



Learning Mandarin through Funds of Identity: Identity Development of a Malaysian Student in Taiwan

CHIA-CHIA HSU

The PhD Program in Teaching Chinese as a Second Language
National Chengchi University, Taiwan

Abstract

Research on Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) has increasingly emphasized learner identity and identity development. However, relatively little attention has been paid to how learners' Funds of Identity (Fol) can be mobilized as resources for Mandarin learning and identity development. This qualitative case study investigates a Mandarin writing course informed by the Funds of Identity approach, focusing on the experiences of a Malaysian student studying in Taiwan. Data included classroom observations, learner-produced identity texts, and semi-structured interviews and were analyzed through narrative analysis, drawing on the Fol framework (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014) and Norton's (2013) theory of identity. The findings indicate that, through writing identity texts in Mandarin, the learner reinterpreted personal experiences and cultural background by mobilizing Funds of Identity as meaningful resources for language learning. This process enabled the learner to express and negotiate multiple identities through language practices while strengthening a sense of belonging to Mandarin-speaking communities and cultures. At the same time, the learner's narratives revealed the fluid and dynamic nature of identity, as moments of uncertainty, ambiguity, and contradiction emerged while negotiating between self-understanding and external expectations across different cultural contexts. These findings demonstrate that Mandarin learning extends beyond the acquisition of linguistic competence to become a process of identity development and social participation. By illustrating how writing identity texts in Mandarin enables learners to mobilize their Funds of Identity and negotiate multiple identities, this study highlights the pedagogical value of the Funds of Identity approach for Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) education.

Keywords: *Funds of Identity, identity texts, identity development, Chinese as a Second Language*

1. Introduction

Second language research has increasingly emphasized the relationship between language learning and identity development [1], [2], [3]. Meanwhile, Chinese as a second or foreign language (CSL/CFL) has attracted growing numbers of learners worldwide [4], [5], and international student enrollment in Taiwan reached 140,417 in 2025 [6]. As learners from diverse linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds enter CSL contexts in Taiwan, greater attention is needed to how their lived experiences and identity-related resources intersect with Mandarin learning.

Despite sustained interest in L2 learner identity, relatively little CSL research has examined language learning through the Funds of Identity (Fol) framework [7]. In particular, limited attention has been paid to how learners mobilize personally meaningful experiences, cultural backgrounds, and social relationships in Mandarin learning and how these resources intersect with identity development. Drawing on Fol [7] and Norton's (2013) theory of identity [8], this study examines a Malaysian student in a Mandarin reading and writing course in Taiwan, focusing on how he draws on Fol in Mandarin learning and how his language-learning experiences intersect with the expression and negotiation of multiple identities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Identity in Second Language Learning

According to Norton, identity in L2 learning refers to how learners understand their relationship to the world, how this relationship is constructed across time and space, and how they understand their



possibilities for the future [8], [9]. From a poststructuralist perspective, identity is not fixed or unitary but multiple, shifting, and sometimes contradictory, continually constructed and negotiated through language practices, social interactions, discourse, and relations of power [8].

Building on this perspective, Norton introduced the concept of investment to complement traditional accounts of language learning based on motivation. Whereas motivation is generally understood in psychological terms, investment emphasizes the social and historical conditions under which learners engage in language learning. When learners invest in a second language, they expect to gain access to symbolic and material resources, such as language, education, and social relationships, which may reshape their access to cultural capital and social positioning [8]. Language learning therefore involves not only the development of linguistic competence but also the ongoing negotiation and repositioning of the self within social relationships and language practices. Accordingly, language is not simply a means of communication but also a site where the self and subjectivity are constructed [10]. From this perspective, understanding identity development requires attention to both learners' language practices and the identity-related resources they draw on, which provides a conceptual connection to the Funds of Identity framework.

2.2 Funds of Identity: Identity Resources and Self-Expression in Second Language Learning

Funds of Identity (FoI), developed by Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014) [7], builds on the Funds of Knowledge (FoK) framework, which recognizes the historically accumulated and culturally developed knowledge and skills embedded in households and communities [11]. FoI shifts attention toward how individuals appropriate such meaningful resources for self-definition and self-expression [7], [12]. As Esteban-Guitart (2014, p. 753) states, "FOK become FOI when individuals appropriate these resources and use them for self-definition" [12]. FoI can thus be understood as a "toolbox" of historically, culturally, and socially developed resources through which individuals understand and express themselves [13], [14], [15].

Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014) identify five types of FoI: geographical, practical, cultural, social, and institutional [7]. These resources derive from meaningful places, everyday practices, cultural experiences, significant relationships, and institutional participation and may intersect in shaping self-understanding [12], [16]. In education, FoI enables teachers to connect classroom learning with learners' lived experiences [17]. Previous research has identified FoI through self-portraits, self-definitions, significant circles, diaries, photographs, maps, collages, identity texts, interviews, and self-narratives [3], [7], [13], [18], [19], [20], [21]. By connecting these resources to classroom learning, language learning can become more closely connected to learners' lived experiences and sense of self, while providing opportunities for them to select, organize, and express their experiences through language. In this study, FoI serves as an analytical framework for examining the identity resources the learner draws on in Mandarin learning and how these resources are expressed through Mandarin writing and other language practices.

2.3 Identity Construction through Identity Texts

Identity texts provide an important space in L2 learning where language learning and identity negotiation can intersect. Cummins (2006) and Cummins and Early (2011) define identity texts as products or performances in which learners invest their identities through creative processes [1], [22]. These texts may take written, oral, visual, musical, dramatic, or multimodal forms and enable learners to draw on their linguistic, cultural, family, and lived experiences in text creation [1], [23]. As L2 identities are multiple and situated, producing such texts can provide opportunities for learners to represent and negotiate who they are through another language [8].

Identity texts are closely related to FoI because they provide a means through which meaningful people, places, practices, relationships, and cultural experiences can enter classroom learning. By recognizing and valuing these experiences, teachers can create classroom spaces where learners' multiple identities can be expressed and explored [23]. Identity texts thus provide a pedagogical means for learners to mobilize their FoI through language and represent identity-related experiences in classroom contexts. In this study, the Mandarin reading and writing course is viewed as a space where learners can draw on their FoI and express and negotiate their identities. By analyzing the participant's identity



texts alongside interview data and classroom discourse, this study examines how a Malaysian student in Taiwan draws on Fol related to social relationships, cultural experiences, everyday practices, meaningful places, and institutional experiences in Mandarin learning, and how these experiences intersect with his identity development. The specific research questions are as follows:

RQ1 : How does an L2 learner draw on Funds of Identity in a CSL reading and writing course?

RQ2 : How does Mandarin learning intersect with the identity development of an L2 learner?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the participant's lived experiences and identity development through interviews, classroom observations, and written texts [24]. Personal narratives are particularly valuable for examining how language and identity interact in L2 learning and socialization [24]. Data included interview narratives, written texts produced in a Mandarin reading and writing course from February to June 2026, and classroom discourse related to the participant's personal experiences, language learning, and cultural identity.

3.2 Participant

Ian is a Malaysian Malay and non-native Mandarin learner enrolled in a Mandarin-related undergraduate program at a national university in Taiwan. He has studied Mandarin for approximately eight years across educational, professional, and everyday contexts. Before coming to Taiwan, he studied in a STEM-related university program in Malaysia and later entered the workforce, where interactions with clients from China prompted him to learn Mandarin. He subsequently moved to Taiwan to pursue a Mandarin-related degree and has taken two courses taught by the researcher. His learning trajectory across Malaysian and Taiwanese contexts makes his case particularly relevant for examining how cultural, social, educational, and professional experiences become resources for Mandarin learning and identity development.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

This study draws on multiple sources of data, including interviews, written texts, and classroom discourse. Interviews explored Ian's Mandarin learning, language use, and intercultural experiences, while written texts and classroom discourse were examined to identify how he mobilized identity-related resources and expressed his identities through Mandarin.

The data were analyzed through narrative analysis using Fol [7] and Norton's (2013) theory of identity [8]. Fol was used to identify geographical, practical, cultural, social, and institutional resources meaningful to Ian's sense of self. Following Block (2010, as cited in Norton, 2013) [8], [25], the analysis considered three dimensions: thematic, focusing on recurring experiences and identity themes; structural, examining how Ian connected and interpreted experiences across his learning trajectory; and dialogic/performative, examining how he positioned himself within the contexts in which narratives were produced.

4. Findings

The findings show that Ian consistently drew on identity resources related to his cultural background, meaningful places, everyday practices, and social relationships in his written texts, personal journals, and classroom discourse. These resources not only provided content for his Mandarin writing but also allowed him to renarrate, organize, and interpret his lived and cultural experiences through Mandarin.

4.1 Constructing Self Identities through Digital Texts: Cultural and Geographical Fol

In the Book Creator activity *My Story*, Ian drew on his hometown and cultural background as resources for Mandarin writing. He introduced Malaysia through ethnic diversity, languages, food, and festivals, including nasi lemak, laksa, Hari Raya Aidilfitri, Lunar New Year, Deepavali, and Open House (Figure



1). These elements represent cultural and geographical Fol closely connected to his sense of place and cultural background.

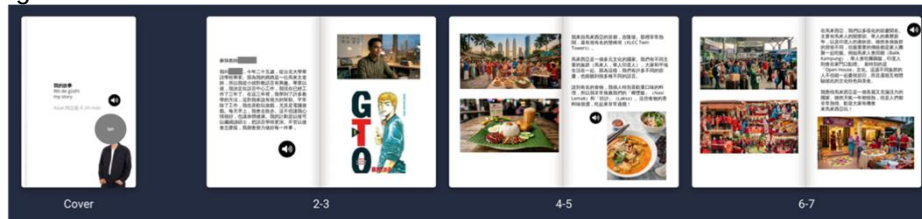


Fig. 1. Book Creator Digital Story: My Story

These contents show how Ian brought his familiarity with Malaysian culture and his experiences of place into his Mandarin digital text. During his presentation, Ian explained that, as the only Malaysian Malay at his university, he frequently encountered confusion between “Malaysian” and “Malay.” He clarified:

Ian: Last weekend at the cultural festival, [my friend] saw many Malays.... When I heard him say “Malay,” I asked him, “Do you think he is Malay?” No, he is Indian. He is from our country, but he is Indian. That is why I want to share about my country, Malaysia.

Ian: Malaysia is a country, and Malaysians are citizens of Malaysia. But Malay is an ethnic group.... So if you mean people from Malaysia, please say “Malaysian.” I have heard many people say “Malay, Malay, Malay (馬來人),” but that is not correct. If you mean people from Malaysia, please say ‘Malaysian (馬來西亞人).’”

Following Ian’s explanation, a Vietnamese classmate responded by asking, “So there are different kinds of Malaysians? They are different?” and later commented, “Now I understand.” This interaction shows that Ian’s cultural Fol extended beyond providing content for Mandarin practice. Drawing on experiences of cultural misrecognition, he used Mandarin to represent his cultural identity and explain Malaysia’s multiethnic society. His personal and cultural experiences thus became linguistic and interactional resources within the Mandarin classroom.

4.2 Interpreting Everyday Life in Taiwan through Journaling: Practical and Geographical Fol

Throughout the course, students kept journals on language and communication, food culture, everyday life, and perceptions of Taiwan, connecting classroom writing with everyday observations. Ian drew on local activities, interpersonal interactions, and digital media experiences as resources for Mandarin writing (Figure 2).

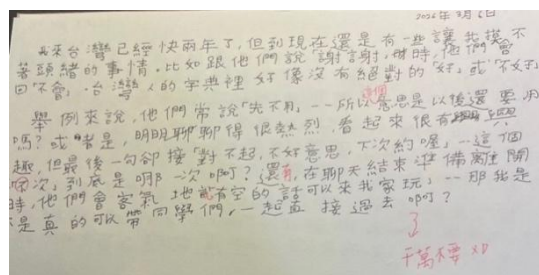


Fig. 2. Life Journal: Observations of Language and Communication

In his journal on language and communication, Ian documented patterns he noticed in interactions with Taiwanese people. He observed that responses to invitations were not always explicit but sometimes involved indirect expressions such as “not for now” (先不用) or “Sorry, maybe next time” (對不起, 不好意思, 下次約喔). Reflecting on their meanings, he wrote, “They often say ‘not for now,’ so does that mean they might want to do it later?” and “We were clearly having a lively conversation ... but then the last thing they said was, ‘Sorry, maybe next time.’ ... When exactly is ‘next time’?” These entries show that rather than simply documenting conversations, Ian used Mandarin writing to examine the relationship between linguistic expressions and social meanings. These everyday interactions became



practical FoI through which he observed, interpreted, and gradually developed his understanding of communicative practices in Taiwan.

4.3 Co-constructing Texts through Intercultural Collaboration: Social and Practical FoI

In the final collaborative activity, Ian and a Vietnamese classmate created A Campus Life Guide for Newcomers (新手) and Experienced Students (老手) (Figure 3), comparing their experiences of living and studying in Taiwan. Through sharing and comparison, they brought their lived experiences and cultural perspectives into the Mandarin text and co-constructed its content.



Fig. 3. Final Collaborative Text Presentation

From the perspective of a “newcomer,” the Vietnamese student described the challenge of encountering different perspectives in Taiwan’s multicultural environment:

Vietnamese student: “I know Taiwan is a very open environment.... Many people from different countries come here to study, so the culture in Taiwan is very diverse.... I also want to ask senior students how we can respond to viewpoints that are different from ours.”

As the “experienced student,” Ian drew on his longer experience of living in Taiwan and intercultural communication:

Ian: “I’m actually still learning about this, but I’ve gradually become used to it.... Some people from different countries communicate more directly.... If someone said that in Malaysia, it would be quite impolite. But later I asked someone from the same country, and they told me that if you have a close relationship, they speak more directly.... What I learned is empathy.... If you don’t understand what I’m saying, I’ll adjust the way I speak and make it simpler.”

This collaborative text illustrates how intercultural relationships became social FoI for understanding different communicative practices. These experiences also contributed to Ian’s practical FoI, reflected in his efforts to consider others’ perspectives and what he described as “empathy.” The collaborative text went beyond presenting two individual experiences side by side, creating a space in which their FoI could enter into dialogue. Through sharing, comparison, and response, their social and practical FoI became resources for co-constructing a Mandarin text.

5. Discussion

5.1 From Mobilizing to Expanding Funds of Identity through Mandarin Learning

The findings suggest that the relationship between FoI and Mandarin learning is not unidirectional. Ian initially mobilized existing cultural and geographical FoI rooted in his Malaysian background, while his everyday and intercultural experiences in Taiwan contributed to the development of new practical and social FoI. These findings are consistent with Esteban-Guitart and Moll’s (2014) conceptualization of FoI as resources grounded in lived experiences, cultural practices, social relationships, and meaningful places [7]. Accordingly, FoI in L2 contexts may not be limited to resources that learners already possess; new FoI may emerge and existing FoI may expand through language practices and social participation. Mandarin learning, lived experience, FoI, and identity development can therefore be understood as mutually constitutive processes: learners mobilize existing FoI for language learning while developing new identity resources through the social participation enabled by language use.



5.2 Identity Development as a Dynamic Process of Social Participation

Across the Digital Story, Life Journal, and Co-constructing Texts activities, Ian's learner-produced texts provided spaces for representing and negotiating identity, echoing Norton's (2013, pp. 19–20) discussion of digital and multimodal works as more than products of language learning [8]. His identity development did not follow a linear trajectory alongside his Mandarin proficiency; rather, his identities were continuously constructed and negotiated across different times, spaces, and social relationships. In his presentation on Malaysian culture, for example, Ian used Mandarin to explain the distinction between Malaysian and Malay. Mandarin thus became not only a language he was learning but also a resource for representing his cultural background and positioning himself in relation to others.

Ian's identity positions further shifted through social participation and intercultural interaction. In the final collaborative text, he positioned himself as an "experienced student" in relation to a Vietnamese classmate who was relatively new to Taiwan, drawing on the practical FoI he had accumulated. Yet, when discussing intercultural communication, he acknowledged, "I'm actually still learning about this, but I've gradually become used to it." He thus occupied the positions of both an experienced participant and an ongoing learner. This reflects Norton's (2000, 2013) conceptualization of identity as multiple, shifting, and situated [8], [9]: Ian could simultaneously position himself as a Mandarin learner, a Malaysian international student, and a more experienced peer.

The journals and collaborative text further provided spaces for Ian to articulate and reinterpret his intercultural experiences through Mandarin, consistent with the concept of identity texts proposed by Cummins (2006) and Cummins and Early (2011). Through sharing, comparison, and collaborative text construction with other international students, he not only incorporated lived experiences into his texts but also reinterpreted their meanings. His role therefore extended beyond that of a Mandarin learner: he increasingly acted as an intercultural broker, drawing on experiences across cultural contexts to interpret communicative practices, explain cultural differences, and mediate understanding across linguistic and cultural backgrounds. His identity development therefore cannot be understood simply as an outcome of increasing Mandarin proficiency; rather, it emerged through the reciprocal relationship between Mandarin use and social participation. Mandarin enabled broader intercultural participation, while these experiences generated new social and practical FoI and opened up new identity positions.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated how a second language learner drew on his Funds of Identity (FoI) in a Mandarin reading and writing course and how Mandarin learning intersected with his identity development. Focusing on Ian, a Malaysian student studying in Taiwan, the study analyzed interviews, written texts, and classroom discourse to examine how he mobilized resources rooted in his lived experiences and identities throughout his Mandarin learning.

The findings demonstrate a dynamic and mutually constitutive relationship among FoI, Mandarin learning, and identity development. L2 learner not only mobilized existing cultural and geographical FoI for Mandarin learning and self-expression but also developed new social and practical FoI through everyday life, Mandarin use, and intercultural participation in Taiwan. Through the *Digital Story*, *Life Journal*, and *Co-constructing Texts* activities, Mandarin became more than a linguistic resource; it provided a means for him to represent his cultural background, reinterpret lived experiences, and negotiate different identity positions through social participation.

The findings further suggest that CSL classrooms can connect learners' lived experiences with language learning through journals, identity texts, and intercultural collaborative activities. In this way, the classroom can become not only a site for language learning but also a space where learners mobilize and expand their FoI and express and negotiate their multiple identities.

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