In this article, Sandra McKay and Sau-Ling Wong argue for a revision of code-based and individual learner-based views of second-language learning. Their position is based on a two-year qualitative study of adolescent Chinese-immigrant students conducted in California in the early 1990s, in which the authors and their research associates followed four Mandarin-speaking students through seventh and eighth grades, periodically interviewing them and assessing their English-language development. In discussing their findings, McKay and Wong establish a contextualist perspective that foregrounds interrelations of discourse and power in the learner’s social environment. The authors identify mutually interacting multiple discourses to which the students were subjected, but of which they were also subjects, and trace the students’ negotiations of dynamic, sometimes contradictory, multiple identities. Adopting B. N. Peirce’s concept of investment, McKay and Wong relate these discourses and identities to the students’ exercise of agency in terms of their positioning in relations of power in both the school and U.S. society.
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