

# FACULTY LANGUAGES & HUMANITIES

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Subject to a positive decision of the doctoral examination board, the faculty invites you to the public defense to obtain the academic degree of

DOCTOR OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS

of

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*Language maintenance in a highly multilingual context. A case study of Chinese communities in Brussels*

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# ABSTRACT

This doctoral dissertation sets out to investigate the maintenance of the immigrant heritage language and culture in Chinese communities in Brussels. Brussels is an officially French-Dutch bilingual city, yet in reality, it is profoundly and increasingly multilingual. Earlier research on the linguistic situation in Brussels has predominantly focused on the competing dominant languages, resulting in very limited scholarly and societal attention paid to smaller language communities. This study addresses this blind spot by exploring the language situation of one of the 'forgotten' or 'overlooked' immigrant minority language groups in multilingual Brussels, as well as the endeavors made and challenges faced by group members to retain their heritage language and culture in the Chinese diasporas.

Drawing on the theoretical framework of language ecology on the one hand, and language planning and policy on the other hand, this study discusses the issues involved in language maintenance, on the basis of the ethnographic data collected in the Chinese communities and two Chinese heritage language schools in Brussels. The dissertation is built around four case studies, centering around the processes and outcomes of Chinese heritage language and culture maintenance in a highly multilingual migration context and involving multiple agents (communities members, heritage language learners, educational practitioners, and immigrant parents) at multiple sites (communities, schools, and families). The first case study aims to construct a broad overview of self-reported language repertoires, proficiencies and practices in the Brussels Chinese communities. We investigate the linguistic profile of the communities members coming to Brussels at different periods and find evidence of a community-level language shift towards more complex multilingual repertoires, with an increased role for English and Mandarin, in tune with Brussels' increasingly international and multilingual context. In the following case studies that were carried out in two Chinese community schools, we describe the beliefs and practices of educational practitioners and students concerning their teaching and learning of Chinese heritage language and culture. In the second case study, we took a language policy perspective to observe how the declared and perceived Mandarin-only policies are transformed and negotiated by educational practitioners and students into multilingual practiced policies at the institutional, classroom and individual levels to varying degrees. In the third case study that focuses on Chinese culture, we unveil how educational practitioners and students downplay the goal of maintaining Chinese culture, and paradoxically instrumentalize heritage culture to serve language teaching and learning in practice, while flexibly adapting Chinese culture to the specific diasporic context. In the final case study, with the focus upon the maintenance outside of the school context, we highlight the influence of family language policy developed by parents on the agency of the heritage language learners in maintaining Chinese language and culture, by exploring students' relevant activities outside of the Chinese community schools and their general attitudes toward heritage languages and cultures.

In combining all of these angles and sources, this dissertation has revealed a complex interplay of structural forces and multiple stakeholders across spaces in the processes of maintaining Chinese immigrant heritage language and culture. We suggest that the benign mechanism for maintaining the heritage language and culture in a multilingual migration context is advanced through the joint efforts of the stakeholders in multi-faceted and multi-layered manners. We believe that this dissertation has shed important light on the maintenance of the Chinese language in a decidedly multilingual diasporic context and will serve as an invaluable point of reference for the research on language maintenance and shift more generally.