

A Comparative Study on Heritage Language Identity of Overseas Chinese Descendants in European Countries

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Abstract: 394 learners of Chinese languages were examined through a questionnaire survey as part of a comparative study of heritage language identity of descendants of Chinese diaspora in the European nations of France, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Greece, Romania and Hungary. Surprisingly, great differences have been noted in their experiences associated with staying in China, nationality and Chinese language identity in these seven different countries. Chinese offspring in Romania show the highest heritage language identity while in the Netherlands it is the lowest. Similar differences are exemplified in correlation analysis of the four variables: age, experience of staying in China, nationality and Chinese language identity. Based on the results, reasons are analyzed and some suggestions are put forward. These suggestions may well be advisable if the maintenance of the heritage language identity of other ethnic migrants is desired.

1. Introduction

The history of Chinese migration to Europe can be traced back to the 17th century. The past century witnessed booming growth, especially during the 1980s and 1990s. The two aforementioned decades were peak times for Chinese migration due to Reform and the Open-up Policy in China since 1978. Early Chinese immigrants settled down in the Netherlands, France, Italy, Spain and other western European countries. At the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, a large number of Chinese immigrants poured into Greece, Hungary, Romania and some eastern and southern European countries. Nowadays, many overseas Chinese are born as second, third or even fourth generation descendants of early migrants. Their identity of Chinese language and culture is not as strong as that of the older generations.

Language, as a cultural heritage, carries the history and traditions of a nation, and has a fundamental significance for cultural and national identity ^[1]. Competency of heritage language declines with multi-generation descendants ^[2]. Numerous recent studies of heritage language focus on how it is affected by multiple factors. Li (2020) considered the home context as one of the most essential factors in heritage-language maintenance ^[3]. Holzer (2021:342) emphasized an early start of heritage language and pointed out that late language learning of young refugees in Germany took place with limited family background and limited maintenance of heritage language and culture ^[4]. Otwinowska (2021) employed multiple regression analyses to reveal that the transmission of HL-Russian and literacy depended on parents' efforts to use Russian actively at home and provide opportunities to communicate in heritage language ^[5].

Apart from the family environment, maintenance and shifting of the heritage language is the result of various other factors, such as social background, social identification, and bilingual teaching environment in schools ^[6]. Welsh (2021) advocated that for children in immigrant families, the home and family members outside the home are the primary sources of heritage language exposure ^[7]. Riehl (2021, 94) argued that the fostering of heritage language awareness should be implemented more intensively in the language classroom based on quantitative studies ^[8]. Pułaczewska (2021) pointed out an age-related decline of interest in the Polish media among Polish adolescents in Germany and interpreted it as an effect of a diminishing role of parents as well as the increasing role of age peers as role models in personal development ^[9].

For students whose heritage language is not English, influential factors of cultural relevance and parent/family involvement for the acquisition of fundamental skills of heritage language need to be underscored ^[10]. Previous study associated with the maintenance and shifting of Chinese as the heritage language of overseas Chinese mainly focuses on Chinese in the United States, e.g., the bilingual model of children of Chinese families in Minnesota ^[11]. After 1980s, Li (1982) ^[12], Li (1995) ^[13], Zeng (1997) ^[14], Luo & Wiseman (2000) ^[15], Zhang (2005) ^[16] focused on the use of native language in the family environment, the results of which coincided with Thomason's three-generation shifting.

Based on results, there is research associated with heritage languages, such as an empirical study of Chinese-American and Australian families, showing that parents' heritage identity, reinforcement of the learning on the children, a positive familial language environment and persistent instruction of Chinese language helps maintain one's heritage language ^{[17],[18]}. Geng & Zhang (2018) considered it important to improve training of Chinese school teachers in Europe, and enhance the supply of books and hold students' interest ^[19]. Yuan (2020) considered that heritage language identity enhancement through family education and society is not adequate enough, so school education should bear the burden of communication ^[20].

Heritage language identity is the foundation of continued and sustained proficiency of Chinese language and culture, and it is important to explore how it correlates with some other influential variables. Factors affecting Chinese language identity, apart from family, schools and communities will be examined in order to analyse their impact, especially in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Methods

Between January and April 2021, the author delivered a series of eight online Sinology lectures for overseas Chinese children in various European countries. During the Sinology lectures, an online questionnaire entitled *A Survey on Current Status of Chinese Language in European Countries* was distributed to students who attended the lectures and real-time data was collected. In addition to students at the Bucharest Bethlehem Church School in Romania, subjects also included some of the

children of members of the Romanian Rui'an Association (a local organization of Overseas Chinese from Rui'an City in Wenzhou, Zhejiang, China) who have been living in Romania for the past three years. Subjects in the Netherlands included students in Rotterdam and the Hague Chinese language schools, as well as children whose parents are from Holland Women's Federation of Overseas Chinese. It is due to the aforementioned reasons that the ages of the subjects who responded to the questionnaire in Romania and the Netherlands are widely distributed and relatively in older age. All subjects are limited to before college graduation, however, namely under the age of 23.

A total of 394 valid questionnaires were collected, including 44 from France, 58 from Italy, 84 from Spain, 51 from the Netherlands, 52 from Greece, 71 from Romania and 34 from Hungary. SPSS24.0 is used to provide analysis of basic information, correlation analysis of four selected variables: the age, nationality, Chinese staying experience and Chinese language identity of offspring of Chinese Diasporas in different European countries.

Age was divided into four brackets: under 6 years old, 6 to 12 years old, 13 to 15 years old, and above 15 years old in order to make the comparison of the percentages. These age brackets were divided according to age and grades in China because most Chinese language schools used Chinese language textbook publishers in China. The first stage is under 6 years old, which is equivalent to the age of children of kindergarten in China; The second stage is from 7 to 12 years old, corresponding to the first to sixth grade of primary school; The next is 13 to 15 years old, corresponding to the age of junior high school students; The last is over 15 years old. In the following correlation and ordinal logistic regression, they will be re-coded as two groups: under 12 and above 13.

Experiences of staying China were simply defined in 'yes' or 'no' in the paper (there are more options in the questionnaire. It's defined in two parameters in order to make a more efficient analysis).

Nationality was defined by 'Chinese nationality' and 'nationality other than Chinese' (there are more options in the questionnaire, such as Chinese nationality with/ without permanent residence. It's defined in two parameters in order to make a more efficient analysis).

Chinese language identity was defined by 5-point Likert scales, namely, 'very important', 'important', 'generally important', 'not very important', 'unimportant', which was assigned 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1 respectively in the comparison of means of Chinese language identity of seven countries and following analysis.

3. Results

3.1. Analysis of Four Variables of Descendants of Chinese Diaspora in Seven European Countries

3.1.1. Age

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

		Under 6	7-12	13-15	Above 15	Total	
Country	France	Number	0	27	14	3	44
		Percentage	0.0%	61.4%	31.8%	6.8%	100.0%
	Italy	Number	0	55	3	0	58
		Percentage	0.0%	94.8%	5.2%	0.0%	100.0%
	Spain	Number	3	58	16	7	84
		Percentage	3.6%	69.0%	19.0%	8.3%	100.0%
	The Netherlands	Number	7	21	6	17	51

	Percentage	13.7%	41.2%	11.8%	33.3%	100.0%
Greece	Number	0	20	30	1	52
	Percentage	0.0%	40.4%	57.7%	1.9%	100.0%
Romania	Number	6	10	19	36	71
	Percentage	8.5%	22.5%	26.8%	50.7%	100.0%
Hungary	Number	0	18	9	7	34
	Percentage	0.0%	52.9%	26.5%	20.6%	100.0%
Total	Number	16	210	97	71	394
	Percentage	4.1%	53.3%	24.6%	18.0%	100.0%

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

According to Table 1, the largest number of Chinese offspring who participated in the survey are from Spain. Romania comes second. Italy, the Netherlands and Greece each had more than 50 children participate. Hungary had the least number of participants because it was strongly impacted by Covid-19 during the time of fieldwork. Additionally, many overseas Chinese were infected with the virus including the Principal of Budapest Guanghua Chinese Language School. The number of children under 6 years old who participated in the survey is relatively small with only 16. The number of participants from the primary age group, namely 7-12 years old is the most, with 210 children. The number of children who participated between the ages of 13-15 and above the age of 15 is relatively smaller, but far more than the number of those under 6. Numbers of age groups under and above 13 in Hungary and the Netherlands is relatively equal; Greece and Romania have more subjects over 13 years old.

The ratio of children under 12 years of age and over 13 in this survey is 1.35:1, which means that the number of children in those two age groups are roughly equal.

3.1.2. Experience of Staying in China

Table 2: Experience of staying in China of Chinese offspring in seven European countries

		Yes	No	Total	
Country	France	Number	7	37	44
		Percentage	15.9%	84.1%	100.0%
	Italy	Number	20	38	58
		Percentage	34.5%	65.5%	100.0%
	Spain	Number	59	25	84
		Percentage	70.2%	29.8%	100.0%
	The Netherlands	Number	14	37	51
		Percentage	27.5%	72.5%	100.0%
	Greece	Number	40	12	52
		Percentage	76.9%	23.1%	100.0%
	Romania	Number	65	6	71
		Percentage	91.5%	8.5%	100.0%
	Hungary	Number	23	11	34
		Percentage	67.6%	32.4%	100.0%
Total		Number	228	166	394
		Percentage	57.9%	42.1%	100.0%

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

Table 2 shows that among the participants of the survey, 166 people don't have experiences of staying in China, accounting for 42.1% of the total while 228 participants did have experiences of staying in China, accounting for 57.9%.

The results show that the percentages of children with staying experience in China. Various European countries, ranking from high to low, are listed as follows: Romania, Greece, Spain, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands and France. Among the seven countries, percentages of Chinese children from France, the Netherlands and Italy without staying experience in China rank the highest, with the percentage of 84.1%, 72.5% and 65.5% respectively; percentages of Hungary, Spain and Greece are close, with the number of 32.4%, 29.8% and 23.1% respectively. Romania has the highest percentage of staying experience with the number of 91.5%.

3.1.3. Nationality

Table 3: Nationality of Chinese offspring in seven European countries

Country		Chinese Nationality	Nationality other than Chinese	Total
France	Number	26	18	44
	Percentage	59.1%	40.9%	100.0%
Italy	Number	46	12	58
	Percentage	79.3%	20.7%	100.0%
Spain	Number	60	24	84
	Percentage	71.4%	28.6%	100.0%
The Netherlands	Number	12	39	51
	Percentage	23.5%	76.5%	100.0%
Greece	Number	49	3	52
	Percentage	94.2%	5.8%	100.0%
Romania	Number	61	10	71
	Percentage	85.9%	14.1%	100.0%
Hungary	Number	24	10	34
	Percentage	70.6%	29.4%	100.0%
Total	Number	278	116	394
	Percentage	70.6%	29.4%	100.0%

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

According to Table 3, 278 children have kept their Chinese nationality, accounting for 70.6%, and 116 hold foreign nationalities, namely a nationality other than Chinese, accounting for 29.4%.

Percentages of Chinese children holding Chinese nationality ranked from high to low are listed as follows: Greece, Romania, Italy, Spain, Hungary, France, and the Netherlands. According to the results, the country with the highest percentage of children retaining Chinese nationality is Greece (94.2%), followed by Romania (85.9%); Italy, Spain and Hungary were relatively close, accounting for 79.3%, 71.4% and 70.6% respectively; 59.1% in France. The percentage of Chinese children with Chinese nationality in the Netherlands is the lowest at only 23.5%.

3.1.4. Chinese Language Identity

Table 4: Scales of Chinese language Identity of Chinese offspring in seven European countries

Country		Very Important		Generally Important	Not Very Important	Unimportant	Total	
		Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number		
France	Number	29		12	2	0	1	44
	Percentage	65.9%		27.3%	4.5%	0.0%	2.3%	100.0%
Italy	Number	43		11	4	0	0	58
	Percentage	74.1%		19.0%	6.9%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Spain	Number	71		9	2	1	1	84
	Percentage	84.5%		10.7%	2.4%	1.2%	1.2%	100.0%
The Netherlands	Number	28		7	9	7	0	51
	Percentage	54.9%		13.7%	17.6%	13.7%	0.0%	100.0%
Greece	Number	43		5	2	1	1	52
	Percentage	82.7%		9.6%	3.8%	1.9%	1.9%	100.0%
Romania	Number	64		4	3	0	0	71
	Percentage	90.1%		5.6%	4.2%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Hungary	Number	25		3	2	3	1	34
	Percentage	73.5%		8.8%	5.9%	8.8%	2.9%	100.0%
Total	Number	303		51	24	12	4	394
	Percentage	76.9%		12.9%	6.1%	3.0%	1.0%	100.0%

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

Chinese language Identity is defined in 5-point Likert scales here to reflect the heritage language identity. This partially reflects mentality and perception toward heritage language of overseas Chinese to a certain degree. According to Table 4, 303 children consider Chinese language very important, accounting for 76.9%; 51 children think Chinese learning is important, accounting for 12.9%; only 16 children combined consider Chinese language as not very important or unimportant.

Results show that the percentages of Chinese descendants from various European countries who consider Chinese language as very important, when ranked from high to low, are listed as follows: Romania, Spain, Greece, Italy, Hungary, France, and the Netherlands. Among them, the percentage of children who think Chinese is very important is the highest in Romania, accounting for 90.1%; the next highest percentage is from Spain and then from Greece, with 84.5% and 82.7% respectively; then comes Italy, Hungary and France with 74.1%, 73.5% and 65.9% respectively; only 54.9% of Chinese children in the Netherlands think Chinese is very important.

3.2. Correlation Analysis of 4 Variables of Chinese Offspring in Seven European Countries

Table 5: Correlation analysis of age, staying experience in China, nationality and Chinese language identity of Chinese offspring in seven European countries

		Age brackets	Experience of staying in China	Nationality	Chinese language identity
Kendall's-tau_b	Age brackets ^a correlation coefficient	1.000	.243**	-.126*	-.084
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.	.000	.013	.083

Experience of staying in China	correlation coefficient	.243**	1	-.182**	.138**
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.000		.000	.005
Nationality	correlation coefficient	-.126*	-.182**	1.000	-.229**
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.013	.000	.	.000
Chinese language recognition	correlation coefficient	-.084	.138*	-.229**	1.000
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.083	.005	.000	.

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

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

a. Age in Table 1 is divided into four brackets. In order to control the variables of correlation and regression analysis, age is divided into two brackets: under 12 years old and above 13.

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

From Table 5, it can be seen that under the condition of significance $0 \leq \alpha \leq 0.05$, there are 5 correlations among the 4 variables. The correlation coefficient between the age bracket and Chinese staying experience is 0.243, and Sig (P) = 0.000, which shows their significant correlation. The correlation coefficients of age bracket and nationality, staying experience in China and nationality, Chinese staying experience and Chinese language identity, nationality and importance recognition of Chinese language are -0.126, -0.182, 0.138 and -0.229, Sig(P) are 0.013, 0.000, 0.005 and 0.000 respectively, which shows that they are all significantly correlated.

Therefore, Chinese language identity of Chinese offspring in seven European countries is significantly correlated to Chinese staying experience and nationality. Sig (P) between Chinese language identity and age bracket is 0.083, which is between 0.05 and 0.20 and it shows that they are not significantly correlated but are, however, slightly correlated.

4. Discussion

Reasons why heritage language identity is affected by the three discussed variables will be analysed and suggestions will be put forth as to how to maintain heritage language identity based upon the assembled data.

4.1. Reinforce Language Identity Education of Lower Age

It is very important to strengthen Chinese language education for children at the lower age through schools, families, and communities. Considering the fact that the majority of students attending European Chinese language schools are primary level students who, due to their age, are more likely to listen to parents and teachers. This reality can be used to the advantage. This scenario is especially true for Chinese children being raised under the Confucius moral system who are more likely to be forced to learn heritage language. Meanwhile, it is necessary to adopt more effective measures for the children over 13, so as to achieve the same effect as the children at the lower age group.

4.2. Provide a Variety of Approaches to Visiting China

Consanguinity is key to be made use of so that overseas Chinese children in Europe can build and maintain better contact and interaction with their relatives and friends in China, especially for

children in countries with relatively shorter immigration histories. For European countries with longer immigration histories, a variety of approaches that result in increased visits to China needs to be identified and provided. Some ideas are: to invite overseas Chinese children to return to their ancestral places in China for root seeking, to host various summer (winter) camps for ‘root seeking tours’, and to host local activities so as to help them better understand Chinese history and culture right from the convenience of their own communities. Ideas must be found that attracts them to China. Presently, overseas Chinese are experiencing many difficulties in visiting China due to the Covid-19 pandemic, both in terms of finance (such as the soaring prices of airline tickets) and the numerous restrictions (even immediate family with foreign nationalities are not allowed to visit China now). Instituting more Covid-19 entry precautions in China and asking more of the population of the Chinese mainland to get vaccinated so that China can open its gates to the rest of the world may increase the number of overseas Chinese visiting China.

4.3. Encourage Retaining Chinese Nationality

It is very important to encourage overseas Chinese offspring to retain Chinese nationality. This variable is the most influential factor. Therefore, it is important to build up and enhance China’s comprehensive national strength, improve China’s international influence, and stimulate a sense of belonging and ethnic confidence in being Chinese even when people are living thousands of miles away from China. All of these aforementioned factors can help to build up the Chinese national identity in Chinese living abroad.

5. Conclusion

Based on the survey conducted of the Chinese language identity of overseas Chinese offspring in seven different European countries, it is found that percentages of Chinese offspring in France, the Netherlands and Italy who don’t have staying experience in China are high, while percentages of Romanian children who have staying experience in China reaches 91.5%. In terms of nationality, more than 80% of overseas Chinese children in Greece and Romania hold Chinese nationality, while only 23.5% children in the Netherlands hold Chinese nationality.

Through the correlation analysis, it is found that Chinese language identity is significantly correlated with staying experience in China and nationality, and slightly correlated with age. According to the above results, this paper analyzed data associated with heritage language identity held by Chinese people residing in Europe and it put forth some suggestions to promote heritage language identity, such as reinforcing language identity education of overseas children in lower age groups, providing various approaches to encourage visits to China and through encouraging Chinese children to retain their Chinese nationality. This paper studied the Chinese language identity of overseas Chinese descendants from the micro perspective with quantitative studies. The suggestions made are also advisable for other migrating ethnic groups whose heritage languages are meant to be preserved.

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