

# Teaching a Language in Transformation: Chinese in Globalisation

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In this paper, we focus on the changing conditions and contexts of Chinese as a language of complementary education in The Netherlands. Complementary education is community-organized schooling additional to mainstream education in weekends or evenings (see Blackledge and Creese, 2010; Francis, Archer and Mau, 2009). Our discussion here draws on data of recent ethnographic fieldwork in and around a Chinese school in Eindhoven. We will focus here on what ‘Chinese’ means in a changing, globalizing world and what it means to teach this language. Our argument is that Chinese is a language in transformation, a moving target for learners as well as teachers. But first we need to sketch the context.

## A very brief history of Chinese in the Netherlands

The Chinese are one of the oldest established immigrant communities in the Netherlands. Their number currently amounts to between 77,000 and 150,000 (CBS, 2010; Wolf, 2011). The first Chinese in the Netherlands arrived as seamen around the turn of the century and gradually settled in the Amsterdam and Rotterdam harbor districts where they developed Chinatowns. The majority came from Wenzhou and Qingtian districts in Zhejiang province on the east coast and Bo On in Guangdong on the south coast.

A second wave of Chinese migrating to the Netherlands, after the Second World War (1950-1970), settled in these Chinatowns as well as in other cities, towns and villages throughout the country, typically finding employment in the Chinese (take-away) restaurant business. They often had complex (family) migration trajectories via Hong Kong, Vietnam, Java, Sumatra, Suriname and other regions, which is also reflected in their linguistic repertoires.

During the Mao Era (1949-1976), a series of reforms in the Chinese language were introduced in the People’s Republic of China, including the introduction of a new, simplified Chinese

character writing system and a new romanisation system (“*pinyin*”) – reforms that were not followed in Hong Kong and Taiwan (where traditional characters continued to be used). In this period, migration from and to, or foreign contact, including business, with the People’s Republic was by and large impossible. The Chinese variety of the mainland, Mandarin or Putonghua, played only a marginal role in the Chinese diasporas until sometime after the Economic Reforms of 1978. Because migration from and contacts with Hong Kong (and Taiwan) remained possible all along this period, the Hong Kong Chinese, together with the earlier migrated Guangdong Chinese – both Cantonese-speaking – became the largest group of Chinese immigrants in the Netherlands. Together they represented some seventy percent of the Dutch Chinese around 1990 (CBS, 2010:6). Until then, Cantonese was the dominant language of the Dutch Chinese diaspora. It was this language that was taught and learned in Chinese schools until the 1990s.

After 1978 and increasingly noticeably in the 1990s and 2000s, the composition of the Chinese community in the Netherlands began to change due to political and economic changes in mainland China. More and more PRC citizens (mainly students and knowledge migrants) found and still find their way into the Netherlands. These new Chinese migrants have an important economic, cultural and sociolinguistic impact on the whole Chinese presence in the Netherlands. They now come from all over China (literally from any province) and bring with them a variety of home languages (“*fangyan*” or dialects), but more importantly also a common Chinese language (Putonghua) that has become the normative spoken standard in the PRC in the last decades (see Dong, 2010). As a result, from the 2000s onwards increasingly Mandarin (Putonghua) is recognized as “the Chinese language” in the Netherlands diaspora. As part of this development, Chinese schools in the Netherlands today have almost entirely shifted to teaching Mandarin (Putonghua) and simplified characters, where this was Cantonese and traditional characters when most schools were founded in the 1970s.

Now that we have sketched the changing context of Chinese in the Netherlands, we are ready to answer the question what it means to teach and learn “Chinese” amidst these transformations.

### Jessie's story

Intuitively, many people see the school teacher as the all-knowing repository and mediator of knowledge, as a stable figure whose input would always be directed towards the focus of the class activities and the curriculum knowledge he or she is supposed to transfer. In the context of our research, however, we came to see the teachers as a highly heterogeneous, “unstable” group of people. The reason for this is twofold. First, the teachers themselves have a complex repertoire and a complex sociolinguistic biography, involving sometimes dramatic and traumatizing language shift during certain phases of their lives. As a consequence, language teachers themselves are, in actual fact, language learners. The second

reason is that teachers from the PRC often arrive with a teaching style and a set of language-ideological assumptions that are at odds with those of the learners in the diaspora. This potentially results in mutual frustration and in incidents over class activities and interpretations of tasks.

For an illustration of this complex language shift, consider the following fragment from an interview we conducted in 2011 with first generation Chinese migrant Jessie, a logistics manager for a local company and a voluntary teacher at the Chinese school in Eindhoven from 1999 to 2003. We asked Jessie to reflect on her language life.

- Jessie 我大概是7岁的时候因为父母工作的调动和父母一起搬到广州的。
- JLi 然后7岁的时候随父母工作调动到广州的。你那时到了广州上小学，学校上课是用普通话还是广东话？
- Jessie 我们的小学是这样子，上课是用国语，但同学们之间的交流都是广东话。我刚去的时候听不懂。那时候广东人都是看香港台，都不看大陆台。但是上课老师虽然普通话很蹩脚，但还是讲普通话的，除了像体育呀。这样的课。她那普通话我刚去的时候听不懂。所以我可以说是外来移民。
- JLi 后来就要学会广东话？
- Jessie 我刚到广东的时候可害怕了，街上全是讲广东话，我去读小学的时候，就是说除了学校和家里的环境可以讲讲普通话之外，你要走在街上你不会讲广东话，你要丢了，家都找不到，特别是小孩。所以非常害怕，要努力学，努力学。看电视，那时候还不好意思开口讲，因为你一讲，有口音嘛，给人笑。我读小学的时候呢我一般不敢开口讲，很自闭的。我读初中后，因为没人认识我，不知道我是外来的，我就是以一个完全会讲广东话的人出现。没人质疑我是外来的。但是发现到了初中很多人都不说广东话了。
- JLi 就一下子都不说了？
- Jessie 后来我中学考的比较好到了重点中学，到了重点中学就更没人说广东话了，交流都不讲广东话。大家交流都是讲普通话。这是我的心理。一个普通话讲不好的人，一定没受过什么好的教育，特别是你要考过高考的话，没有一个好的语言教育，你是考不过那些试的，所以从语言上可以判断一个人的教育程度。到了大学反

I moved to Guangzhou with my parents at age 7 because of my parents' job.

Okay, so you started your primary school in Guangzhou. Did the teachers use Putonghua or Cantonese at school?

In our primary school, the teaching was in Mandarin, but pupils communicated among each other in Cantonese. I couldn't understand when I just arrived there. Guangdong people also watched Hong Kong TV channels, they didn't watch mainland channels. But in the class, even though the teacher's Putonghua wasn't that fluent, but they did use Putonghua, except for subjects like gymnastics. I could barely understand the teacher's Cantonese style Putonghua. I was a migrant in Guangdong.

So you had to learn Cantonese?

It was very scary when I just moved to Guangdong. You could only hear Cantonese on the street. School and home were the only two places where you could speak some Putonghua. If you got lost on the street and couldn't speak Cantonese, then you were not able to find your way home. So it was very scary if you were just a little kid. So I had to learn Cantonese very hard, by watching TV as well. At that time, I was also very shy to speak, because once you opened your mouth, you had an accent in your Cantonese, so people laughed at you, so I dared not to speak and had autism until I went to secondary school, because there no one knew that I was a migrant. And I found in the secondary school not so many people spoke Cantonese anymore.

Just all of a sudden people stopped speaking Cantonese?

I went to a key secondary school and people didn't speak Cantonese at these schools, even among each other. I had a feeling, if people couldn't speak Putonghua well, then they didn't have much education, especially for those who had experience with school exams. If your Putonghua is not very good, you won't be able to pass all the exams. So you can judge one's educational level from their language use. But once

而又换过来了，到了大学呢，大家因为没什么压力了，又开始讲广东话了。

you got into the university, things changed again, because we didn't have so much pressure, so we started to speak Cantonese again.

Jessie talks about three moments of language shift in her childhood and adolescence: a first at the age of seven when she moved to the Cantonese-speaking city of Guangzhou with her parents and had to learn Cantonese in order to survive in the school; a second, still in Guangzhou, when she went to a Putonghua-medium secondary school

and found herself with an advantage again; and a third, also in Guangzhou, when she got into the university where Cantonese became more important again. The interviewer then asks Jessie to talk about her experiences as a teacher after migrating to the Netherlands.

- JLi 好，我们现在回到荷兰。  
你以前在安多分的中文学校教过书。
- Jessie 教过，教粤语，教过4年。从99年开始。
- JLi 那时中文学校粤语班多吗？
- Jessie 有好几个，学校都是以说粤语为主。
- JLi 现在中文学校都没有粤语班了，都是普通话班。
- Jessie 就是，早就该没粤语了。
- JLi Hmmm
- Jessie 知道吗，我那时候教得很痛苦。书是繁体字，教简体字。
- JLi 怎么有这种？
- Jessie 因为当时也可以教繁体字，但有些班里学生家长的意见，他们觉得简体字比繁体字有用。当时我们的课本都是台湾提供的，没有简体字的课本。
- JLi 所以当时中文学校的课本都是台湾提供的。
- Jessie 是，以前我们都是10月10号台湾的国庆节，我们都是去台湾的大使馆吃饭。有很多这样的活动。
- JLi 这些年的变化很大。
- Jessie 是，我们以前教的都是广东，香港移民的孩子。现在都是大陆那边的。我以前没有接触香港那边的教材，其实台湾那边的教材用广东话教是教不出来的。有些国语的音用广东话教是教不出来的。所以教得很痛苦，用的是台湾的教材，教的是粤语的发音，写得是简体字。

Okay, now let's go back to the Chinese in the Netherlands. You had been teaching Chinese in the Chinese school in Eindhoven?

Yes, I taught Cantonese for four years since 1999.

Were there many Cantonese classes?

Quite a few. Cantonese was the dominant language.

There is no Cantonese class anymore in the Chinese school.

Yes, should have done that earlier.

Hmmm

You know, it was very painful for me to teach at that time, because the textbooks were in traditional characters but you had to teach the children simplified character writing.

How come?

Because some parents requested for simplified character teaching, they thought it was more useful. But our textbooks were provided by the Taiwanese government, so they had no simplified characters.

So the teaching materials were provided by Taiwan.

Yes, We also celebrated the Taiwanese national day on the 10th of October by going to the Taiwanese embassy to have a meal there.

Things have changed in the last decade.

Yes, my students were all of Guangdong and Hong Kong origin. But now the students are from all over China. I didn't have experience with the textbooks provided by Hong Kong. What I experienced is the teaching material provided by Taiwan couldn't be used to teach Cantonese, because some pronunciations in these textbooks couldn't be pronounced in Cantonese. For instance, rhymes in the Mandarin poetry don't have the same effect in Cantonese. So it was very painful for me to teach Cantonese pronunciation while using the Taiwanese textbooks and teaching simplified character writing at that time.

Taken together, the transcript gives insight into Jessie's experience of the transformations of Chinese. She underwent traumatic language change in her own lifetime: the forced transition towards Cantonese in her childhood left her intimidated and scared ("it was very scary when I just moved to Guangdong"; "I dared not to speak

and had autism"). Community pressure marginalized her as a speaker of Putonghua and accented Cantonese. Yet, the school exam system pushed her peers towards intense efforts in Putonghua, because "if your Putonghua is not very good, you won't be able to pass all the exams". And then, when she started teaching after

migrating to the Netherlands as a graduate student, she saw herself confronted with the strong “polycentricity” of Chinese: Cantonese had to be taught using Taiwanese textbooks, raising linguistic and literacy issues that she found hard to manoeuvre, the more since the parents demanded the teaching of simplified script to their children (polycentricity refers to language having not one, but multiple centres to which speakers orient). Jessie’s teaching experience dated to a decade ago, probably the very early stage of the process of language shift to Putonghua we currently see in full force. Right now, she observes a conflict between old and new styles of teaching, due to the fact that the PRC sends teachers and teacher trainers to the West to streamline and/or “improve” Chinese teaching.

In the school we investigated, differences observed between “old” teachers and newer ones directly from the PRC were striking. While the older generation of teachers tended to have a rather relaxed and tolerant attitude during teaching sessions (and were themselves sometimes struggling with Putonghua), new arrivals from the PRC displayed an outspokenly “native” teaching style, with emphasis on rigour, discipline, and monological teaching. The point of these observations is that the “input” given by teachers during the Chinese classes is in itself a conflict-ridden and polycentric feature, not always without contradictions and contestation, and not always unambiguous in terms of learning. The teachers themselves bring along a baggage of complex sociolinguistic biographies, matching the complexity of those of their students.

### **Chinese as moving target**

This brief discussion of teaching Chinese in the Netherlands points at a series of fundamental aspects about language teaching and language in general in the current globalised, superdiverse world.

Chinese, or any language for that matter, is not a fixed object or entity that people can learn to make use of but is dynamic, changing, contested, in transformation. Languages are moving targets. Chinese as a language has a long history of export and mobility, of being exported “to the world” by Chinese migrants from the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century until today. This has resulted in divergent configurations of language diversity overseas and at home, that are converging in the current wave of globalization characterized as superdiversity (cf. Blommaert and Rampton 2011). If we understand current globalization processes as the

compression of time and space through increased flows of people, goods and images – migration, (mass) communication, imagination – facilitated through technologies, then we can understand how developments in the diaspora are reflecting in intricate ways developments in the PRC. Researching Chinese language in the diaspora helps us look at “the world as one large, interactive system, composed of many complex subsystems” (Appadurai, 1996: 41) and at processes that are of a larger scale than nations and states. This leads us to the second point of our conclusion.

Chinese as a globalising language is fundamentally polycentric. This holds true for other languages as well (see e.g. the chapters in Clyne, 1992), but Chinese presents an extreme case. It is the national language of the world’s largest country in terms of population (1.3 billion) and a heritage language for many millions of diasporic Chinese worldwide. At the same time, we know that the label of Chinese is applied to the written variety of the language (the character-based script and literary language) as well as to a very wide range of regional and vernacular varieties that may be identified separately as Cantonese, Fujianese, Wenzhounese, Shanghaiese, Hakka, Mandarin, etc. To say that Chinese is polycentric means that it has multiple centers that exercise varying degrees of influence on what constitutes the language. This polycentricity is inherently dynamic and changing. Over time, old centres are replaced by new ones. Where Guangdong, Hong Kong and Taipei once were the centres from where books and goods were imported in the diaspora, it is now increasingly Beijing that determines the destination of Chinese. This is an ongoing process, as Jessie’s story illustrates.

Finally, in superdiversity, language teachers have to deal with increasingly diverse audiences in their classrooms with increasingly diverse motivations and purposes to learn a language. Chinese schools are increasingly attracting non-Chinese learners that are interested in learning Mandarin as a foreign language because of its value on the local job market and the global economy (cf. Wang, 2011). This is true also for many second and third generation Chinese heritage children who are native speakers of Dutch and are learning Chinese in complementary education. This will again contribute to further transformations in language teaching and learning processes.

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