

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

The Dilemma of Belonging:

**Aspects of Cultural Memory in *Magyar-Kínai Két
Tanítási Nyelvű Általános Iskola és Gimnázium***

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1- Topic and Thesis Statement

In the late 20th century, the political upheaval in Eastern Europe triggered Hungary's economic transformation period. To attract foreign investment, Hungary implemented a visa-free policy for China for a brief period of several years. This visa-free policy attracted a large number of Chinese immigrants with business acumen to settle in Hungary. These Chinese immigrants quickly established themselves through small commodity trade, opening restaurants, and operating trading companies, forming a unique transnational community. Unlike traditional immigration patterns, the history of Chinese immigration to Hungary is characterized by its short duration, rapid development, high degree of independence, and substantial heterogeneity (non-family-based migration and non-geographically-driven migration). They are not easily assimilated, and their internal structure exhibits complex cultural diversity (e.g., the second generation of immigrants has been categorized into groups such as HBH, CBC, CBH, and HBC).

These immigrants' practices, memories of their homeland, and experiences in their new environment have created a conflict of memories, leading to confusion about their identity. The Hungarian-Chinese bilingual school, established to address this issue, has become a unique place to observe this phenomenon. It is not only an educational institution, but also a carrier of cultural memory and a place for identity negotiation.

As a public school jointly operated by the governments of China and Hungary, the Hungarian-Chinese Bilingual School has become a cultural space that brings together diverse cultures. Chinese students from diverse backgrounds coexist here, making cultural heterogeneity and identity negotiation processes worthy of study. Official regulations granted Hungarian and Chinese equal cultural status in this school. As a result, the negotiation among culturally diverse subjects in this space is afforded stronger institutional safeguards, and the officially recognized equality creates a unique environment for cultural negotiation and dialogue.

However, cultural hybridization does not occur automatically. It requires interaction, dialogue, and negotiation among people from different cultural backgrounds—in other words, the process of “cultural negotiation.” In the daily practices of school, the interactions between new immigrant groups (Chinese students and their families) and the local community (Hungarian students and local cultural representatives) are essentially a process of cultural negotiation. This process not only promotes understanding between different cultures but also dynamically constructs a space where hybridization of cultural identities is produced, with identity constantly being redefined and integrated through negotiation.

The students of this school represent a new generation of mobile, globalized individuals. Their identity crisis is no longer a simple binary choice between “integrating into the host country” or “maintaining Chinese culture,” but instead constructing a fluid, hybrid hyphenated identity within multiple cultural reference systems. For these Chinese students who are

far from China, the memories they carry of ‘China’ are constructed through the “cultural memory” transmitted by family, school, and the Chinese community, rather than through direct lived experience.

In my thesis, I attempt to use the application of cultural memory within the framework of Chinese diaspora studies as my starting point, relying on the conceptual evolution of identity to construct a theoretical framework and conduct field research on the paradigm of memory, the construction of identity, and their interrelationships. I view the Hungarian-Chinese bilingual school as a container of cultural memory. Through four years of fieldwork, I have revealed how Chinese students dynamically negotiate, translate, and reconstruct their Chinese memories and Hungarian life practices in their daily educational experiences, thereby forming their unique, fluid identities. This study provides a new theoretical framework and empirical evidence for understanding the formation of immigrant identities in the era of globalization.

The thesis of my dissertation is this: in the historically unique migration pattern that the Hungarian Chinese community devises, the hyphenated identity of Chinese Hungarian people expresses a dynamic duality (or, rather, multiplicity) that can be grasped through the cultural memory of the community, which comes to expression in how they define their life in the context of Hungary, how they relate to their immediate environment, and how they shape their cultural spaces. The bilingual school offers and constructs a cultural space in which Chinese students express and negotiate identities and, in that way, interpret and reinterpret their cultural memories in the vortex of the evolving relational identity within the school community. Their cultural memory, therefore, demarcates the nature and possibilities of intercultural relations.

2- Chapters Description

To respond to the aspect of Chinese students' memory and identity in Hungary, I have divided this thesis into five parts. Each part discusses a specific aspect related to migration,

memory, and identity. The first chapter is a synthesis of the theoretical part. In this chapter, I divide the discussion into two specific sub-chapters. In the first subchapter, I define the Chinese home as “floating” by talking about the ever-travelling nature of Chinese migration. The second subchapter distinguishes Chinese migrants from other migrant groups in the world by bringing in the concept of “Chineseness.” This chapter concludes that the Chinese diaspora group is different from all other migrant groups in the world in that their migratory experience is characterized by the practices of “traveling-in-dwelling, dwelling-in-traveling” (Clifford 1992, 108). The discussion about the Chineseness of being involved serves as a complement to the expression of how Chinese people maintain and transform their own markers of Chinese cultural elements while traveling. The aim is to use the fluidity of “Chineseness” to clarify one’s liquid identity.

The second chapter relies on diaspora theory to give a general overview of Chinese migration to Hungary and to state why the Chinese diaspora in Hungary distinguishes itself from

diaspora groups worldwide. I present this chapter in two parts. In the first part, I test the role of diaspora theory and cultural memory theory in studying Chinese groups, starting with a discussion of the economic life of Chinese in Hungary. The second part focuses on the dynamic relationship between Chinese migrants' memory and identity change in Hungary. Here, their cultural space is labeled as a memory-aided space for negotiating and reconstructing a sense of belonging. The uniqueness of the most representative Hungarian-Chinese bilingual school as a Hungarian cultural space is thus elicited by examining the uniqueness of the Hungarian Chinese immigrant community.

In the third chapter, from Pierre Nora's point of view, it is argued that the school space can be seen as a unique memory space. This memory space attests to three meanings: the material field of memory, the symbolic field of memory, and the functional field of memory. The chapter divides these three aspects into three sub-chapters. This research aims to

determine how Chinese cultural memory is expressed in these three memory sites.

The fourth chapter explains that language is both an important component of knowledge passed down from generation to generation within a group and a carrier of cultural memory. Therefore, teaching the Chinese language and calligraphy in bilingual schools is seen as a way to demonstrate Chinese cultural memory in bilingual education. As visual “memory traces” of socio-spatial memory and cultural-spiritual tensions, the chapter examines how the Chinese language as a mnemonic technique affects individual and collective memory. I have divided this chapter into three sections. The first part focuses on how calligraphy, as a typical representative of Chinese character acquisition, acts as a mnemonic, laying the theoretical foundation for the second subchapter. In the second part, I specify how calligraphy acts as a mnemonic in Hungarian-Chinese bilingual school for both individual and groups of students. The third part elaborates on the uniqueness of thinking in Chinese characters that are different from those

of other languages in the world, as derived from Chinese language acquisition. This leads to the fact that the degree of Chinese character acquisition shapes the impact of identity. The degree of language acquisition also plays a role in mediating the identity of Chinese students who dynamically adjust their identity through language and memory.

In the conclusion of the last chapter, I conclude that Chinese students' identity change is an unfinished dynamic practice of identity shaping. I focus on the changing identities of Chinese students in terms of fluid memories and identities. I consider Chinese students' identities to have "in-between, hybrid, ambiguous" characteristics (Bhabha 1994). Unlike the "in-between" identity proposed by Homi Bhabha, however, the identity of Chinese students may also be "in-among," based on the specificity of the Chinese diaspora community in Hungary in intercultural interactions, which is characterized by their deep interaction and participation in multicultural networks. Therefore, I argue that identity can be seen as a "vapor structure," shaped by the constant negotiation and interaction

of multicultural forces, shaping the creativity of diasporic cultural integration.

3- Research methods

The study involves multiple research methods, specifically ethnographic research methods: field research, participant observation, interviews, and questionnaire surveys, and introduces relevant literature research as an auxiliary means of understanding the research topic.

Literature analysis: Analysis of relevant official school documents, teaching materials, and student works as auxiliary materials for understanding the cultural environment, as well as literature research corresponding to the necessary theoretical clues involved in each sub-topic of the study.

Fieldwork Method: Over four years, from 2020 to 2024, multiple field visits were conducted at the Hungarian-Chinese Bilingual School in District 15 of Budapest.

Participant Observation Method: By observing students' behavior in the classroom and their interactions outside the classroom in real-life scenarios, I examined how they engage

with their native cultural memories within the school environment and how the memories they bring from their homeland interact with the memories they form in their new environment.

Questionnaire Survey Method: This dissertation conducted two questionnaires, selecting 86 Chinese students and some ethnic Chinese students as research subjects. To minimize the influence of Chinese students' parents on the questionnaire results, the survey was primarily conducted among students in grades 5–12, as students in grade 5 and above are capable of independently reading and completing the questionnaire.

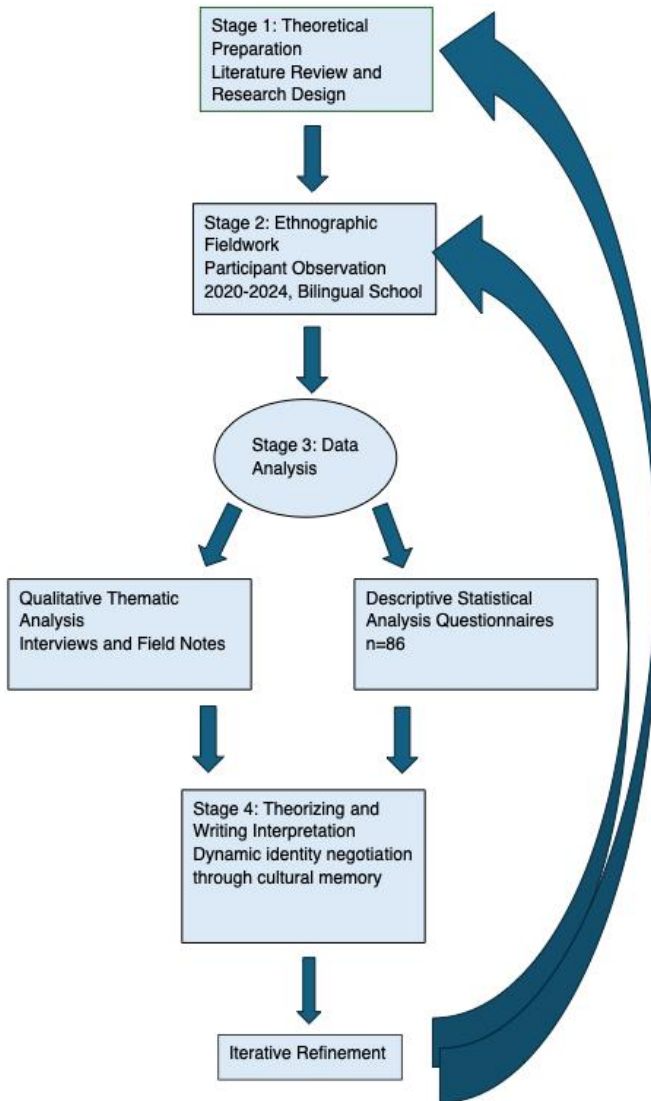
Interview Method: I conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 Chinese students, 30 teachers, and parents to understand their perceptions of identity, subjective experiences of cross-cultural adaptation, and perceptions of Chinese cultural heritage.

Data Analysis Method: The transcribed interview texts were subjected to thematic relevance analysis. The collected

data results were analyzed using statistical methods, primarily descriptive statistics. This process yielded a substantial amount of structured data, laying the quantitative research foundation for examining the relationship between cultural memory and identity fluidity within the Chinese community.

Research Ethics: This study adhered to academic ethical standards, anonymized the names of participants, and obtained informed consent from participants prior to their participation.

This study is divided into four research phases: Phase One, the theoretical preparation and design phase, to determine the research questions and methods; Phase Two, conducting field research and data collection; Phase Three, conducting qualitative thematic analysis and descriptive statistical analysis; Phase Four, writing up the research findings. The research was continuously refined and iterated throughout these four processes based on preliminary findings and data results. The specific research workflow diagram is as follows:



4- Results

Chinese immigrants intend to position their identity through a “contact zone” (Hungarian-Chinese bilingual school), which seeks difference and homogeneity, and experiences the world from their unique space. In an intercultural environment, Chinese migrants’ identities cannot be uniformly defined. Their identity can be viewed as a vapor structure, shaped by the constant negotiation and interaction of multicultural forces, shaping the creativity of diasporic cultural integration.

The diasporic identities of new immigrants exhibit strategic and contextual features because, while maintaining their attachment to their country of origin (China), new immigrants have different understandings of their own “Chineseness” based on the memory embodied in these characteristics, resulting in a hybrid and fluid identity.

Along with the fluid nature of identity, the cultural fragments of immigrants form a mixed whole. Although the various cultural fragments are superficially fused into a whole, there is always conflict within them. To a large extent, migrants

have only acquired the appearance of an identity with homogeneity. Still, they are a mixture of different discourses, voices, habits, or needs, a collage of individuals made up of a combination of multiple cultural identities and self-identities. This seems to imply that immigrants become a sort of “all-inclusive” assemblage as they gradually depart from earlier modes of existence and imitate others (Gergen 1991, 71).

Nevertheless, the identity of the Chinese students still reveals “in-between, hybrid, ambiguous” (Bhabha 1994) qualities. However, unlike Homi Bhabha’s notion of “in-between,” Chinese diaspora identity in Hungary is more complex. Migrants always try to find a transcendental spiritual belonging that is “de-territorialized” and “de-identified.” Still, the collision and intersection of two (or more) cultures essentially plunges them into new confusions and wanderings.

Therefore, based on the complexity of the Hungarian-Chinese diaspora community in cross-cultural integration, the identity of Chinese students may also be

considered “in-among.” Their identity is not just in the middle of two cultures (in-two), but also complexly navigating and intermingling between multiple cultures (in-among). This state of affairs goes beyond a simple cultural sandwich to a multidimensional and multilayered interaction of cultural integration.

5-List of Publications



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Foreign language Hungarian book chapters (3)

- Liu, M.:** The Use of Chinese Characters as Mnémotechnique.
In: Tropes of Transformations. Eds.: Péter Gaál-Szabó, Szilárd Kmeckzó, Andrea Csillag, Ottilia Veres, Debrecen Reformed Theological University ; Nagyvárad : Partium Kiadó, Debrecen, 47-59, 2024, (Cultures, contexts, identities, ISSN 2631-1674 ; 5) ISBN: 9786155853678(DRHE)
- Liu, M.:** Negotiating Memory and Belonging: the Chinese Cultural Space in Hungary.
In: Crossroads in diversity : a travel across spaces of academia. Eds.: Péter Gaál-Szabó, Szilárd Kmeckzó, Andrea Csillag, Ottilia Veres, Debrecen Reformed Theological University ; Nagyvárad : Partium Kiadó, Debrecen, 49-60, 2023, (Kultúrák, kontextusok, identitások = Cultures, contexts, identities, ISSN 2631-1674 ; 4) ISBN: 9786155853524(DRHE)
- Liu, M.:** Migratory Memory and Identity of the Diaspora Chinese Migration to Hungary.
In: Memory, Trauma, and the Construction of the Self. Eds.: Péter Gaál-Szabó, Szilárd Kmeckzó, Andrea Csillag, Ottilia Veres, Debrecen Reformed Theological University ; Nagyvárad : Partium Kiadó, Debrecen, 169-182, 2021, (Kultúrák, kontextusok, identitások = Cultures, contexts, identities, ISSN 2631-1674 ; 3) ISBN: 9786155853456(DRHE)

Foreign language scientific articles in Hungarian journals (3)

- Liu, M.:** Floating "Home": The Chinese Diaspora and the Dynamics of Travel.
Különleges Bánásmód. 10 (Spec.Iss.), 97-106, 2024. EISSN: 2498-5368.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18458/KB.2024.SI.97>
- Liu, M.:** The Functional Sites of "Sites of Memory" in Hungarian-Chinese Bilingual School in Budapest.
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