Language transmission among multilingual Chinese immigrant families in the Northern Netherlands

Eva J. Daussà and Yeshan Qian
University of Groningen | City University of New York

Maintaining heritage languages is of vital significance for multicultural families. We present a study of Mandarin transmission among ten Dutch Chinese families in Groningen (Netherlands) associated to a local Saturday school. Data from semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire reveal that personal, integrative, and instrumental values, all play a role in language choices. Remarkably, with general positive attitudes towards multilingualism in Dutch society, families too feel encouraged to maintain Mandarin. Nevertheless, they report lack of school and institutional support, and criticisms about their ability to belong in Dutch society. Parents wish that teachers attached more importance to their heritage languages, rather than solely focusing on children’s learning of Dutch (and English), and that their own multiculturality (not only that of their children) be embraced. Likewise, parents are critical of the Chinese school, and wish teachers better accommodated to the sensitivities and practices their children are used to from their Dutch school experience.

Keywords: heritage language transmission, multilingual Chinese families, family language policy, Dutch-Chinese communities in the Netherlands

1. Introduction

People with Chinese heritage in the Netherlands form a relatively closed-knit community structured around their specific ethnic group. As the fifth largest group with non-Western heritage in the country, their numbers are between 77,000 and 150,000 (CBS, 2010; Li & Juffermans, 2018). Two thirds have roots in mainland China and Hongkong, while the remaining one-third mainly originate from other countries, including Indonesia and Suriname (Gijsberts et al., 2011).
Dutch children of Chinese immigrants hold a polycentric identity that simultaneously combines Dutch and (a diversity of) Chinese identifiers, structured around co-occurring yet context-specific centers of language and culture (Li & Juffermans, 2018). One such pivotal element is the maintenance of the family heritage language. It plays a crucial role in the construction of self, in addition to facilitating a more harmonious relationship between generations – both of which bringing the well-known psychological and social benefits derived from a community with happier, better adjusted and balanced individuals (Wong Fillmore, 2000, De Houwer, 2015; Li & Juffermans, 2018). Immigrant parents, indeed, often times express their wish to transmit their multilingualism to their children (Lao, 2004; cf. Lanz, Daussà & Pera-Ros, 2019; Velázquez, 2018). Research conducted in a variety of contexts and populations has consistently shown that families’ motivations for maintaining their heritage languages go beyond perceived necessity and projected opportunity, as the weight of integrative and personal values is higher than previously assumed (Juarros-Daussà, 2013; Zhu & Wei, 2016). For example, based on the data elicited from three multilingual Chinese families living in the United Kingdom, Zhu and Wei suggested that, while it is necessary for transnational families to learn the language of the country where they reside because of the education, employment, and social integration opportunities it provides, their motivations for the maintenance of their heritage languages are often related to the families’ sense of belonging and self-imagination as transnational families, and play a fundamental role in the construction of concepts such as where and what home is, as well as their ability to project into the future instead of being tied by their past (Zhu & Wei, 2016; also Cohen, 1997). Furthermore, Luo and Wiseman’s research on Chinese-American children in the United States has shown that children’s decisions to maintain their ethnic language were influenced not only by parental attitudes, but also by the degree of cohesion between (grand)parents and children, as well as peer linguistic behavior, and timing of migration (Luo & Wiseman, 2000).

Compared to the Chinese American diasporas, relatively little is known about European contexts (Wei, 2018). Against this backdrop, the present study is set out to explore language choices and linguistic attitudes among families of Chinese origin recruited from the *Stitching Chinese School Groningen*, a Saturday heritage school in the North of the Netherlands. Our focus is on parents’ motivations and expectations regarding their children’s Mandarin proficiency, including their reasons to send their children to Chinese school, as well as their experiences both with the school and the extended environment. We hope to contribute the voices of a small group of Chinese Dutch families, in order not only to start filling the empirical gap, but to point out interesting issues to further focus if we
are to capture the experiences of this population and tend to the issues that really would serve them best.

2.1 Family language policy, transmission strategies, and parental motivations

It is commonly recognized that all meaningful language policy is eventually operated at home; hence the growing field of Family Language Policy, henceforth FLP (e.g., King, Fogle & Terry, 2008; Curdt-Christiansen, 2009; Caldas, 2012; King & Fogle, 2013; Lanza & Wei, 2016; cf. Spolsky 2009 Family Language Management). The field of FLP has evolved quickly from the pioneering diary studies of ethnographic character dating back to a century ago (Ronjat, 1913; Leopold, 1939–1949), and it has increasingly incorporated techniques from psycholinguistics and discourse analysis (Lanza, 1997). It has also broadened to include a varied range of family types and language combinations, as well as an updated conceptualization of the family as a dynamic system, including the significance of child agency in choices of identity and reformulation of the family unit as instantiated by language (King, 2016; Gafaranga, 2010; King, 2013). Finally, recent studies have focused on trilingualism and other forms of multilingualism, which we now know are common worldwide (King, 2016; Curdt-Christiansen, 2009). Currently, thus, many studies focus on transnational, multilingual and globally distributed populations and families beyond the traditional family type, with increasingly great diversity and adaptability in terms of research approaches (King, 2016).

FLP is implemented through (often ‘invisible’, Pakir 1994) linguistic practices, which are also labeled as “transmission strategies”. For example, a popular strategy among parents who want to raise bilingual children is the “One-parent-one-language” (OPOL) strategy (Barron-Hauwaert, 2004; Döpke, 1992). Initiated by Grammont (1902), this approach was regarded as the optimal method to raise balanced bilinguals who would avoid mixing up their two languages (Bain & Yu, 1980). It was claimed that OPOL prevented children from being linguistically puzzled (Eisenberg, Murkoff & Hathoway, 1989), hence avoiding resulting language delays—an idea that is still alive in some contexts, in spite of the fact that no cogent evidence has ever been found to support that language confusion or delay be the result of rearing children multilingually, regardless of the family strategy employed (Lanza, 1992; King & Fogle, 2006b).

Another example of documented family language strategies include speaking solely the minority language in the home. Likewise, in some families one parent uses only one language with the children, while the other parent uses both (Barron-Hauwaert, 2004). Moreover, in some families parents do not enforce a strict separation between languages in their repertoire, regularly engaging in what
has come to be known as translanguaging practices (Cummins, 2008; García, 2009).

Regarding parental motivations to raise their children multilingually, a popular idea is the belief that bilingualism be correlated with cognitive advantages (King & Fogle, 2006b), as is the positive economic impact of knowing two languages (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009; Lao, 2004). It should be noted that, while the first statement would hold for any combination of languages, the second is contingent to the status of the particular language in the socio-economic global and local dynamics, with some languages indeed contributing to the potential economic capital of their speakers, and other languages bringing no obvious economic or professional benefits and opportunities. In the latter case, other factors are to be identified to explain their transmission.

One analytical proposal is presented in Juarros-Daussà (2013). In her study of language transmission choices and ideologies among American Catalan families residing in New York City, she adapts ideas from language learning motivational studies (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Dörnyei, 2003) in order to analyze the major factors influencing parental choices. She differentiates between instrumental reasons (having to do with practical goals, such as economic and academic benefits), integrational reasons (having to do with feeling part of a community and fully partaking in their activities), and personal reasons (having to do with the prestige associated with the language, the pleasure derived from knowing it, and the like). Among them, Juarros-Daussà found out that personal values were the most determinant factor in the transmission of the minority language Catalan among the studied population, while instrumental reasons were the main factor determining parents’ choice of Spanish, the other family heritage language, “either by adopting it for daily communication, by signing their children up for Spanish classes, or by using a third person as a more or less regular babysitter or nanny” (Juarros-Daussà, 2013: 152). In many cases, maintaining the minority heritage language helped parents (and their children) deal with the reported multilayeredness derived from their immigrant experience (cf. Juarros-Daussà & Lanz, 2009, Zhu & Wei, 2016; Li & Juffermans, 2018).

2.2 Language schools and social networks

Heritage languages can be supported through various means outside of the family, ranging from public school instruction to after school or weekend language courses managed by the community. On occasion, these schools receive the support from governments of former homelands, although oftentimes diaspora communities find their needs either not sufficiently supported, or inadequately addressed by official agencies, a situation exacerbated in the case of Stateless languages (Casesnoves
Juarros-Daussà, 2013). However, while research has indicated that such language learning schools and programs play a significant role in the maintenance of the particular language (Lao, 2004; Hummel, 2014), the impact of school-based programs for language learning is rather limited: it is language use and practice in the home that plays the most significant role in maintaining a language across generations (Lao, 2004; Hakuta & d’Andrea, 1992; Hakuta & Pease-Alvarez, 1994).

Indeed, when it comes to linguistic proficiency in the heritage language, social networks are a crucial factor. Raschka, Li and Lee (2002), for instance, note that children who had the opportunity to use Cantonese, especially with no or low degree of code-switching, with their close family members or close friends of the older generations, usually tended to have higher proficiency than children who lacked such opportunity. Likewise, Tannenbaum and Howie (2002) found that among Chinese immigrant children in Australia, those with more integrated families were more likely to maintain their multilingualism. Similarly, Park & Sarkar (2007) also showed that the maintenance of the minority language is not a barrier for the acquisition of the societal language, if the relations between the parents and the children are cohesive and secure. Finally, Luo & Wiseman found that, while children were likely to hold relatively more negative attitudes towards their family language and to employ it less often and less proficiently when the impact of English-speaking peers appeared the more potent, Chinese-speaking peers exerted a positive effect on children’s language maintenance (Luo & Wiseman, 2000).

3. Chinese Dutch families in Groningen

For our study, we examine language use and linguistic attitudes in ten multilingual Dutch Chinese families recruited through the Stichting Chinese School Groningen, a Saturday school which at the time of writing has been operating for over 30 years. The school offers classes at different levels, ranging from beginner to advanced, as well as oral Chinese classes, and a teaching training program. In addition, it plays an active role in encouraging students to participate in diverse related activities, such as the Global Chinese Composition Contest, the Spring Festival Gala and so on, and the school’s students have reaped numerous prizes in numerous occasions. This heritage language school, situated in the center of the Northern Dutch city of Groningen, has not only attracted an impressive number of heritage Chinese young people, but also a large number of Dutch students without any family links to China. Our empirical data comes from a combination of qualitative interviews and a short questionnaire.
3.1 Participants

The participants of this research were the parents of ten Chinese Dutch immigrant families who sent their children to learn Mandarin in the aforementioned school. Their detailed demographic and background information is presented in the tables at the Appendix.

As shown in Table 1 (see Appendix), most of the Chinese immigrant parents have been living in the Netherlands for more than fifteen years, and they indicate Mandarin as their first language. Although the parental migratory trajectories differ, almost all of the children were born in the Netherlands, although almost all of them have visited China, with the majority of them staying one month each time except in one family, in which the child was born and lived in China until the age of seven.

3.2 Semi-structured interviews and brief questionnaire

Stichting Chinese School Groningen opens only on Saturdays, assuming that during the week children attend regular Dutch schools. Qian visited the school several times, held informal conversations in Mandarin with parents and teachers, and arranged formal interviews helped by the chairman of the parents’ association. Questions for the formal interviews were based on these initial conversations.

Participants were told that research was being conducted about the lives of Chinese Dutch families, with special focus on their language habits. Permission was asked to audio-record the interview, and obtained in all cases. The interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes each, and they were conducted in the school’s premises, either as the parents dropped their children for class, or when they came to pick them up. As a consequence, the surroundings and atmosphere were ideally conducive to the task, since the adult conversation proceeded in a relatively quiet setting and without disruption.

After being translated in order to facilitate analysis by the research team, interview data were reviewed and coded by themes, following grounded theory techniques (Glaser, 1998). The different themes were categorized along the intersection of research goals and interview data, and eventually six themes were identified for analysis: linguistic practices and transmission strategies; parents’ motivation to maintain the heritage language; parents’ expectations both regarding their children’s language development, and with regard to their children’s attitudes towards learning Mandarin; children’s reported linguistic proficiencies; parents’ motivations for sending their children to the Chinese school, and their critical assessment; and finally, feedback from the environment to the parents.
The second component of the study was a brief questionnaire. Existing research protocols from Daussà's previous work were adapted to the specifics of the population at hand, and the final product translated into Mandarin by Qian. Questionnaires either preceded or followed the formal interview, were filled by the same person who was interviewed, and were administered on paper by the researcher, who was available for clarifications pre- and post-questionnaire filling.

4. Questionnaire results

The questionnaire targeted the following information: overall language composition of the family; languages used among parents, language use between parents and children, languages used among siblings and language use between immigrant children and their friends. Relevant comments and graphs are included below.

4.1 Family language composition and use

Most of the families are highly multilingual, up to one family managing seven languages, although under further investigation, it is revealed that some of those languages are not frequently used in the home. Only 10% of the families are bilingual, and families with three or four languages account for the most proportion, with 30% each. Figure 1 shows the detailed language composition of the ten families.

Most parents pointed out that Mandarin (26%) and Dutch (26%) are the main languages used in the family, together with some English (23%). Chinese languages like Cantonese, Hokkien, and Wenzhou dialect make up a very small proportion, between 2 and 5%, slightly more than “other languages” (such as Hakka, Xiamen dialect, and some non-Chinese languages like Spanish) combined (8%), as seen in Figure 2.

Regarding use, as seen in Figure 3, the majority of families always use or almost always use Mandarin in the home. Some of the families that never use Mandarin when interacting with their partners either speak Cantonese or Dutch with them – invariably, the latter case, when the partner is non-Chinese Dutch, as revealed in the interview. Even in non-mixed marriages however, most of the parents sometimes speak Dutch with their partners, but almost none ever use English with them.
Figure 1. Language composition of the families

Figure 2. Language use in multilingual Chinese immigrant families in Groningen, the Netherlands
4.2 Language use between parents and children

All parents reported that their language patterns are the same for all the children in the family; consequently, here we only represent the language use between the parents and the eldest child. Results indicate that most parents choose to use Mandarin when communicating with their children, while the least number of parents use English when they communicate with them. As for Dutch, the majority of the parents sometimes speak it with their children. And most of the parents almost never use English when interacting with the children, as can be shown from Figure 4.
4.3 Language use among siblings

Because we only analyze the language use patterns in the families with more than one child, two families are left out of this section’s computation. As can be shown from Figures 5, 6, and 7, in 38% of the families children sometimes use Mandarin to talk with their siblings, followed by children always using and almost always using Mandarin, with 25% each. With regard to Dutch, in the majority of the families children always use or sometimes use Dutch to communicate with their siblings, accounting for 38% each. The use of English among children themselves presents a distinctive pattern: children who sometimes use English and who never use English to communicate with their siblings make up the most proportion, with 38% and 37% respectively.

![Figure 5. Language use among siblings (Mandarin)](image)

To sum up, Mandarin is mostly used among parents, and those who never use Mandarin with their partners either speak Cantonese, or Dutch (in mixed marriages). In addition, most parents also use Mandarin when communicating with their children, while the least number of parents use English in this case. Regarding languages used among siblings, results are different, as Dutch is now the most frequently used language. Not surprisingly, Dutch is also the most commonly used language (80%) between the children and their friends, as Figure 8 shows. Besides, the children rarely ever use Mandarin to communicate with their
Figure 6. Language use among siblings (Dutch)

Figure 7. Language use among siblings (English)
friends, and most of them never use Mandarin or English when communicating with their friends.

Figure 8. Language use between children and their friends

5. Results from Semi-structured interviews

5.1 Parental language practices

Interviews allow for more fine-tuned understanding of the context-dependent nature of language use within the multilingual family. While we saw above the complexity of multilingual families, the particular language use can be very different. For example, regarding the presence of Mandarin, Dutch and English, while all the languages are declared in all families in the questionnaire, the usage pattern might differ significantly in each family. One participant, for example, says,

Mr. Yiming: At home, Mandarin is the major one; there is a little bit of English, very little. There is almost no Dutch. Only when there are issues related to school or when we deal with other issues and there is no choice but to use Dutch. So sometimes a little Dutch is involved.

Another mother described a very different pattern:

Mrs. Xue: Generally, [the children] often...at home will use Dutch among themselves, or sometimes with me. I ask [them], er...in Mandarin, [but] most of their responses are in Dutch. (...) [Regarding] English...they, because I myself cannot speak English, so they play games by themselves. They play computer games at
home, for example, and they learn by themselves. Because our eldest child is studying in junior high school, and he himself learns English at school.

A specially interesting feature of this population is the fact that in many families Mandarin co-exists with another Chinese dialect, such as Hokkien and Wenzhou. Unlike in the case of other Stateless languages (Juarros-Daussà, 2013), most of our parents choose not to transmit their minoritized dialects to their children. Several reasons were argued for this. For one thing, parents tend to think that Mandarin suffices for communication with their family and acquaintances in China, so there is no need to teach them an additional dialect. Some parents felt that there were already many languages in the family, and feared that including additional ones would confuse the children, and even interfering with their acquisition of Mandarin. Finally, some parents also mentioned that they themselves do not use Chinese dialects very often in the family, so they don’t feel the need to teach them to their children. Remarkably, we found no family who opted to transmit a different dialect to the children at the cost of Mandarin.

Parents differ in their language transmission strategies. One father, for instance reports on using some resources to support the minority language:

Mr. Yiming: So, regarding the language plan, we two [the parents] mainly focus our attention on Mandarin (...) Sometimes I will watch some movies, um...or TV shows in Mandarin with him.

Another mother believes in creating a natural language environment in Mandarin, and reports enlisting grandparents for the task. She advises:

Mrs. Shen: Just speak! There is nobody teaching them. That is, they are used to speaking Chinese because they also speak Chinese with their grandparents. Therefore, except with their father, actually they speak Chinese with all of the family members.

Some parents are aware of explicit language transmission strategies. One mother, Mrs. Li, for instance, mentions that they adopt OPOL, with the mother only speaking Mandarin to the children and the father only Dutch, but when the parents themselves communicate, they speak English even in their children’s presence. One grandma, Mrs. Zhou, reports that the child’s parents let him watch Chinese videos on a specific electronic device which has a Mandarin setting, so that the child can learn Mandarin in this way. Parents adopting OPOL are quite adamant on requiring their children to follow their interaction guidelines:

Mrs. Shen: No, he cannot answer to me in Dutch. He must answer to me in Mandarin. (...) I do not allow it, I do not allow it [laugh] (...) That is, he must respond to me in Mandarin. Only in this way can he consolidate it. If he responds in Dutch,
although he can understand, but he cannot speak [in Mandarin], I think that is a waste of energy, useless. One must practice one language by speaking it and using it.

Strict language separation, however, is not always so vehemently enforced. Some parents pointed out that their children respond in Dutch when spoken to in Mandarin. Parents tend to respond with different degrees of tolerance to this situation, with, for example, Mrs. Lin and Mrs. Chen explaining that they would explicitly correct their children when they mix languages and ask them to practice using solely Mandarin, while Mrs. Li pointing out that it is not reasonable to correct the child directly, but preferring instead translating the parts that the child mixes into Mandarin and thus modeling the targeted form.

Likewise, language mixing in conversation is a common phenomenon. For example, some parents mention that when their children feel it difficult to express themselves in Mandarin, they might use some Dutch words, especially in some specific situation or conversational topics:

Mr. Yiming: Hm... er... this is related to context. Because if she talks about things relevant to school, or say, for example, says something about the Netherlands, she (...) needs to use some Dutch, because there are no matches in Mandarin. But except in this situation, never, very rarely [does she mix languages].

In addition to lexical mixing, one mother also mentions phonological mixing (accent). She says that when her children speak Mandarin, it reminds her of when foreigners speak Mandarin, in that they sound as if having a peculiar accent. This sometimes has the unfortunate consequence of her daughter being apprehensive to speak Mandarin in front of other people because she is afraid that others will laugh at her, even if she can fully understand what others are saying and has otherwise fluent proficiency.

Nevertheless, the children’s bilingual variety does not always awake negative feelings among the parents. For example, Mrs. Huang and Kelly show more leniency regarding their children’s translanguaging abilities, and indeed admit to engaging in it themselves in order to achieve effective communication:

Mrs. Huang: We are used to it; we [parents] sometimes also (...) when speaking Dutch... I think if it is easier to express [ourselves] this way, we will also... will mix a bit.

5.2 Parental motivations to maintain Mandarin

As explained above, we drew inspiration from Daussà’s former studies with diasporic communities, in looking for evidence of the three sets of values (personal, integrative and instrumental) which have been correlated with transmission...
likelihood in multilingual families (Juarros-Daussà, 2013; Casesnoves Ferrer & Juarros-Daussà, 2011, 2015).

5.2.1 Personal values

All the parents in the study held a positive attitude towards the transmission of their heritage language(s) to their children, and personal values played a central role. Some participants responded that maintaining Mandarin (and/or Cantonese) enabled their children to construct and keep their national and cultural identity. One mother, for instance, claimed that learning Mandarin helped the child identify with his Chinese ethnic identity:

Mrs. Huang: Because before he learned Mandarin, he thought he was Dutch and we [the parents] were Chinese. He thought he was just Dutch; then I think since we are the descendants of Chinese people, and we both [the parents] are Chinese, there is no reason for him not to learn Chinese. That is, he must learn it.

Likewise, another parent finds it necessary for her children to learn Mandarin in order to instill a deeply felt parental Chinese identity:

Mrs. Xue: We are originally Chinese people, so he must learn Chinese. This is always our view (...) I think more or less he should speak Chinese. After all, firstly we are Chinese.

Beyond identity, some participants mention that the ability to appreciate Chinese culture and language is also one important reason for them to maintain Mandarin.

Mrs. Li: Also, it is said that Chinese language is teeming with its traditional culture. So if you cannot read [in Mandarin], and you read with the help of a translated version, it feels like something that has been chewed. Er...like it will lose its original flavor.

Finally, we also found generalized statements about the value of maintaining one’s heritage language for the sake of it, and beyond Chinese itself:

Mr. Yiming: Because we are Chinese people, and I think one’s mother tongue should always be maintained.

Our findings are similar to those found elsewhere with different communities in different contexts, and confirm that the development of the heritage language can positively contribute to children’s constructions of a healthy multilayered identity in multilingual and multicultural societies (Cho & Krashen, 1998; Cavallaro, 2005; Park & Sarkar, 2007; Wei, 2018).
5.2.2 Integrative values in the extended community

Chinese Dutch parents’ choices to maintain Mandarin is also influenced by its integrative value. For example, several participants mentioned that they wanted their children to learn Mandarin in order to facilitate communication with grandparents and other relatives and friends in China:

Mrs. Xue: Because after all... er...their grandparents, for example are all in China, right? (...) They need to communicate when going there. Then, even if er...they don’t stay, after all we, that is, we have relatives in China, so we must communicate [in Mandarin].

Mandarin is not the only language favored for transmission by integrative considerations. A parent from Hongkong also expressed similar motivations to maintain the family language Cantonese:

Qian: Then in your home, which languages do you teach your children?
Kelly: Mostly Cantonese
Qian: Mostly Cantonese
Kelly: because their grandmother is...speaks Cantonese, so she wants all children to be able to... to communicate, communicate a bit.

Beyond extended family, some participants mentioned that communicating with friends in China is also an important reason:

Mrs. Li: One of her good friends (...) is in China. Then she... And our relatives, many relatives are also in China. If you learn well, ah... you can use it when you go back.

In sum, facilitating communication and ensuring a pleasant experience for the children while visiting China is a recurrent theme, as previously documented (cf. Park & Sarkar, 2007). For that purpose, Mandarin is the preferred language of choice:

Mrs. Huang: (...) they are Chinese people, and when they go back [to China], they cannot communicate with others. (...) The situation is the same with my daughter. When we went [to China] during the summer holiday, she could not be understood and she spoke Dutch when she was really anxious. But the others could not understand Dutch. If you go back, you do not need to learn all the dialects... (...) But for Mandarin, you must understand. (...) Mandarin definitely is necessary.
5.2.3 Integrative values in the local community

Two parents in our sample reckoned that maintaining Mandarin was of vital importance for achieving integration in the immediate community as well. Some parents express their desire for her children to learn some Mandarin so that they can have a closer and more harmonious relationship within the local Chinese Dutch group. Likewise, parents sometimes admit to being under peer pressure for their children to learn Mandarin, if they want to fit in and keep up with other local families of Chinese origin, again a finding consistent with previous research showing that interaction with immediate and extended groups by using the heritage language can accelerate strong and healthy social relationships (Wong Fillmore, 1991) and integration:

Mrs. Wang: This is a little bit also er...er...we notice other parents, other parents, they all send their children to the Chinese school, so we also send them.

5.2.4 Instrumental values

Instrumental values include perceived economic and professional advantages brought about by knowing a given language. Perhaps not surprisingly, evidence for Mandarin being considered an asset in future professional careers abound in our sample. Parents claim that the development of the current Chinese economy is an important element for them to include Mandarin in their family, as they estimate that their children are likely to work with (or in) China in the future. In addition to future economic and professional advantages, one parent points out a very immediate pragmatic consideration for transmitting not only oral, but also reading skills, to her children; namely, being able to have a safe stay in China:

Mrs. Li: [Sometimes] she says, ‘as long as I can understand and can speak, it is okay!’ Then I say, ‘for example, consider the safety perspective: if you are in China, you...you live there. When you stay with your relatives and friends, for instance, when you go out together, when you see the signs on the roads, see something, particularly the traffic signs, you will recognize these characters, and this is definitely beneficial.’

Nevertheless, pragmatic considerations of the instrumental kind are oftentimes considered as a relatively secondary factor for the family to transmit Mandarin. One father explicitly states this:

Mr. Yiming: Undoubtedly, the consideration of the future is also important, including economic factors. For example, in the future, she might choose a job related to Chinese. But this is a very subordinate factor [for me].
5.3 Parental expectations regarding Mandarin proficiency

Parents have different expectations regarding their children’s learning of Mandarin regarding oral proficiency, literacy, or engagement.

5.3.1 Oral proficiency

Some parents expect their children just to develop a passive knowledge of Mandarin so that others can use this language with them, even if this means engaging in bilingual conversations. Being able to understand Mandarin is perceived as the minimal expectation, although even in the most low-pressure families, an ability to also being able to speak is preferred:

*Mrs. Xue:* Eh... myself, eh... actually do not have so big eh... If say, if [my children] can speak, it is already... that is, speaking and listening, are already... I think it is... In terms of the current situation, I only require that they can understand. (...) Understanding... is not simply that they can understand [Mandarin], but also that they can understand what we say, that they can understand [and] that they can speak, they can communicate... they can express themselves.

Most parents, indeed, expect their children to be able to speak Mandarin, setting the lowest expectation at this level:

*Mrs. Shen:* Actually we do not have requirements. As long as they can speak Chinese [this is enough]... If [the children] have to learn later, at least it is convenient... if [they] will go to China later.

Parents seem to adjust their expectations to what they see possible in their situation, and to their linguistic needs. Hence, the mother above is satisfied with her children’s oral proficiency, because compared to their peers, her children show very good language skills, and the identified purposes of communicating and consuming cultural products are met:

*Mrs. Shen:* Because my children can speak, so I am very relaxed... Unlike some [other children from the community] – they really speak very badly. I do not have any expectations, and do not impose any requirements at all [laugh] (...) Because when they go to China, [there is] really zero... zero... zero distance [between her children and native Chinese people]. [They] can all speak very well. (...) They... can understand Chinese TV shows, so... no requirements, [we] do not think about any requirements.
5.3.2 Literacy

Beyond oral abilities, and oftentimes when those have been satisfactorily achieved, two parents in the interviews hope that their children can recognize Chinese characters, and their focus in bringing them to the school lies on them developing reading and writing abilities. Mr. Yiming, for example, explains that

*Mr. Yiming:* Because for Mandarin, he can speak well, and can listen well. But mainly our focus is on reading and writing. (...) So [we are sending him] to this school, [because we] mainly want him to recognize and write Chinese characters.

In some occasions, expectations regarding literacy are very elementary:

*Mrs. Li:* That is, he can read fluently. I do not expect her to write so well but expect that at least she can read fluently. If she has a good foundation for reading [in Mandarin], she will understand Chinese traditional culture from within the culture.

Some parents however have higher expectations, sometimes even explicitly hoping that their children achieve enough proficiency to be able to study in Mandarin in the eventuality that they went to live in China for an extended period. One father, for example, says:

*Mr. Yiming:* My expectation is that she can… [I] don’t [mean] she can recognize or write well all of the Chinese characters. But [my daughter] can build a good foundation here. If there is need to develop [Mandarin], [my daughter] can very quickly…for example, when [she] goes for one or two years, [she can] develop [Mandarin] very quickly. If she ever needs to, [she] can pick it up very quickly.

5.3.3 Children’s engagement

Despite parental efforts, oftentimes children do not share in the enthusiasm for learning their heritage language, which oftentimes results in the parents not setting any proficiency goals, but rather focusing on promoting interest and engagement among their children:

*Mrs. Wang:* As for requirements, eh…it is better to let her have an interest to learn. But [we try] not to push too hard, because if we do so, for children, eh… for children… if [we] push too much, she will become nervous. This is not good.

Unfortunately, even in the most relaxed, low pressure parental contexts, children oftentimes present a negative attitude towards learning Mandarin and attending classes in the Chinese school:

*Mrs. Xue:* But children...of course, [they] feel tired here [the Chinese school], [saying that they have to] go to school, go to school, go to school every day.
Nevertheless, we also found a more positive engagement on the part of the children, although rarely linked to Mandarin itself or the Chinese culture, but to the fact of being raised bilingually:

Mrs. Shen: [My children] think it is so great, [they] can learn two [languages]!

5.4 Reported children’s linguistic proficiencies

In spite of the obvious difficulty in measuring language proficiency, three participants held clear ideas about their children’s, while others, however, do not state them clearly. The three parents who mentioned their children’s proficiencies report imbalances between the languages. In general, Mandarin and Dutch are their children’s relatively most proficient languages. According to the parents, the children all have high proficiency in Dutch –not surprisingly, since they all attend mainstream school, where Dutch is the only language of instruction. Regarding English, most children still have relatively low proficiency, with most of them only reaching intermediate or beginner levels –generally in accordance with their non-Chinese Dutch peers. Mandarin, however, presents the most variability: while two parents report high proficiency in Mandarin, one mother reports that her children can hardly speak it. The two opposite situations are illustrated below:

Mr. Yiming: Because for Mandarin, he can speak well, and can understand well. (...) Because it is already native level, already.

Mrs. Xue: We... say... when at home, [I] speak Mandarin with my husband. Then, regarding our children, [they] can listen a little bit; the eldest child can listen [and understand], and the second child and the youngest one cannot (...) When speaking Chinese, they will...because they...have difficulty in expressing [themselves] in many cases, and they will use Dutch [instead].

In great measure, of course, parent’s judgments correlate with their expectations, which in some cases produces feelings of failure and frustration, which surely do not contribute to family wellbeing:

Mrs. Xue: I think [Mandarin] is very important, although [we] are relatively not successful, because [our] children cannot speak well.

5.5 Parental motivations to send their children to the Chinese school and their critiques

Parents claim two major reasons for sending their children to school to learn Mandarin. The first and also the most common motivation is so that their children
improve reading and writing in Mandarin. Parents who have this motivation often themselves have high proficiency of Mandarin and their children already have a good basis of Mandarin in terms of speaking and understanding. The following fragments illustrate this point.

Mr. Yiming: Our focus is mainly on Mandarin, because for Mandarin, she can speak well, and can listen well. But... mainly our focus is on reading and writing.
Qian: Reading and writing.

Mr. Yiming: Reading Chinese characters and writing Chinese characters, yes.

Mrs. Shen: I just want them to recognize some [Chinese] characters.
Qian: Just want them to recognize [Chinese] characters, right?
Mrs. Shen: Yes.

Considering their goals and expectations, it is interesting to learn about how parents evaluate the school. This is what one mother has to say to this respect:

Mrs. Li: Firstly, he comes [to the school], ok, but although we are in the Chinese school in the Netherlands, the culture of the school itself, oh... the learning style is very different [from the teaching style in the Dutch school].
Qian: Yeah.

Mrs. Li: So he will have some resistance. They still adopt... although it is in the Chinese school in the Netherlands, teachers basically use traditional... that is, [traditional] teaching methods, which is the same as in China.
Qian: Yeah
(...)

Mrs. Li: I think it is necessary to create some interesting... some interesting activities at the school.
Qian: Children want to attend classes that they like.

Mrs. Li: Learning Mandarin actually...[can be interesting] I am thinking that better schools do not use traditional teaching methods but instead some... some interesting teaching methods to attract children [to learn Mandarin]. That is, to develop [children's] interest and to attract them.

This mother articulates some criticisms about the traditional teaching style in the school, which causes her otherwise Dutch children to have resistance to learn Mandarin. She wishes instead that the Chinese school had more interesting learning methods or activities which can more or less alleviate children’s learning pressure and motivate children’s engagement by promoting “learning with more happiness”. While she points out that she recognizes the advantages of the
traditional Chinese teaching methods, she advocates for a more relaxing learning atmosphere that better accommodates the sensitivities of Dutch children.

On the positive side, parents agree that the school provides a great resource towards satisfying the integrative needs of the Chinese Dutch parents, since by sending their children there they can interact with other parents and teachers in the Netherlands with similar background.

5.6 Feedback from the environment

Parents were also asked about their experiences receiving feedback from their environment. Parents perceive that the dominant attitude towards multilingualism in the Dutch educational system is undoubtedly positive, as illustrated below:

Mr. Yiming: Dutch people actually rely... they relatively encourage multilingualism, because generally speaking, they can speak German, or for instance, in junior high school, some good schools will teach Spanish or French, and in some still better schools children will learn Latin. So generally it is normal that people can use four or five languages, And also English...

The same father links such promotion of multilingualism in schools to the reality of the Netherlands containing many ethnicities, mostly due to immigration (although the ethnicities he lists do not correspond to the languages present in the educational system that he mentioned before):

Mr. Yiming: Because the Netherlands itself is a multicultural [country], including very diverse ethnicities... such as Romanian, Polish... (...) Immigrants from Russia are particularly many, also including Italy...

Chinese Dutch parents partake in these general positive attitudes towards multilingualism as well. One mother, for instance, admits that

Mrs. Xue: I think it is not a bad thing. Having one more language is (...) is relatively (...) to us it is [beneficial].

This general positive attitude towards additive multilingualism fuels parent’s efforts to maintain their heritage language. Some parents feel comfortable showing assertiveness towards Mandarin transmission, by claiming that promoting it does not threaten her children’s development of either the Dutch national language, or fashionable English:

Mrs. Wang: Emphasize [Mandarin]!! (...) Dutch, if we stay in the Netherlands, there is no doubt that Dutch is important. But Mandarin... is like what other people say, is like our second language...
Mrs. Shen: For English, children who grow up in the Netherlands all can speak it. Why should we teach it [at home]? Is there any Dutch person who cannot speak English? Nobody.

RESEARCHER 2: Then how do they learn English?

Mrs. Shen: At school (…). Above junior high school. When children are in the eighth… or seventh grade, they begin to teach them English. And then it is okay (…) [English] is never what we have to worry about.

Despite this generalized positive societal support for multilingualism, parents also report facing negative comments from the immediate community regarding their efforts to transmit their heritage language and culture to their children. In fact, it is their impression that in their particular case, the community is more welcoming of accepting their cultural practices than their language itself:

Mrs. Xue: Firstly, probably one thing is language, and culture is another. Actually people can easily accept [cultural differences]. Every country has its own culture. But language is probably more (…) as a Chinese person, I think that a different language is less likely to be accepted by others than a different culture.

Furthermore, parents criticize that teachers attach importance to their children learning Dutch and other curricular languages, while their heritage language lacks support and promotion from local schools and the institutions that manage them. One mother wishes that schools would teach Mandarin to heritage speakers as well as other pupils, by stating:

Kelly: I think, I mostly wished that junior high schools… at junior high schools, they could also teach Mandarin (…) At present, Dutch schools…that is, there is a lot of English, German, and French; that is very common. But if Mandarin could also be popularized (…) that would be great (…) It would be useful for [our] children, and also would offer another choice.

In some occasions, parents feel unsupported by teachers, who openly express opposition to the transmission of the heritage language, to the extent of interfering with family dynamics:

Kelly: That is, the school said ‘you shouldn’t use too many languages… to talk with him. Because he… [pause] cannot differentiate clearly, he cannot understand’ (…) So…the teacher said, ‘you…you should speak a little bit more Dutch with him [the child] at home at the beginning. Relatively… for him… it is relatively better because he is studying here’. So [as parents, we] do not put too much pressure on him, ah… to learn Mandarin, yeah.
Paradoxically, in addition to being advised not to speak Mandarin with their children, parents are also confronted with the recommendation not to speak Dutch with them either, since they are deemed to be a bad influence in their children’s proper language development—a claim which results in fueling a high degree of language insecurity among the parents:

*Mr. Yiming:* As for Dutch, we also do not teach it because the teacher in the kindergarten tells us that ‘you do not need to teach Dutch [by yourselves at home], as you cannot teach well and your pronunciation is not standard.’

*Mrs. Xue:* [Dutch] Chinese people often say that (...) ‘I am afraid of speaking [Dutch] in the wrong way, so I just do not speak [it].’

In sum, parents regret that Mandarin receives no support from schools in Groningen: while all children have Dutch classes, and will also learn English since (at least) junior high school (in addition to, depending on the educational track, one or all of German, Spanish, and French, plus Latin), there is however no place for Mandarin in Dutch education. Therefore, the only way for parents to transmit Mandarin is within the home or by sending their children to Chinese schools, which are not widely available.

On the other hand, while there are no services supporting the promotion of heritage languages in the Groningen area, there are (limited) special services (public or private) facilitating the learning of Dutch. One mother expressed her (limited) positive experience with Dutch assistance:

*Mrs. Shen:* Actually for us... that is, when I lived in [another city], there were people who specially helped our group of [Chinese] people. [They] would come to our home to help the children learn Dutch in this way. Eh...I think that is good. Then since [our family] moved from there, there has been no [such assistance programs]. [We] cannot find them. [laugh]

6. Conclusion and discussion

The Chinese Dutch families interviewed for this study expressed high motivation to transmit their heritage language to their children. One of the resources they use to achieve their goal is enrolling them in the local Chinese school, which offers Saturday classes. The most common parental reason for it is for children to improve their literacy skills in Mandarin. A positive side effect is higher integration in the immediate community, in some cases as a refuge from negative feedback by non-Chinese Dutch society. All parents assign personal, integrative,
and instrumental values to Mandarin, and clearly identify the contribution that its transmission makes to their family satisfaction and integration.

Altogether, this is a case of relatively successful heritage language maintenance. There is variation regarding parents’ expectations, and in the resulting linguistic proficiencies of their children. Naturally, we encounter reported peculiarities of the specific multilingualism, with language mixing being salient in parent’s perceptions, and motivating a diversity of responses. A detailed study of the grammatical specificities of this interesting language contact situation which would take into account both expected typological peculiarities derived from language co-existence and the somehow limited acquisition context, would be extremely interesting (Benmamoun, Montrul & Polinsky, 2013).

Remarkably, despite of the school popularity, parents’ comments are a bit negative, especially referring to teaching methods, and they blame their children’s resistance to learn Mandarin on the school’s cultural disconnect with the population it is set to serve.

Parents report perceiving a generally positive attitude towards multilingualism in Dutch society. This results in parents feeling empowered and supported in their efforts to maintain their heritage language. Nevertheless, they also often report generally outdated and prejudiced negative feedback from the immediate community, ranging from being criticized for their multilingual parenting goals, to being discouraged to adopt Dutch as their family language on the basis of their own linguistic inadequacy. Consequently, they regret that Mandarin specifically lacks support from schools or institutions in Groningen, while other languages are encouraged. In addition, their subsequent feelings of Dutch language insecurity surely results in additional obstacles towards integration in Dutch society, and impede their feelings of belonging.

Our findings regarding the importance of institutional and community support for heritage languages are consistent with the results from previous research in other contexts. For example, Hinton (1999) pointed out that the lack of support from schools meant that Asian-American immigrant parents and families tended to shoulder the total obligation to maintain their children’s heritage language in the United States. Likewise, Kondo (1998), examining the case of American Shin Nisei (new second generation Japanese) university students’ in Hawaii, also attached great importance to the support and promotion from schools, ethnic communities, and peer groups, together with families, in the maintenance of the heritage language Japanese language of immigrant children. In sum, when it comes to the role formal institutions play in the promotion of the heritage language, previous research has amply shown that schools should at least build up a positive environment where linguistic minority students’ heritage language can develop (Cummins, 2001b). Indeed, we cannot insist enough on the impact
that school support could play in maintaining their children’s multilingualism, by acknowledging the value of their heritage languages, and by attaching implicit significance to them as they are used in public and official contexts (cf. Tse, 2001). In order to redress the situation in Groningen, it would be advisable that efforts be made to promote among Dutch teachers an appreciation for their pupil’s linguistic diversity, as further support for the educational goal of promoting multilingualism (Duarte, 2018).

Acknowledgements

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References


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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Years of residence of the family in the Netherlands</th>
<th>Parent’s residences (father)</th>
<th>Parent’s residences (mother)</th>
<th>Number and ages of children</th>
<th>L1 of the parents (language that parents prefer)</th>
<th>Family languages</th>
<th>Children’s birthplace</th>
<th>Children’s experience with China</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Mr. Yiming</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Born in Henan province, China</td>
<td>Henan province, China</td>
<td>2 (8 and 3)</td>
<td>Mandarin, Dutch, English, Chinese dialect</td>
<td>Mandarin, Dutch, English, Chinese dialect</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>Go to China every two years for about one month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Kelly</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Born and grew up in the Netherlands</td>
<td>Born in the Netherlands; lived in Hong Kong from age 4 to 12</td>
<td>3 (17, 15, and 11)</td>
<td>Cantonese, Mandarin, Dutch, English, Cantonese, Hakka</td>
<td>Mandarin, Dutch, English, Cantonese, Hakka</td>
<td>Groningen, The Netherlands</td>
<td>Go to China every two years for about one month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Mrs. Xue</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Fujian province, China</td>
<td>Fujian province, China</td>
<td>3 (12, 9, and 7)</td>
<td>Mandarin, Dutch, English, Chinese dialect, French, German</td>
<td>Mandarin, Dutch, English, Cantonese, Hakka</td>
<td>Groningen, The Netherlands</td>
<td>Went to China once for about 3–4 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Mrs. Wang</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Zhejiang province, China</td>
<td>Zhejiang province, China</td>
<td>2 (10 and 6)</td>
<td>Mandarin, Dutch, English, Dutch</td>
<td>Mandarin, Dutch, English, Dutch</td>
<td>Rotterdam, The Netherlands</td>
<td>Have not gone to China yet</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
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<td>Parent’s residences (father)</td>
<td>Parent’s residences (mother)</td>
<td>Number and ages of children</td>
<td>L1 of the parents (language that parents prefer)</td>
<td>Family languages</td>
<td>Children’s birthplace</td>
<td>Children’s experience with China</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mrs. Shen</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Born in China: has lived in the Netherlands since age of 5</td>
<td>Born in China: lived in Spain from ages 14–26; then moved to The Netherlands</td>
<td>2 (7 and 4)</td>
<td>Mandarin Dutch, English, Spanish, Chinese dialect</td>
<td>Mandarin, Dutch, English, Spanish, Chinese dialect</td>
<td>Groningen, The Netherlands</td>
<td>Have gone to China three times since the children were born, for about three weeks at one time</td>
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<td>Mrs. Huang</td>
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<td>Zhejiang province, China</td>
<td>Zhejiang province, China</td>
<td>2 (7 and 3)</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td>Mandarin, English, Dutch</td>
<td>Groningen, The Netherlands</td>
<td>Have gone back to China once for three weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Li</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Born in the Netherlands; lived in Fujian province, China for about 2 years; came back to the Netherlands with family</td>
<td>Born in Fujian province, China; lived in Xiamen city, Fujian province for about 2 years</td>
<td>1 (10)</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td>Mandarin, English, Dutch</td>
<td>Fujian province, China</td>
<td>Born in China and lived in China until 7 years old</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mrs. Lin</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Zhejiang province, China</td>
<td>Wenzhou city, Zhejiang</td>
<td>2 (6 and 4.5)</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td>Mandarin, English, Dutch</td>
<td>Groningen, The Netherlands</td>
<td>The elder child has gone back to China twice, and the second child has gone to China three times and for one month each time</td>
</tr>
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<td>Mrs. Chen</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Born in the Netherlands; have once gone to China for travelling</td>
<td>Fujian city, Fujian province, China</td>
<td>2 (7 and 4)</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td>Mandarin, Dutch</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>Went to China once for one month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Chen</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Fuzhou city, Fujian province, China</td>
<td>Fujian city, Fujian province, China</td>
<td>1 (10)</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td>Mandarin, English, Dutch</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>Went to China for one month; plan to go to China in 2019</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Address for correspondence

Eva J. Daussà
University of Groningen
Program Minorities and Multilingualism
Oude Kijk in 't Jatstraat 26
9712 EK Groningen
The Netherlands
e.juarros.daussa@rug.nl

Co-author information

Yeshan Qian
Educational Psychology Program
The Graduate Center
City University of New York/CUNY
yqian@gradcenter.cuny.edu
806791173@qq.com