deal of diversity that exists within a given subgroup, which must be explored in its own right. Chinese Americans are one of the most heterogeneous Asian groups within Asian America (as discussed below), and this paper considers that diversity with respect to the variable pronunciation of English in the San Francisco Bay Area. We put forward an argument for the emergence and proliferation of multiple styles that are increasingly available to monolingual English speakers in similarly urban, multiethnic communities.

Chinese Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area

California's population was multiethnic before it even became a state, and Chinese Americans have been a major part of its population since the earliest days of statehood. Coinciding with the gold rush, the Tai Ping Rebellion of 1850 drove many people to escape and begin new lives in California, or *Gum Shan* ('Golden Mountain'). During the 1860s and 1870s,



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Chinese immigration was actively encouraged by major railroad companies operating in California promising work building the western portion of the Transcontinental Railroad. These earliest immigrants, particularly those from China's Guangdong province, paved the path across the Pacific Ocean linking Asia to California. Since the mid-1800s, many people from across Asia have made that journey, settling in the United States and contributing to the multi-faceted pan-ethnic identity: Asian American. The San Francisco Bay Area was central to this process of settlement, intermixing, and emergence, and continues to be today.

This relatively long history of Chinese and other Asian waves of migration means that today's Chinese American community, in its broadest definition, is stratified according to both immigration generation and ethnic identity. In contrast to other parts of the United States, Chinese Americans in the Bay Area include those who identify as fourth- or fifth-generation, some of whom may also identify as biracial, multiethnic, or mixed-race, and many of whom experience and construct Chinese identity in ways quite different from their second-generation counterparts. At the same time, new Chinese immigrants continue to arrive, often settling directly in the same communities, and co-constructing ethnic identity across the immigrant generation divide. This has led to a multi-faceted relationship between language use and immigrant generation among Chinese Americans in the Bay Area, with interesting implications for stylistic variation in the use of English. Even among Chinese Americans specifically, any simple notion of 'ethnolect' is untenable in the San Francisco Bay Area. The relationship between English pronunciation and Chinese American identity is better understood as a negotiation of local linguistic resources that index ethnic meanings in different ways.

The nature of Chinese settlement in the Bay Area is highly diverse not only because of its long history but also as a result of the sociopolitical circumstances and linguistic geography of the Chinese population across East and Southeast Asia. Individuals identifying as 'Chinese American' may have ancestors who emigrated not only from Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, but also from Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines, Vietnam, and other regions and nations.

The first wave of Chinese immigration, primarily from Cantonese and Toisanese/Taishanese-speaking regions of Southern China, was cut short as a result of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Despite some immigration in the following decades, particularly 'paper son' immigration following the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906,¹ the second major wave of immigration did not arrive until the lifting of immigration restrictions in 1965. This period consisted primarily of immigration from Taiwan and Hong Kong, and mainly of individuals whose families had fled the Communists in various parts of Mainland China decades earlier, resulting in a very different migration experience than those earlier immigrants who had arrived directly from China, before the Communist occupation. Already by the late 1960s this meant that 'Chinese American' was not a singular identity, even within communities settled by people who had emigrated from the same region.

With recent economic and visa changes in Mainland China, a new wave of Mainland Chinese immigrants is arriving in the Bay Area. Unlike previous groups, recent immigrants from Mainland China are maintaining strong ties with their country of origin, with many moving back and forth as their educational needs and economic situations change. This newest Chinese immigration wave is steadily altering the cultural and linguistic makeup of the Bay Area. While Cantonese, spoken in Hong Kong and Southern China, was once the Chinese variety most spoken in the United States, Mandarin, the standard variety of Mainland China, is now coming to dominate as the *lingua franca* of choice in Chinese American communities (Semple, 2009). Similarly, traditional characters, used in Hong Kong and Taiwan, are being pushed out in Chinese schools and media in favor of the simplified characters used in Mainland China. A cultural divide exists in some Bay Area regions between these new immigrants and older, more assimilated immigrant populations, and conflicts have arisen over issues such as educational priorities, and political stances toward China and Taiwan (Chien, 2006; Tanner, 2008).

While San Francisco is the city traditionally associated with Chinese Americans, this population has now expanded into the suburbs, with the southern portions of the Bay Area home to significantly dense concentrations of Chinese Americans. The city of Cupertino, for

example, was 23.8% Chinese American as of the 2000 U.S. Census, a number which has certainly increased in the past 10 years, recasting the city with an increasingly Asian identity (see Gokhale, 2007). Within the city of San Francisco, decades of fair housing legislation have now resulted in the settlement of neighborhoods outside of Chinatown, in part by former residents of the downtown Chinatown area. These more affluent suburban neighborhoods, known by some as ‘New Chinatowns’ (Laguerre, 2005), may boast populations of more than 50% Asian American, the vast majority being of Chinese descent.

Variation in San Francisco Bay Area English

The English spoken by native-born residents of the San Francisco Bay Area shares many of the features of the English spoken in Southern California and parts of Arizona, Nevada, and Oregon. Although considered by some to be less distinct or marked than other areas of the United States, there are several sound changes in progress that are characteristic of western varieties. Many of these fall under the Northern California Vowel Shift (Eckert, 2008),

shown in Figure 1, which involves the counter-clockwise rotation of the front lax vowels (*bit* and *bet*), a split in the vowel in *bat* according to phonological environment, the fronting of the back vowels (*boot*, *book*, *boat*, and the central vowel in *but*), and the merger of the low back vowels (*bottom* and *bought*, found in pairs like *cot* and *caught*). Although most thoroughly documented among communities in Northern California, many of these vowel features have been found throughout areas of the Western U.S. and Canada (Labov, 1991; Di Paolo, 1992; Conn, 2000; Ward, 2003; Fridland, 2004; Hall-Lew, 2005).

Speaker ethnicity and migration history have long been central to research on English in California, in some cases much more so than in research on English in other parts of the United States. In particular, there are a few key studies looking at its realization among speakers identifying as Mexican American or Chicano, another (broadly construed) ethnic group whose presence in California in fact predates the existence of the state. In her work among Anglo-American and Chicano grade school kids in the San Francisco Bay Area, Eckert (2008) found that students make use of variable pronunciations of the *bat* vowel in line

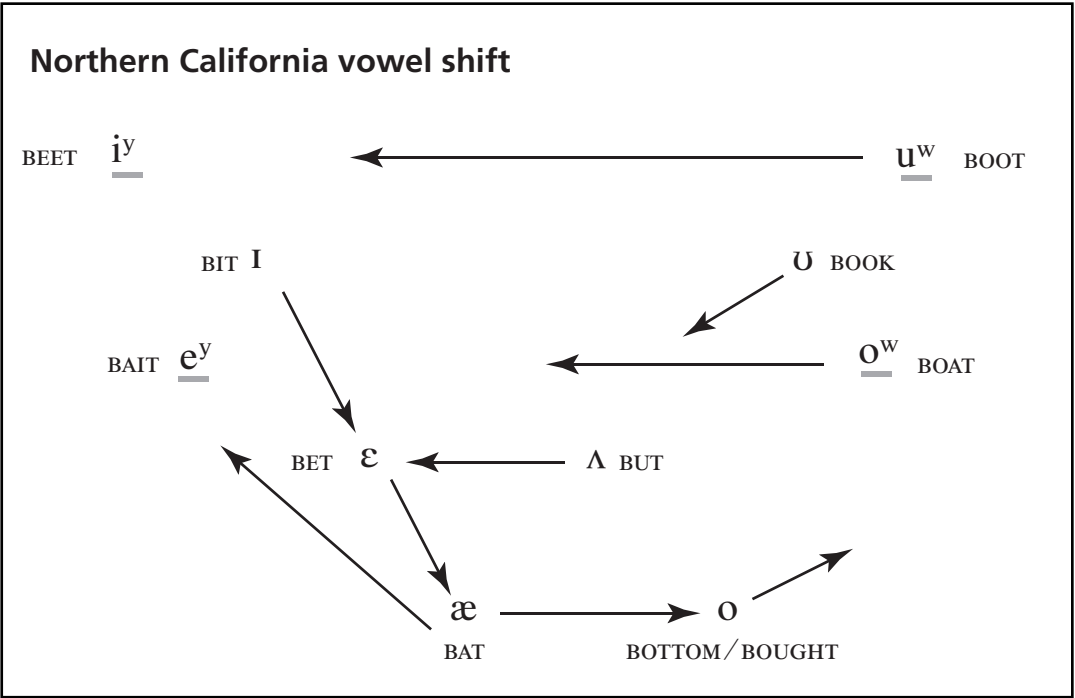


Figure 1: The Northern California Vowel Shift (Eckert, 2008)

with the norms of their particular school, which are linked to ethnicity. At one school, the Anglo norm of raising the *bat* vowel before nasals (such that *pan* sounds something like *peh-an*) is what the popular crowd orients to, while at the other school, the Chicano norm (not raising the vowel) is the pronunciation produced by members of the popular crowd. Eckert notes that it is not the ethnicity of the speakers themselves that correlates linguistic variation with ethnicity, but rather the co-occurrence of linguistic variables with other social practices that are linked to both ethnicity and popularity.

Studies of English variation in the San Francisco Bay Area such as Eckert's have almost always considered ethnicity as a social factor associated with linguistic production, but few have looked at Chinese Americans in particular, and none of them have considered immigrant generation as an explicit factor. The first analysis of vowel production by this population, Hall-Lew (2009), considered the production of back vowel fronting and the low back vowel merger among second- and higher-generation European and Chinese American residents of one of San Francisco's New Chinatown neighborhoods, the Sunset District. The results showed two patterns of vowel production across these groups. For the fronting of the vowel in *boot* (sounding something like *biwt*), the rate of fronted pronunciations across a stratified sample of 30 speakers did not differ significantly according to ethnicity or immigrant generation. Age, on the other hand, was a conditioning factor in *boot* fronting ($p < 0.012$ for *boot* vowels after coronal consonants; $p < 0.057$ for all instances of the *boot* vowel). It was found that the younger the speaker, the more fronted the articulation of that vowel, and being Chinese or White made no difference. But a slightly different pattern emerged for the fronting of the vowel in *boat* (sounding something like *beh-oat*) and for the merger in the *cot* and *caught* vowels (such that the two words rhyme exactly). For these two vowel changes, there was again no significant difference between the Chinese Americans and the European Americans, but there was a difference in the way both groups correlated the vowel changes with age. Overall, as with the *boot* vowel, both changes correlated with age ($p < 0.002$ for *boat*; $p < 0.01$ for *cot* and *caught*). But this same correlation, although found for the Asian Americans, wasn't found

for the European Americans. ($p < 0.002$ for *boat*; $p < 0.01$ for *cot* and *caught*). This presented an unexpected finding. Most research on language and ethnicity in U.S. English would predict that if one of these two groups were more likely to show a correlation between speaker age and vowel pronunciation, it would be the European American group, because Labov (2001) and others have argued that non-White groups lag behind Whites in terms of sound change. However, in this New Chinatown community, the correlation was the opposite. The Chinese American speakers showed a correlation between speaker age and the pronunciation of the *boat*, *cot*, and *caught* vowels, the same correlation that was found for the community as a whole, while this was not the case for the European American subsample. Since we can hypothesize that a correlation between pronunciation and speaker age indicates a sound change in progress, this study shows that Chinese Americans' pronunciation of English reflects the community-wide pronunciation patterns more closely than European Americans' pronunciations do. The study also compared second- and third-generation speakers and found that the immigrant generation of the speaker does not seem to correlate with that speaker's vowel production.

Research in progress focusing on these same speakers is demonstrating further ethnic distinctiveness in English pronunciation, in addition to this pattern of production of regional vowel patterns. Specifically, the vocalization of syllable-final /l/ (pronouncing the /l/ sound closer to a /w/), known as 'L-vocalization,' has been found across a number of the Chinese American participants from this New Chinatown neighborhood, and even (to a lesser extent) among some of the European Americans, as well. L-vocalization involves the pronunciation of the /l/ such that it resembles a back vowel or a voiced glide (Hardcastle & Barry, 1989), so that words like *cold* and *skill* sound like *code* and *skew*, and seems likely to have appeared in the English of Chinese Americans because of the lack of a syllable-final /l/ in all varieties of Chinese. So, unlike the production of regional vowel changes, the production of L-vocalization appears, at least initially, to be correlated with immigrant generation. However, immigrant generation was a social variable that was, until recently, conflated with other variables such as native language and age of acquisition. In other words, first

generation immigrants generally spoke English as a second language, while their second generation children acquired English at the same time as (or only a couple years after) acquiring proficiency in their parents' language, and third generation children acquired only English. This oversimplified representation is no longer adequate to describe the linguistic experiences of Chinese (and other Asian) Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area. Indeed, preliminary analysis suggests that there are third and higher immigrant-generation Chinese Americans who are vocalizing /l/, despite not being immigrants themselves, or even being raised by immigrant parents. One possibility is that because the San Francisco Bay Area community is majority Asian American, its residents are more likely to maintain heritage language features in the local variety of English. This may indicate a trend toward the proliferation of linguistic styles associated with immigrant identities. Such a trend would be further supported by suggestive evidence of European Americans also producing L-vocalization, which points to the argument put forward by Eckert (2008) that it is the social meaning of the variant, and not the ethnicity of the speaker themselves, that is more crucial to an analysis of language and ethnicity.

Beyond the second generation

When auguring the future of Chinese Americans' use of English, it is crucial to understand that the current demographic context of Chinese Americans is unlikely to remain stable. While we might assume that it will become increasingly common to find Americans who identify as ethnically Chinese but are culturally American (and are native English speakers), in fact it seems possible that this population will shrink, and that the current, relatively large group of individuals who fit into this category is the result of some unique historical factors which are rapidly disappearing.

The first major demographic shift that is occurring in this population is the result of interracial marriage. Studies indicate that rates of interracial marriage for Chinese Americans are quite high; only 44% of U.S.-raised Chinese American women and 53.1% of men married Chinese partners (Le, 2010). On the other hand, recent studies also suggest that interracial marriage is beginning to decrease, possibly as a result of increasing immigrant populations,

and increasing availability of intra-ethnic social connections via online dating and residential patterns (Gowen, 2009). In the Bay Area, interracial marriage among Chinese Americans is prevalent, but current immigration trends may slow or reverse this phenomenon.

Of course, this interracial marriage issue raises the question of whether individuals with multiracial backgrounds will continue to identify as Chinese American, or to use linguistic features like L-vocalization. Certainly multiracial individuals can and do participate in Chinese American communities in the Bay Area, but their access to Chinese American identity is more complicated than for individuals of wholly Chinese ancestry. Subsequent generations of interracial marriage further extend this complex, and ultimately distanced, association. At the same time, as pronunciations with ethnic associations become available to the wider community, which may be the case for L-vocalization, multiracial individuals will be in a better position than, for example, European Americans, to acquire and employ those linguistic styles. For those multiracial individuals who identify with more than one Asian ethnicity, associations between English pronunciation and 'Chinese' meanings and practices will likely become extended to more general 'Asian' meanings and practices. For example, because syllable-final /l/ is absent from the majority of the Asian heritage languages that are relevant across the Bay Area, it is a readily available linguistic resource for the construction of multiple or multiracial Asian identities. Orientations to pan-ethnic identities are particularly evident in parts of the Bay Area such as the neighborhood studied by Hall-Lew (2009), where residents of all ethnicities identify and construct their neighborhood as a primarily 'Asian' neighborhood, despite the clear dominance within 'Asian' of specifically Chinese ethnicities.

The second major demographic issue, as suggested above, is the increasing Chinese immigrant population which has relatively strong 'back-and-forth' ties to China (and, in some cases, Taiwan). In some respects, these immigrants are returning to a cultural context more similar to that of the first wave of immigrants from China in the 1800s; they are more likely to live in areas with concentrated Chinese populations, and often intend to return to China for at least some portion of their lives – in light of the opportunities now available in China, the

assumption that children of immigrants will remain in the United States is no longer a given. This population is learning English, but the context of their English acquisition is quite different from that of the second and third generations of second-wavers (whose parents or grandparents came to the U.S. in the 1970s or 80s).

This change in immigrant population has profound cultural and linguistic implications for Chinese Americans. Unlike previous waves of Chinese American immigrants, 1.5- and second-generation children in this population are often culturally oriented toward China and greater East Asia, wearing Asian fashions and following Asian pop groups. This cultural identity, sometimes referred to as FOB ('fresh off the boat'), is quite distinct from the culture of the children of the first- and second-wave immigrants, sometimes referred to as ABC ('American-born Chinese'), which is oriented primarily towards mainstream American culture (see Shankar, 2008). Intriguingly, although these terms appear to refer to the length of time that an individual has lived in the United States, today they are often used to refer to cultural identities that are independent of immigration history – even fourth-generation Chinese Americans can participate in FOB culture. The FOB identity has a strong appeal in such communities because it draws on the increasing cultural cachet of China, and is based on a culture in which Chinese is the majority ethnicity. It seems likely that FOB identity will continue to expand and subsume ABC identity, at least in areas of the country like the Bay Area with high concentrations of Chinese Americans and a steady rate of continued immigration. The extent to which L-vocalization and other heritage-language features found in Asian styles of English are becoming increasingly associated with FOB identity may point to the future of English pronunciation across such communities.

Although linguistic studies have yet to specifically address this question, our preliminary observation is that Chinese Americans who participate in FOB culture, or who are part of this new immigrant wave, are more likely to use ethnically marked linguistic features than second wavers. In other words, they are more likely to have features like vocalized /l/ in their speech. We would argue that this is due both to population density of non-native speakers in these immigrant communities, and to cultural identity factors. If FOB identity does continue

to gain prestige, then we predict that these English pronunciations associated with that identity will also continue to gain prestige, with profound implications for the linguistic landscape of Chinese Americans beyond the second generation, even for monolingual English speakers.

Conclusion

The pan-ethnic Asian American identity arose in the late 1960s, and gained currency in the 1980s as a term uniting Americans of various Asian backgrounds around common interests. At the time, people born in the U.S. with parents and grandparents who immigrated from China, Japan, or Korea, united around their shared experience as being second- or third-generation, finding commonalities that they did not have with their immigrant parents or grandparents. A generation later, the situation has shifted considerably in the San Francisco Bay Area and similar communities across California. Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino Americans in particular are today represented by a wide range of immigrant generations, from a new wave of first-generation immigrants to the birth of some sixth-generation children. The population of the San Francisco Bay Area is layered with respect to immigrant generation, heritage dialect, country of origin, multinational networks, and engagement with Asian cultural practices. The long history and demographic dominance of Asian Americans in communities like the Bay Area may have different implications for language use and patterns of phonetic variation than for other Asian American communities. For Chinese Americans in particular, orientations to Chinese cultural practices are gaining frequency and value, and FOB styles are losing stigma and gaining currency. Today's communication technologies make the negotiation of linguistic and other cultural resources faster, more accessible, more fluid, and more transnational. This has a fundamental effect on the experience of a given immigrant generation, such that today's Chinese Americans are not nearly as isolated from their heritage cultures as in previous decades. Therefore, although the Bay Area may seem like a unique site for this cultural shift, it may in fact serve as a microcosm of broader, national patterns of change in the relationship between immigration and English use. ■

Note

1 'Paper Sons' and 'Paper Daughters' formed an unofficial class of immigrants who were able to immigrate into the U.S. under the guise of being family members of U.S. citizens.

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