

The intercultural dimension of Chinese community schooling: fluidity and complexity in Chinese migrant identity



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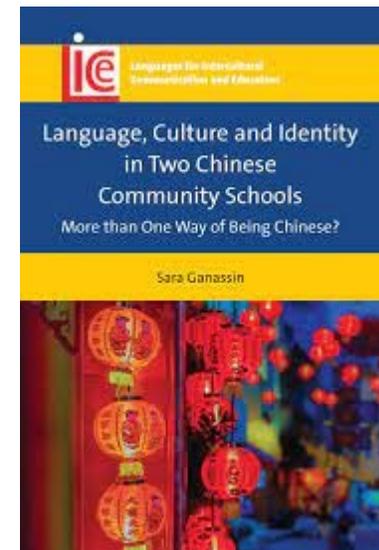
Language, Culture and Identity in Two Chinese Community Schools

Macro-context: Ethnographic study of Chinese heritage (community) language education in England

Project aim: to investigate the social, political and education role of community language education in a migratory context

Key concepts: language, culture and identity through the lens of intercultural communication research

The question ‘**is there more than one way of being Chinese?**’ is addressed from the perspectives of children, parents and teachers attending two Mandarin schools

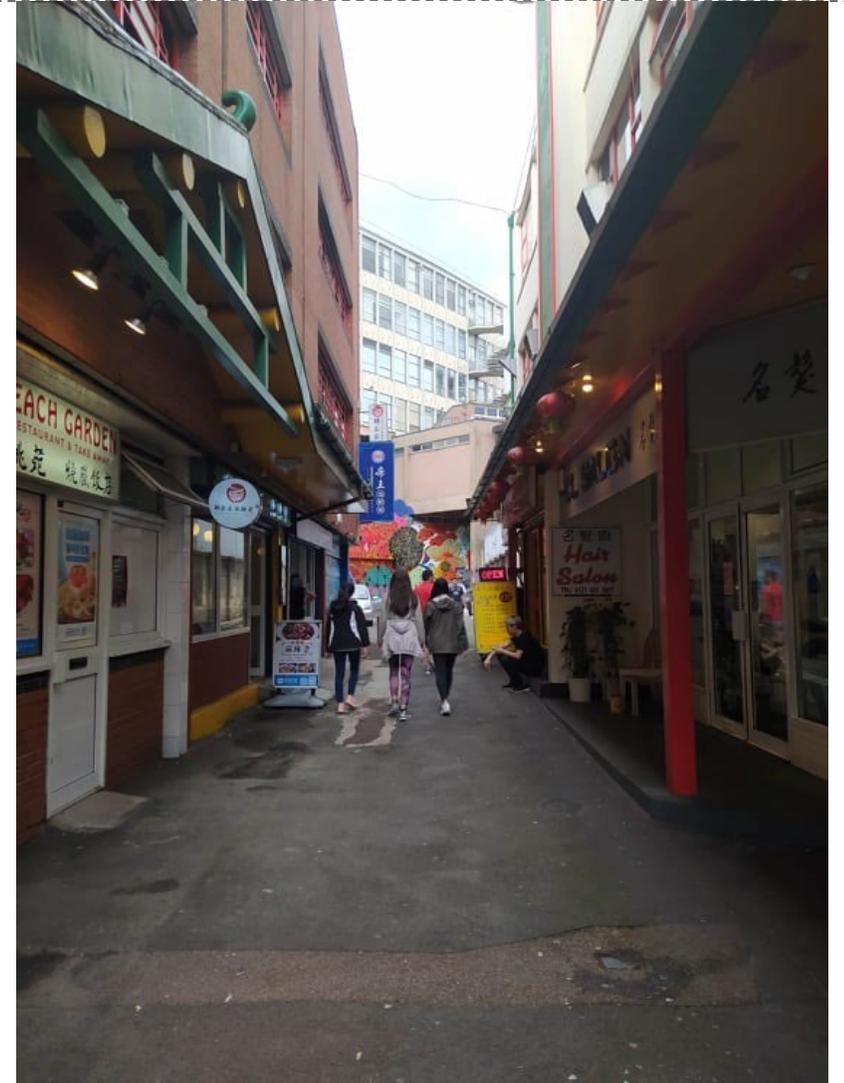


Chinese communities in the UK

Chinese migration started in 17th century and the first sizeable Chinese settlements date back to the 19th century (Li & Zhu, 2009)

Nowadays the British-Chinese community, which constitutes the **third migrant community in the UK**, is a mix of 'old' and 'new' migrants- 400,000 people according to the 2011 Census (0,7% of the population identifies as Han Chinese)

Five (very small) 'Chinatowns' (London, Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle)-many families are scattered in smaller towns



About (Chinese) community education in Britain

Chinese community schools are **voluntary organisations** with a curriculum centred on the teaching of Chinese language (Cantonese and Mandarin) (Wang, 2017).

Shift from Cantonese to Mandarin community schools due in part to the ‘political cachet’ of Mandarin- **learners are not necessarily heritage language speakers of Mandarin** hence the terminological choice ‘community’ schools (Ganassin, 2020; Wang, 2017)

Teaching of language (pupils grouped by proficiency) intertwined with the teaching of ‘**cultural values**’ and traditions

First schools instituted in England in the 1960s; Independent from the mainstream education system

Teachers are often parents and/or volunteers **with little formal training** (Mau et al., 2009; Wang, 2017)



Constructing one's Chinese identity

Adoption of a **bricolage' approach** that brings together a range of theoretical perspectives from applied linguistics, social-psychology, and sociolinguistics (Kincheloe et al., 2017).

Social-constructionism enables us to see **identity as a process** constructed through the relationships that we establish with the world around us.

'Chineseness' is not necessarily related to an affiliation with a particular political entity, but it is **rather related to the complex nature of the 'Chinese world' including its multinational and multicultural dimensions.**

Why an intercultural approach?

'Intercultural encounters' as opportunities for people from different life trajectories to engage with one another. They don't need to happen between people from different countries (Holmes & O'Neill, 2012)

Importance of acknowledging how **different life trajectories are a source of enrichment** rather than obstacles as people move, settle in new contexts and negotiate who they are in relation to the 'other'.

Identity is a crucial and controversial topic in any context of migration and displacement.

Culture and language are bound together and impact on people's identity (Chen & Collier, 2012).

Research Aims

- To explore role and significance of Chinese community schooling from the perspectives of pupils, parents and school staff involved.
- To investigate participants' constructions of culture and language vis-à-vis the schools' agendas and their ideologies
- **To explore how such constructions (of language and culture) support pupils to understand who they are and to shape their identities.**
- To explore the significance of a multilingual researcher approach in this research context.

Data collection and analysis

Participants from two Schools

Children (23 participants aged 4 to 17)

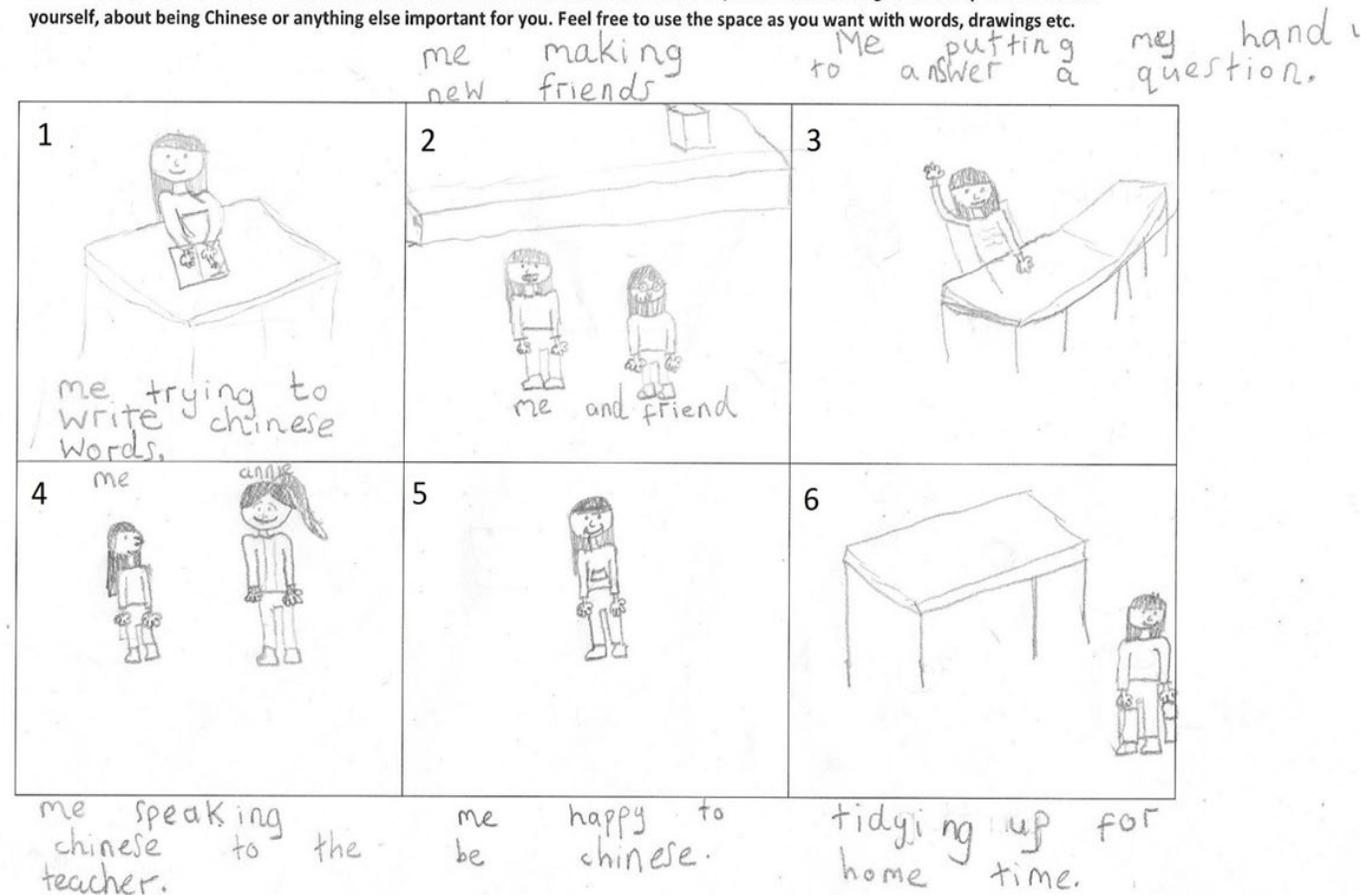
Cartoon storyboards and Venn diagram over 20-30 minutes + focus group discussions

Adults (9 parents, 7 teachers, 2 principals)

One-to-one-semi-structured interviews

Data analysis: Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012); RQs used as organising principles

Use this storyboard to tell the story of one learning moment at the Chinese Community School: something has made you learn about yourself, about being Chinese or anything else important for you. Feel free to use the space as you want with words, drawings etc.



Language in the rhetoric of the schools: Mandarin as (the) Chinese heritage language

Heritage language (HL) as language with particular family relevance (Fishman, 2001) which learners speak or at least understand as it is used by their families (Valdés, 2001).

But

The term “Chinese” language does not refer to one specific language but it is an umbrella terms subsuming at least seven different languages or *fāngyán* 方言 (He, 2008).

However

Mandarin community schools often assume Mandarin Chinese as their pupils’ Chinese Heritage Language.

The situation is more complex.....

Chinese language(s) in the schools

Complexity and hierarchies of Chinese languages involving adults:

[Name] speaks Mandarin ok, she knows the words but she still sounds from a village in Malaysia.
[Chloe, parent, DR school]

I would say we speak proper Chinese in Taiwan but they [Mainlanders] don't. Actually we speak Chinese much better than them.

[Joy, teacher, DR school]

A lot of parents can't speak Mandarin themselves, they speak Cantonese or something else. They cannot engage in any conversation but they want the kids to learn.

[Nala, teacher, AV school]

Maintaining the 'cultural core'

The **adults problematised the (perceived) distance from a Chinese 'cultural core'** and how it potentially impacted on their efforts to preserve Chinese culture and transmit it to their children. For example, the head teacher of Deer River School lamented that:

It is hard to maintain language and culture by ourselves. It's a fight. Because we don't live in China, we and our children don't learn these things in our daily lives. We, parents and teachers, are all in the same boat.

They [children] can never be properly Chinese. That's why they are called British-Chinese. (Philip, parent)

One or many Chinese cultures

All adults were committed to the children 'cultural education' (i.e. traditions, fables). At the same time, parents and teachers offered different interpretations of 'Chinese culture' based on their own life trajectories. **They acknowledged that, culture is a 'living thing' and that China too is changing:**

It's not just about children learning real Chinese language and culture. It's about providing the nearest thing that you can get to going to China.

There is a generational gap in how adults and children see culture; the young generations subscribe to different sets of values not just here in Europe, [but] even in China things have changed. [...] that's how the society has changed, is not necessarily westernised, but just different.

China is changing and moving forward very quickly. We are all changing with it.

Spaces for people to come together and learn from one another

Adults saw the **provision of social, economic and cultural capital** (Bourdieu, 1986) for their children as benefits of community schooling (i.e. future professional opportunities). They also valued how the schools are important **community spaces** where adults who could otherwise feel isolated, come together.

A teacher explained:

I have heard some parents saying that [the school] is important for them. You know some housewives. Their lives are very simple. It is the same as if you live in China. For them is very important to get a sense of community and make more friends.

Speak Chinese and be(come) Chinese

Children are not necessarily Mandarin heritage language speakers as illustrated by pupils in Deer River school:

Violet: I like Cantonese.

Lily: I like Cantonese.

Roy: I like Cantonese.

Julian: Cantonese it's my first language.

*Roy: English and Cantonese are my first languages, we went to Cantonese school for few years and then we came here (...) **I can't speak Mandarin but when I speak Cantonese some people would think that I am just local.***

Nevertheless, other varieties like Cantonese to them assume the value of CHL as retaining family relevance and emotional significance:

Sara: So do you speak Chinese when you are not in the school?

Kitty and Yvonne: Yes, we speak Cantonese, Hakka sometimes, quite a lot of English.

Pupils' perspectives on the importance of attending a Mandarin Chinese community school

Language related benefits: a) language as socio-economic capital; b) language and communication; c) language and identity

Other benefits: a) retention of Chinese heritage and culture b) social benefit: community school as a safe space c) social benefit: making friends d) social benefit: relationship with the teachers e) learning other skills

Chinese community school as a safe space to engage with the local community

Being in the school as seemed **very important for children who recently moved to the UK**, this as they often experience a sense of loneliness in their mainstream school where they feel that they cannot connect with classmates and teachers’.

Lei represented in his cartoon: “In the Chinese school (we) can learn English and also we can make friends 相交 xiangjiao with Western people who like the Chinese language. Here things are normal”.

“We can feel that we are part of China”

Importance of **learning Chinese culture through experience**— such as involvement in celebrations at the school both for migrant and British-born children:

Meili, who had recently moved from China: “You don’t need to study Chinese [language] but you could forget Chinese culture

Yvonne: Our ancestors were great and intelligent, no less than the Victorians or anyone else. Just because British people don’t know about the Chinese, it doesn’t mean that they are not great

Feeling different, feeling special: “I am happy to be Chinese”

The school has a positive impact on children regardless of their language skills:

*Roy: **It feels good being in an environment [the Chinese school] where you are not so different from everybody else. Where you are not THE Chinese kid.***

Sara: Since you have started the [Chinese] school do you think that you changed the way you look about yourself?

Kitty: I feel proud if it's Chinese New Year and I am the only one in my class that can speak Chinese and all the English people get jealous because they don't speak Chinese.

*Yvonne: They just ask me a lot of questions in the English school. Even the teacher goes “wow” because she doesn't know much about China. So **I feel that because China is special and interesting I can be proud too.***

Some Conclusions

Acquiring language proficiency should not be considered a primary (or the sole) aim of community language schooling.

Pupils valued the ability to develop **self-awareness and identification in a Chinese social in-group**. At the same time, they **overcame the isolation** that some of them experienced in their mainstream school through a sense of affiliation with other pupils sharing similar life experiences.

With their focus on **non-dominant languages and 'cultures'** community schools represent a space for adults and children to explore who they are and what 'being Chinese' (but also being 'Polish', 'Italian', 'Portuguese' means to them.

Interculturality does not exclusively pertain to the relationships between 'the Chinese' and 'the non-Chinese' but **exists within the Chinese communities** as adults and children bring with them different understandings of 'being Chinese'.

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Thank you 谢谢 Grazie
Questions? Comments?