

Marginality in Heritage Language Education of Overseas Chinese Children and Solutions

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Abstract: Based on a questionnaire survey, a comparative study of 394 learners of Chinese languages of Chinese reading proficiency of overseas Chinese children in seven European nations was made. Statistics and correlation analysis show that overseas Chinese children in Romania have the best Chinese reading proficiency, and the primary ways of their Chinese language learning reflect that overseas Chinese in Romania deal with the marginality in heritage language education by returning or staying China for schooling, building up Chinese-populated communities near private schools, setting up neighbour-watch study groups in Chinese communities. Most participants in the survey of Romania were overseas Chinese children from Wenzhou, China, known as “Oriental Jews”, whose Chinese language proficiency shows the effectiveness of dealing with marginality in heritage language education.

1. Introduction

Early Chinese immigrants settled down in France and the Netherlands more than a century ago, and then they expanded to Italy, Spain and some western European nations. About two or three decades ago, a large number of Chinese immigrants poured into Hungary, Greece, Romania and some southern and eastern European countries at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. Being in multicultural communities, overseas Chinese children in Europe nowadays are the products of the local education system since childhood, but most of their parents or grandparents are from China, which means Chinese language—their heritage language—are most likely to be the language to be used in their family. Heritage language plays an important role of connection of migrant individuals and their ethnic groups.^[1] Descendants of Chinese diaspora, no matter in school, family, or community setting, are under the framework of multicultural diversity. Plenty of studies on the maintenance and shifting of heritage language of overseas Chinese mainly focuses current status on the bilingual model of children of Chinese family^[2-7]. Yuan (2020) considered that heritage language identity enhancement depended largely on school education, instead of family education solely.^[8]

Marginality as a social phenomenon, which best describes the characteristics of overseas Chinese children, was first proposed by Robert Park in 1928.^[9] Stonequist (1964) emphasizes the psychological uncertainty of such individuals by demonstrating the discords and harmonies, repulsions and attractions of the two worlds that marginal men inhabit.^[10] Marginal men typically react to cross-cutting pressures in four directions: assimilation, return, poise, and transcendence.^[11] The concept of marginality has offered a powerful framework to examine individuals or groups who leave his original group or culture without making a satisfactory adjustment to another, who have the feeling of not belonging anywhere and of finding oneself in the intersection between two or more cultures.^[12]

However, previous studies, focused on the influential variables, the familial, such as classroom or school settings and how they impacted the acquisition of heritage language. Few researches provide qualitative and quantitative studies with comparative perspective, especially a comparative study of different nations and then investigation of influential factors from the social settings. Heritage language proficiency is an important variable to examine how the marginal men perceive their heritage language identity.

This paper will not examine the overseas Chinese from a micro perspective of individuals; instead, it's from the perspective of sociology. Namely, overseas Chinese, as an ethnic group, will be discussed. To be specific, aims of the study are listed as follow:

1. How good is the heritage language proficiency of overseas Chinese children nowadays maintained and how is it correlation with their age in some selected European nations respectively?
2. Is there any country in Europe whose Overseas Chinese children demonstrate a good proficiency and what are their ways of learning heritage language?
3. How do Chinese deal with marginality in heritage language education of children in the country with the best proficiency and what ethnic features are revealed when they figure out the solutions?

2. Methods

This study on heritage language proficiency is based on the dataset of online Sinology lecture project for overseas Chinese students in France, Italy, Spain, Greece, Holland, Hungary and Romania from January, 2021 to April 2021. Those Sinology lectures were held by a university of China through online teaching software and were given to Children in the seven European nations one nation after another, during which Chinese language proficiency of children could be observed. A clear disparity of Chinese language proficiency could be seen among the children from seven European nations during the project.

As a supplement of quantitative study of Chinese language proficiency, an online questionnaire—*A Survey on Current Status of Chinese Language in European Countries* was distributed to students who attended the lectures and data were collected real time. Sampling was restrained to those overseas Chinese children who have the access to internet and attended the lectures in seven different European nations. All participants were limited to before college graduation, namely under the age of 23 years old. A total of 394 valid questionnaires were collected, including 44 in France, 58 in Italy, 84 in Spain, 51 in the Netherlands, 52 in Greece, 71 in Romania and 34 in Hungary.

Among the European Chinese schools investigated, in all the three Chinese Language Schools of in Italy, Athens Chinese Language School in Greece, Bucharest Bethlehem Church School in Romania, Budapest Guanghua Chinese Language School in Hungary, and the Bucharest Bethlehem Church School in Romania, Bosi Language School in Spain, students use Chinese language textbooks published by People's Education Press of China (which are also the textbooks used in

mainland China), and that's the reason why Chinese reading proficiency of all overseas Chinese children in the survey adopted the five grading systems of Chinese reading proficiency in mainland China, namely, within 1600 words (grades 1 and 2 in primary schools of mainland Chinese), within 2500 words (grades 3 and 4 in primary schools of mainland Chinese), within 3000 words (grades 5 and 6 in primary schools of mainland Chinese), and over 3000 words (junior high schools or higher of mainland Chinese). For kids under the age of 6 who participated in the survey, there is no specific standard set up for kindergarten children in the grading system, therefore the intermediate-level of YCT(Youth Chinese Test) targeted for foreign young students was used as the standard^[13], which is mainly for primary and secondary school students who have learned Chinese for 2 or 3 hours per week in Chinese language schools in foreign countries for more than two semesters and have a reading proficiency of 400 most commonly used Chinese words. Therefore, the age brackets of Chinese children in the paper are divided in accordance with Chinese primary schools: under 6 years old (before primary school), 7-8 years old (grades 1 and 2 in primary schools of mainland Chinese), 9-10 years old (grades 3 and 4 in primary schools of mainland Chinese), 11-12 years old (grades 5 and 6 in primary schools of mainland Chinese) and above 13 years old (junior high schools or higher of mainland Chinese). And then SPSS24.0 is used for the analysis to single out the country whose overseas Chinese children have the best Chinese proficiency.

3. Results

According to the data gleaned from the questionnaire, this paper makes an analysis of age and Chinese language reading proficiency of the overseas children in the seven countries, in order to find out which countries have the closest matching percentages of the children in the different age brackets and with Chinese reading proficiency. Based on the chosen countries, a correlation analysis is made to find the coefficient of the seven European countries as a whole and separately, in order to rule out the countries with the closest matching percentage of the two variables of age and reading proficiency, but no significant correlation. Then the country with the best matching results of two variables and significant correlation will be under close examination of ways of learning Chinese to explore how they keep up with their Chinese language proficiency.

3.1. Analysis of Two Variables of Children of Chinese Diaspora in Seven European Countries

3.1.1 Age

Table 1: Age brackets of Chinese offspring in seven European countries.

Country		Under 6	7-8	9-10	11-12	Above 13	Total
France	Number	0	4	14	9	17	44
	Percentage	0.0%	9.1%	31.8%	20.5%	38.6%	100.0%
Italy	Number	0	25	18	12	3	58
	Percentage	0.0%	43.1%	31.0%	20.7%	5.2%	100.0%
Spain	Number	3	8	21	29	23	84
	Percentage	3.6%	9.5%	25.0%	34.5%	27.4%	100.0%
the Netherlands	Number	7	3	9	9	23	51
	Percentage	13.7%	5.9%	17.6%	17.6%	45.1%	100.0%
Greece	Number	0	10	5	6	31	52

	Percentage	0.0%	19.2%	9.6%	11.5%	59.6%	100.0%
Romania	Number	6	2	3	5	45	71
	Percentage	8.5%	2.8%	4.2%	7.0%	63.4%	100.0%
Hungary	Number	0	2	2	14	16	34
	Percentage	0.0%	5.9%	5.9%	41.2%	47.1%	100.0%
Total	Number	16	54	72	84	168	394
	Percentage	4.1%	13.7%	18.3%	21.3%	42.6%	100.0%

Source: based on author's fieldwork from January 27 to April 15, 2021.

It can be seen from Table 1 that among the overseas Chinese children of European countries in this survey, children under the age of 12 have a larger percentage in France, Italy and Spain. Children under 12 years old and over 13 years old are roughly evenly distributed in Hungary and the Netherlands. Romania has the most participants above the age of 13, accounting for 63.4%, and Greece comes the next, with 59.6%.

Only 16 children under 6 years old participated in the survey. The number of primary school students aged 7-8, 9-10 and 11-12 is relatively equal; the number of children over 13 years old is 168, accounting for 42.6% of the total. The ratio of children under 12 and over 13 years old in this survey is 1.35:1, which means that numbers of children of those two age groups are roughly equal.

3.1.2 Chinese reading proficiency

Table 2: Chinese reading proficiency of overseas Chinese children in seven European countries.

Country		Within 400 words	Within 1600 words	Within 2500 words	Within 3000 words	Above 3000 words	Total
		France	Number	20	12	5	2
	Percentage	45.5%	27.3%	11.4%	4.5%	11.4%	100.0%
Italy	Number	24	19	7	5	3	58
	Percentage	41.4%	32.8%	12.1%	8.6%	5.2%	100.0%
Spain	Number	18	14	20	17	15	84
	Percentage	21.4%	16.7%	23.8%	20.2%	17.9%	100.0%
the Netherlands	Number	31	5	5	2	8	51
	Percentage	60.8%	9.8%	9.8%	3.9%	15.7%	100.0%
Greece	Number	7	8	6	14	17	52
	Percentage	13.5%	15.4%	11.5%	26.9%	32.7%	100.0%
Romania	Number	5	9	8	4	45	71
	Percentage	7.0%	12.7%	11.3%	5.6%	63.4%	100.0%
Hungary	Number	0	5	1	11	17	34
	Percentage	0.0%	14.7%	2.9%	32.4%	50.0%	100.0%
Total	Number	105	72	52	55	110	394
	Percentage	26.6%	18.3%	13.2%	14.0%	27.9%	100.0%

Source: based on author's fieldwork from January 27 to April 15, 2021.

According to Table 2, countries with the largest percentage of above 3000 words in the seven European countries in this survey is Romania, accounting for 63.4% followed by Hungary with 50%, and then Greece with 32.7%; percentages of children above 3000 words in the rest countries are lower than 30%. Comparing Table 1 and table 2, we can see that the percentages of children over 13 years old in France and the Netherlands are 38.6% and 45.1% respectively, however, only 11.4% and 15.7% of children can read a reading vocabulary over 3000, which shows that the latter percentages are almost tripled by the former. Percentages of children over 13 years old in Spain and Greece are 27.4% and 59.6% respectively, while only 17.9% and 32.7% of children have a reading vocabulary over 3000, about 1.53 times and 1.82 times respectively as the ratio of age to Chinese reading proficiency. In Italy and Romania, the percentages of children over the age of 13 and children with above 3000 words are equal, 5.2% to 5.2% and 63.4% to 63.4% respectively, but percentages of the rest age brackets under 12 in Italy are significantly higher than the percentage of their corresponding reading proficiency level, which means children in younger age groups are not doing well in Chinese reading proficiency. Percentage of children with a reading vocabulary over 3000 words in Hungary is even higher than that of children above 13 years old, 50.0% to 47.1% (one child in number difference).

Take the overall perspective of the all children of seven European countries; the number of children above 13 is 168, while the number for corresponding language proficiency is 110, which means their reading proficiency is obviously below their age group. Besides, the ratio of children with vocabulary within 3000 words to those above 3000 words is 2.58:1, which is significantly larger than the radio 1.35:1 of those under the age 12 to above 13. And this indicates that the overall reading proficiency of heritage language of participants is in a poor state.

In conclusion, through the cross exam of Table 1 and Table 2, Romania and Hungary have the closest matching percentages of children in the different age brackets and with Chinese reading proficiency.

3.2 Correlation of 2 Variables of overseas Chinese children in Seven European Countries

Table 3: Correlation of age and Chinese reading proficiency of overseas Chinese Children in seven European countries.

Kendall's- tau_b								
	Europe	France	Italy	Spain	the Netherlands	Greece	Romania	Hungary
Correlation Coefficient	.421**	.257*	.285*	.433**	.129	.749**	.390**	.136
Sig.(2-tailed)	.000	.049	.013	.000	.289	.000	.000	.390
Numbers	394	44	58	84	51	52	71	34

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: based on author's fieldwork from January 27 to April 15, 2021.

According to Table 3, it can be seen that under the condition of significance $0 \leq \alpha \leq 0.05$, there are six correlations between the two variables. Take all the 394 participants in seven European countries as a whole, age and Chinese reading proficiency are significantly related. The correlated five countries include France, Italy, Spain, Greece and Romania. Among them, the correlation coefficient of Romania is 0.390, and Sig (P)=0.000, which shows their significant correlation. But the correlation coefficient of Hungary is 0.136, and Sig(P)=0.390 > 0.05, which shows that there is no significant correlation between age and Chinese reading proficiency and Hungary will be ruled out in the following discussion.

To sum up, Romania has the best matching percentages of two variables and correlation. And it will be under close examination of ways of learning Chinese to find out how they maintain their heritage language proficiency.

4. Discussion

Romania is the country whose overseas Chinese children have the best Chinese reading proficiency from the analysis of questionnaire survey. This result coincides with the observation during Sinology lectures project. Compared with the interviews of overseas Chinese in Romania and the rest six European countries, it shows that children in Romania learn heritage language can be categorized in four different ways: take Chinese classes in private or public schools; learn Chinese from their families; take classes in online or offline Chinese language schools; learn from with playmates or peers. Importance attached to the four ways is arranged in that order for most interviews in Romania although interviews employ the ways in different strategies, whereas children from other European nations use less strategies and in an almost reversed order. Therefore, why and how overseas Chinese in Romania use those strategies as their solutions for marginality in heritage language education will be under discussion.

4.1 Historical background

Immigration history of Chinese diaspora in Romania started in the 1990s since its neighbouring country Hungary commenced its mutual visa-free treaty with China in October 1988, which caused a fever of immigration to Hungary in the following year and resulted its relatively later immigration history compared to other six European countries. Romania, being adjacent to Hungary, became one of the favourite countries for their business expansion because the first group of Chinese immigrants in Hungary was mostly businessmen. In the early 1990s, Chinese immigrants who first settled in Romania mostly came from Russia or Hungary. According to the statistics in 2013, there were about 4000 Chinese immigrants in Romania with another 6000 people for short visits.^[14] Due to the booming trade and business in recent years between China and Romania, more and more overseas Chinese in Romania become transmigrants (migrants travel between emigrant and immigrant countries). The number of overseas Chinese in Romania ranges from about 7000 to around 10,000 nowadays (excluding the employees of some Chinese international corporations, such as Huawei), which is considered as the European nation with the least Chinese diaspora compared to the rest six nations in discussion. The limited density of overseas Chinese population is a major cause to be factored in educational marginality.

4.2 Solutions for marginality of heritage language education

4.2.1 Leave children behind in China

A large percent of overseas Chinese in Romanian are transmigrants who leave their children behind in China. Transmigrants and their society in origin country have forged a dense web of transnational relations, which is functioned as a link in a continuous trans-territorial social formation. And the formation is oblivious in the constant back and forth traveling. Transmigration provides ways to spread people's lives across national borders and forms a transnational habitus.^[15] The majority of the overseas Chinese in Romania immigrated after the 1990s with the economic transformation of Eastern Europe and economic gains were the main purpose of their migration and still are. Its capital, Bucharest, ranked among 50 best start-up locations worldwide according to the latest report in May, 2021, ranking 33rd.^[16] And through hard work and financial improvement of earlier

immigrants upon years, they bettered off and then invited more friends and relatives to Romania for business. They are smart enough to make the planning of family or even their extended families and prefer friends and relatives old enough to give a hand in business. As most children are not old enough, some parents leave their children behind in China for schooling so that they can focus on business because businessmen usually don't have enough time for picking up or dropping off children or taking them to extra classes. Therefore, some Chinese parents foster their children with relatives and friends so that children can go to local school in China and those children never go to schools in Romania. But during summer and winter vacation of public school in China, those left-behind children usually go to Romania for family reunion and vacation.

4.2.2 Send children back to China

Frequent entry and exit of China is another important feature of overseas Chinese in Romania and some children who stay in Romania usually mobilize with their parents. After several years of living or schooling experience in Romania, children usually pick up adequate Romanian language and are sent back to China to learn Chinese language or other reasons. During the questionnaire survey in Romania (that period happened to fall on the Chinese Spring Festival break of 2021), 59.2% participants in the survey were staying in China (including those have been staying in China before) even though it was very difficult to get back China during Covid-19 pandemic (e.g., all direct flights Romania to China have been cancelled; two weeks of mandatory quarantine in designated hotels and one more week at home, the flight tickets and hotel prices were very pricy), many overseas Chinese managed to come back China against all the odds. After children get back China, they can either learn Chinese with families or go to local public schools. Some interviews who were staying in China during the survey claimed then had been back for three or five years and that they might not go back to Romania again. Even for some recent returning children, it's hard to tell if they will go back to Romania after the Spring Festival 2021 because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Returning immigrants happened before and the number is growing year by year. For example, Qintian, an adjacent county used to belong to Wenzhou, reported 1.88% of overseas Chinese returned in 2000, 18.57% in 2008, and that number skyrocketed to 79.56% in the years after.^[17]

4.2.3 Build up Chinese-populated communities in Romania

Due to the early start-up of overseas Chinese in Romania, parents from Wenzhou are more successful and financially well-off, so they send their children to local private schools in Romania. Local organizations and associations of Wenzhou people with children going to primary and high school make an agreement to live near some selected private schools which are promising to provide Chinese language courses. Then those private schools, due to the large number of overseas Chinese children in the Chinese-populated communities and the needs for the language course, offer Chinese language as an elective course, and nearly all overseas Chinese children choose the course. More than 50% of the overseas Chinese children staying in Romania go to those private schools. Those children usually don't go to the church school so as to give more opportunities to those who are in need, for example children who can't afford private school and don't have the access to Chinese classes in public schools. That's why percentage of "Chinese classes in private or public schools" as a learning way in the survey is not high enough because most of those children didn't participate although the majority of them study in the private schools. About 80% of Chinese diaspora live in the capital Bucharest, which is one of the results of Chinese-populated communities. And early settlers in Bucharest attract more Chinese immigrants to move here.

4.2.4 Migrate from Romania to other European Countries

Part of businessmen of overseas Chinese in Romania is doing business with some other European countries, which means that they consider Romania as a stopover. As participants in the survey included children of the members of Rui'an Association in Romania who stayed in Romania in the past three years, some participants used to stay in Romania and then moved to other European countries. According to the survey, the children of overseas Chinese who lived in Romania in the past three years now live in a wide range of countries, including 59.2% in China, 28.2% in Italy, 5.6% in Germany, 2.8% in France, and 1.4% in Spain. During the survey, only 28.2% of the Chinese children were staying in Romania. 14.31% of all 700,000 Wenzhou emigrants live in Italy, which account for the largest emigration country of Wenzhou.^[18] Some immigrants used to live in Romania and then immigrate to Italy for various reasons. Business, of course, is one of the main reasons.

4.2.5 Build up Neighbour-watch Chinese learning communities

For some Chinese parents who have moderate education backgrounds and enough available time in Romania, they will build up some neighbour-watch Chinese learning communities. Namely the children are organized in study groups and parents take turns to teach the children in the group if their children don't go to private schools or they consider two-hour per week Chinese language class in the church not sufficient enough. Those children in study groups are usually children of similar age and on weekends, they hang out together, which is another stimulus of their heritage language learning.

4.3 Result of few assimilated children

With all the above solutions, Chinese language proficiency of overseas Chinese children in Romania is slightly uneven, but on the whole, the number of Chinese children who are assimilated and use Romanian as the language is relatively small. Results show that only 7% of overseas Chinese children use Romanian in their daily communication, and 15.5% of them can switch between Romanian and Chinese, which is much smaller than 73.2% children who use Chinese in their daily communication. Another 4.2% of Chinese children use languages other than Chinese and Romanian in their daily communication.

A short immigration history which guarantees a good heritage language environment both in the communities and family, results in few assimilated children in Romania. Children have stronger internal drive to learn Chinese so that they can communicate well with their comparisons. In addition, Chinese parents in Romania have strong ethnic group identity and awareness of the importance of Chinese language, so they attach great importance to their children's Chinese learning. Consequently, the majority of Romanian Chinese children are sent to private schools to have Chinese language courses.

5. Conclusion

A comparative study shows that Chinese language reading proficiency of overseas Chinese children varies among seven European countries. Romania is the country whose overseas Chinese children have the best matching Chinese language proficiency with their age in different age group.

It's found that they maintain the high Chinese language proficiency by leaving the children behind in China so that Children can go to school in China, or return to China, or live in Chinese-populated communities in Romania so that private schools offer Chinese language course, or have "neighbour-watch" study groups in some Chinese communities, or use a mix mode for Chinese language reinforcement during vacation, or take Romania as a stopover and move to other European

countries. All solutions result in few assimilated children in Romania and the heritage language is well maintained. Those solutions reveal how psychological uncertainty of Stonequist's research and four reactional directions of Weisberger's research for overseas Chinese as an ethnic group. How overseas Chinese in Romania deal with the educational marginality is advisable for other ethnic groups in European countries if heritage language is meant to be maintained.

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