

Teaching and learning about Chinese culture: Pupils' and teachers' experiences of Chinese community schooling in the UK

Abstract

This article investigates how pupils and teachers in two Chinese community schools in the UK understand Chinese culture as regards the classroom teaching and other activities offered by the schools such as the celebration of festivals. Working from a social constructionist perspective and building on the work of Adrian Holliday, the study explores both how participants understand and negotiate culture, and what processes inform their constructions. Overall, this study demonstrates complexity in pupils' and teachers' understandings of Chinese culture and how such complexity lies in participants' personal trajectories and on the significance they attribute to Chinese culture in their lives.

Il presente articolo discute come gli alunni e gli insegnanti di due scuole di comunità (community schools) cinesi nel Regno Unito elaborino il concetto di 'cultura' in relazione all'insegnamento e alle attività offerte dalle scuole come, ad esempio, la celebrazione delle festività tradizionali. Usando una prospettiva socio-costruzionista e seguendo la cornice teorica sviluppata da Adrian Holliday, lo studio esplora come i partecipanti costruiscano e negozino il concetto di 'cultura' e quali siano i processi che stanno alla base delle costruzioni. Complessivamente, questo studio dimostra come gli alunni e gli insegnanti interiorizzino in modo complesso il concetto di cultura cinese e come tale complessità derivi dalle loro traiettorie personali e dall'importanza che tale cultura riveste nelle loro vite.

Keywords

Migrant communities; intercultural education; community education; Chinese community schooling; grammar of culture

Introduction

Community language schools are multilingual educational spaces where migrants promote their language and culture to the following generations (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Curdt-Christiansen & Hancock, 2014; Francis, Archer & Mau, 2010). In the UK, like in many other parts of the world, Chinese communities have established voluntary schools to promote Chinese (Cantonese and Mandarin) as a heritage language as well as Chinese traditional and contemporary 'culture' (Ganassin, 2017; Li & Zhu, 2014).

With their agenda centred on the transmission of Chinese culture through formal classroom teaching and informal teaching through a range of activities (e.g., celebration of festivals), community schools represent ideal sites to study how culture is taught, learnt and understood by pupils, teachers and parents. This article examines how the concept of Chinese culture is negotiated in the context of Mandarin Chinese community schooling in the United Kingdom (UK). The perspectives of pupils and teachers attending two schools—Apple Valley and Deer River— are compared and contrasted vis-à-vis the agenda of the schools.

A number of studies on Chinese community schooling showed that language teaching is intertwined with the teaching of Chinese cultural values and ideologies (e.g., Li & Zhu, 2014; Wang, 2017). However, adults and pupils tend to attribute different value to the teaching of culture as cultural values are 'changing across the generation and with the on-going process of transnational movement and globalization' (Li & Zhu, 2014, p.118). Given the centrality of 'culture' teaching in the agenda of the schools, this article does not seek to define Chinese culture but it rather aims to investigate participants' understandings of culture as a social construct.

From a theoretical point of view, culture is a contested term (Dervin, 2013). Although there are many definitions of culture, it should be dealt with critically and seen as 'something one does', on people's processes of meaning-making rather than on 'something you belong to or live with' (Kramsch & Hua, 2016, p. 41). Furthermore, this paper argues that pinning down the concept of 'Chinese culture' presents risks of essentialisation such as equating Chinese culture with particular nations and ethnic group in a static manner (Jin & Dervin, 2017). Drawing on Holliday's work (e.g., 1999; 2016) — discussed as part of the theoretical framework — here I understand culture as a process through the mean of 'small culture formation' defined as 'the everyday business of engaging with and creating culture' (Holliday, 2013, p. 56).

Focused on the teacher-pupils interactions in the classrooms and in the wider context of the schools, this article is guided by the following research questions:

- How is the teaching and learning of Chinese culture negotiated by teachers and pupils in the context of Chinese community schooling?
- How do teachers and pupils construct Chinese culture vis-à-vis the aims of the schools and their own small culture formation processes?

To address the research questions, I use ethnographic, qualitative methods to investigate how participants construct meaning—and, in particular, concepts of 'culture'—within and in response to the studied setting. This research approach allows me to understand the shifting and contextual nature of individuals' constructions of culture.

Having introduced the research problem, next, I provide a brief review of the issues addressed in this article.

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Review of the literature

The study of language and cultural practices plays a prominent role in the international literature on Chinese community schooling. Some studies have investigated the experience of pupils, parents, and teachers (e.g., Francis, Archer, & Mau, 2008, 2009). Other studies have focused on language practices as a means of discussing notions of language, culture, and identity (e.g., Creese, Wu, & Li, 2007; Wu, 2006) and on classroom interactions with focus on a socialisation dimension (Li & Zhu, 2014). Furthermore, research has investigated pedagogies of Chinese heritage language (e.g., He, 2006, 2008; Ming & Tao, 2008), the socio-cultural value of language learning (e.g., He, 2010), pupils' biliteracy development (Hancock, 2014), and the relationship between proficiency change and cultural and identity maintenance (e.g., Jia, 2008). Finally, studies focused on the cultural dimension of Chinese community schooling explored pupils' attitudes towards 'cultural activities' proposed by teachers (e.g., Wang, 2017).

The literature contends that the replication of Chinese culture is central in the agenda of Chinese community schools, often framed as a matter of preservation against risks of dilution (Archer, Francis, & Mau, 2010; Mau, Francis, & Archer, 2009; Li & Zhu, 2014; Lu, 2014). The objectification of Chinese culture through cultural practices and symbols is widely discussed in the literature on Chinese community schooling (Li & Wu, 2008; Mau et al., 2009; Wang, 2017) and more broadly in the literature on Chinese communities in the UK (e.g., Benton & Gomez, 2008). With its emphasis on a tangible set of practices (e.g., celebration of festivals), values (e.g., filial piety) and behaviours, such objectification of Chinese culture echoes what some scholars have termed 'vernacular Confucian culture' (Chang, 2000). However, when discussing

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claims of cultural fixity made by parents and teachers, Archer et al. (2010) note that constructing Chinese culture as homogeneous and universal fails to appreciate the shifting and processual production and negotiation of culture.

As far as pupils' and adults' constructions of Chinese culture are concerned, Francis et al. (2008) illustrate how participants to their study understood Chinese culture as a sort of cultural package made up by food, history, and archaeological heritage. In a recent study on classroom practices, Wang (2017) confirms these views and argues how the focus of the schools on cultural activities (e.g., poems, codes for dressing) risks to expose pupils to distant and stereotypical images of Chinese culture they cannot connect with.

Finally, previous studies (e.g., Archer et al., 2010; Francis et al., 2009; Li & Zhu, 2014) argue that adults tend to attribute more importance than do pupils to the transmission of Chinese culture: while pupils tend to be concerned with language learning, adults are equally concerned with the transmission of moral discourses.

These contrasting understandings of the role of Chinese community schooling alerted me to the need to analyse these differences in relation to the schools' approaches to maintaining language and culture. In Ganassin (2017), I investigated classroom language practices and participants' constructions of Chinese as a heritage language. Here, I focus on pupils' and teachers' understandings culture as a social construct.

A further area of research relevant to this study concerns the representation of Chinese pupils in educational contexts. The literature often focuses on their educational achievements, depicting them as a successful ethnic minority (Francis & Archer, 2005a; Archer & Francis, 2007) with conformist and deferent learning attitudes (Woodrow & Sham, 2001). By examining the ways in which pupils negotiated and contested the

teaching of Chinese culture in the community schools, this study challenges views of Chinese children as passive recipient of education.

Having introduced the issues addressed in this study; next, I present the theoretical underpinnings, the context and the methodology. Following, I discuss the emergent findings, drawing on Holliday's 'grammar of culture' to theorise the insights offered by pupils and teachers. Finally, I discuss some emergent implications in order to guide other researchers in the design and development of their own studies on 'culture' in migrant contexts.

Culture as theoretical standpoint of the study

This study is located within the broader field of intercultural education and communication. Theoretically, the study is premised on the epistemological position of interpretivism and its concern for people's subjective experiences. Pupils' and teachers' experiences are understood through the ontological perspective of social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, 1979; Gergen, 2009) and guided by its concern for human experience in social interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1991).

For the purpose of this study, I adopt Pavlenko and Blackledge's (2004) definition of culture as the expression of meaning, values, and behaviours that are always changing and evolving. To capture such dimension of fluidity and subjectivity, I draw on Holliday's grammar of culture and on his 'large' and 'small culture' paradigms (1999, 2010a, 2010b, 2011a, 2011b, 2013, 2016).

Constructed as an imaginary map to read intercultural events, the 'grammar of culture' rests on the belief that culture is socially constructed by different people, at different times, and in different contexts. The 'grammar of culture' is represented by four different domains in loose conversation: particular social and political structures;

personal trajectories; underlying universal cultural processes; and, particular cultural products (see: Holliday, 2011a; Holliday, 2016). 'Personal trajectories'—defined as the individuals' journeys through society (e.g., family, ancestry, peers, profession) — are a central element of the grammar because they mediate how people respond to the structures within they are brought up (Amadasi & Holliday, 2018; Holliday, 2016). The concept of 'personal trajectories' is used in this study to discuss of participants' personal accounts of culture.

Holliday (1999) distinguishes two paradigms of culture in applied linguistics: a 'large' culture paradigm which refers to ethnic, national or international and a 'small' culture paradigm which concerns the ways in which individuals come together on a daily basis to seek affiliation with particular social groups (e.g, neighbourhoods, professional groups) often of transient nature.

Whilst a 'large culture' paradigm focuses on notions of nation, centre and periphery, a 'small culture' one focuses on activities within the group, rather than on the nature of the group itself. As groups are constructed through human interaction, they can form, develop, change and break up and their nature can be transient (Amadasi & Holliday, 2018). Individuals can subscribe to different, and sometimes even conflicting and competing, discourses of culture, creating meanings constituted by a variety of layered factors such as religion, family, and language which provide framings for identity formation (Holliday, 2010a; Holliday 2013).

The distinction between 'large' and 'small' culture also refers to a different approach to the study of culture. Here, I follow Holliday's (1999) call for a 'small culture approach' which stresses the need to observe and interpret interaction of people in real life with a focus on their individual experiences rather than on the 'essence' of

(Chinese) culture (e.g. essential features of ethnic, national and international groups) as a 'large culture approach' suggests.

The study

The findings presented in this article draw on an ethnographic study, which explored the constructions of Chinese language, culture and identity, of 23 pupils and 18 adults (8 parents, 2 head teachers and 8 teachers).

All adults were first generation migrants from China, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Taiwan and were fluent in at least one variety of Chinese (e.g., Cantonese or Mandarin) as well as in English. Pupils were aged between 5 and 17 years old. Six of them (15 to 17 years old) recently migrated to the UK from China and had Mandarin as their first language. The other pupils (5 to 13 years old) were second-generation migrants from China or Hong Kong or from mixed heritage families and all had English as they preferred language. The identification of research participants was purposive, a common feature of qualitative research (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005) and was based on the interest of participants to be part of the study. Ganassin (2017) provides further details about the participants.

Both schools prioritised the transmission of spoken Mandarin and written Chinese in simplified characters alongside the importance of traditional and contemporary Chinese culture (Ganassin, 2017). At the time of the data collection (November 2013—January 2015), Apple Valley School had 65 students. All the teachers were women and had Mandarin as their first language. The school was mostly attended by migrant families from Mainland China and Cantonese-speakers Hong Kong nationals. A small number of mixed heritage families and four local and European children also attended.

Located in a different county, Deer River School had about 90 students.

Teachers were all women from China and Taiwan. The school was attended mostly by Chinese families from China, Singapore, Malaysia, and Taiwan. Cantonese speakers from Hong-Kong, a number of local English and mixed heritage families also attended.

I chose an ethnographic framework for its ability to provide rich understanding of linguistic, cultural, and behavioural practices of particular groups in a specific context, and time (Jackson, 2016). I implemented a number of methods to fulfil different aims and to respond to different research questions: participant observation (including 12 classroom observations), document analysis (e.g., governing documents), semi-structured interviews with adults and visually-mediated focus groups with pupils.

In all, I spent 14 months in the field, taking part in school meetings, supporting the organisation of events, and attending language classes with pupils. I was also invited to attend a number of social events that took place out of the school's opening times (e.g., a karaoke night for parents). These experiences allowed me to get an insight into what pupils and adults experience at school and helped me to recruit participants.

I was aware that hosting a researcher in a school setting could be perceived as disruptive. Therefore, to minimise any discomfort related to my presence and to give something back to the schools, I supported them with a number of organisational tasks such as the production of publicity materials.

Data collection and analysis

The data collected comprised 55 pages of research field notes documenting the researcher's ethnographic observations and reflections (72 hours over 38 days across two research sites), 18 one-to-one semi structured interviews with adults, three focus group sessions with 23 pupils, and 24 visual artefacts produced by pupils.

This article draws on the interview data from the teachers' and pupils', supported by the researcher's ethnographic investigation. Teachers were asked open-ended questions on the following topics: (i) how they understood and implemented the agenda of the schools on the promotion of Chinese language, culture and identity; (ii) their goals as educators; (iii) how they understood the importance of community education in the lives of adults and pupils. I referred to the term 'culture' in the teachers' interviews because of its centrality in school agenda.

I observed pupils in the classrooms and in the wider social context of the school as they interacted with peers, teachers, parents, and with me, the researcher. I did not use term 'culture' in the pupils' focus groups. Instead, I focused on their wider learning experiences according to the following topics: (i) reflections on learning moments; (ii) motivation to attend and expectations; (iii) discussion on how the schools changed (if so) the ways in which they looked at themselves.

The emic perspectives provided by the interviews were complemented by the researcher's observations of participants' spontaneous reactions to different school activities, revealing significant traits of their experiences of community schooling.

Data were recorded, transcribed and coded following Braun & Clarke (2006) principles of thematic analysis, which involves researchers familiarising themselves with the data, generating initial codes, searching for and reviewing themes and defining and naming themes. I chose thematic analysis as it allows the researcher to work inductively from the data, but also to rephrase the research questions in line with the emergent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2012). Such flexibility was required to capture the constructionist underpinnings and the exploratory purpose of the study.

Data were subjected to thematic analysis under three broad categories guided by the agenda of the schools: Chinese language, culture and identity. For the purpose of this article, I will explore the themes found under the umbrella of 'culture' in the perspectives of pupils' and teachers'.

Ethical considerations

The study received ethical approval from the university where it was based. I initially contacted the head teachers and obtained their permission to access the schools and to engage with adults. Classroom observations were agreed with teachers and parents and they served as a platform to arrange the focus groups with pupils who were interested.

Adults' and pupils' participation was voluntary. All participants were informed about the ethical principles around anonymity/confidentiality, the right to withdraw, and the right to ask questions about the study. I gave fictional names to the research sites and to all the participants.

Languages

The data were primarily collected in English and Mandarin was occasionally used (e.g., observational data). The centrality of English in the research design depends upon the fact that the study was located in an English speaking macro-context. My own language repertoire also informed this choice: I have Italian as first language and I use English in personal and professional contexts. Chinese is also part of my repertoire as I studied Mandarin at undergraduate level, and I am familiar with Chinese simplified characters and the 拼音 *pīnyīn* transliteration system. I also have some understanding of Cantonese, although I cannot speak it. Although my command of Mandarin generally enables me to engage in informal conversation with people, it would not have been sufficient to conduct full interviews.

The decision of conducting research mainly in English had an impact on the researcher-researcher relationships at various levels. For example, it affected the recruitment process as a number of potential participants did not have sufficient English language skills, or so they perceived, to take part in the interviews.

However, this decision also offered a number of opportunities. For example, it facilitated the relationship between a 'foreigner' adult researcher and child participants considering English as their first language, as it triggered their interest in the research and in the researcher. The wider implications on the research of the positioning of the researcher as a linguistic and cultural outsider are discussed in further detail in a forthcoming article.

Teachers' and pupils' constructions of Chinese culture

The data were analysed to investigate and compare the accounts of teachers and pupils. The following themes emerged under the umbrella of 'culture': classroom teaching (teachers); projected images of Chinese culture (teachers); motivation (teachers); classroom learning/engagement with teaching (pupils); experiential learning and engagement (pupils').

Because of the qualitative and exploratory nature of the study, here I discuss selected examples that possibly illuminate the perspectives of the wider group of participants. I begin by discussing how culture was taught in the classrooms.

Classroom teaching of Chinese culture

The schools implemented the teaching of culture both in the classroom through teacher-centred teaching and through extracurricular activities (e.g., celebrations of festivals). Teachers were responsible for implementing the curriculum in the classroom. Their relationships and interactions with the pupils were central to the classroom dynamics.

At the same time, teachers had to prioritise the agenda of their schools—which guided the curricula—and their focus on textbooks.

As anticipated, textbooks formed the core of the planned curriculum, here intended as contents and aims of the syllabus (Kelly, 1999) and, thus, to its theoretical aspect. However, the analysis of findings reveals that a textbook-centred curriculum with often little leeway for any personal input was problematic for a number of teachers.

At Deer River School, Joy was very disillusioned about the agenda of the school. When I asked her what motivated the school's choice for a textbook-centred curriculum, she replied: 'You should ask the [school] committee, not the teachers. We are not involved in any decision'. The teachers' reservations about the choice of a textbook-centred curriculum rested upon a number of reasons. For example, the majority of them felt that topics (e.g., traditional poems) and tasks (e.g., copying and memorising characters and sentences) did not support the pupils' engagement. At Apple Valley, teacher Shuchung contested the pedagogical approach of the school to language and culture, as it centred on repetition of concepts not relevant to everyday life:

The textbooks are a bit old. The teaching style is different from what they get in mainstream schools. It is textbook and repetition driven. There is stuff like about the Forbidden City, about our history. Not very relevant to everyday life.

At Deer River, Ting extended that opinion and argued that the fact that pupils 'don't live in China' affected their understanding of certain cultural products represented in the books. In her interview, Ting did not express a concern for the inability of pupils to understand specific lexical forms, but rather voiced her concerns about the collective memories that those words evoked. For example, she explained how her students did

not know that the word 茅房 *máofáng* was originally used to indicate a latrine but, more importantly, it is used to define 'something [that] it's made very poorly'.

Echoing the work of Li and Zhu (2014), teachers seemed aware that the static configuration of culture in the textbooks was not relevant for the pupils' daily lives, and they realised how the teaching of culture needs meaningful representations that pupils could connect with. However, teachers also looked for pedagogical alternatives, other methods to introduce Chinese culture to their pupils. With their knowledge and experience of life in China, teachers gave great importance to their role as educators and they felt responsible for making Chinese culture accessible for the pupils.

All teachers wanted their classes to be interesting and so they tried to incorporate stories, presentations, and other materials to provide a valuable alternative to the textbooks. As Rose pointed: 'You share your knowledge, your information, your understanding of your own culture to make them interested'. She explained that: 'We celebrate festivals and do things in the community. You learn with the language and the culture together'. Her colleague Lirong was convinced that particular aspects of Chinese culture, such as the celebration of festivals, were important for the children. She explained:

[Chinese culture is] anything that is related to our Chinese background. Like how is Women's Day in China. Like the dragon boat becomes a big culture [cultural celebration] in China. I hope that children are interested in what's behind the dragon boat.

Lirong was concerned also about the importance of pupils' understanding the symbolic meanings of particular Chinese cultural products and how pupils could relate to them. Similarly, Alice put a lot of effort in offering extra materials to her students:

I have prepared some PowerPoint for my students about Chinese culture or I bring some short articles or use some pictures about different dresses and about food. I think that this is a very nice way of teaching, it brings culture to life.

In the classrooms, fables, stories, and legends were widely used by teachers to expose their pupils to Chinese culture. In the teachers' eyes, they represented a way to 'bring to life' Chinese culture and to make it more relevant to pupils. The gulf between teachers and pupils as regards what is relevant to be taught—and how pupils responded to the classroom teaching—is explored in further depth later on in the article.

Teachers' projected images of Chinese culture

The ways in which teachers taught Chinese culture were informed by their projected images of Chinese culture. Although teachers drew on cultural products—such as values, beliefs and behaviours—to construct Chinese culture or their Chinese cultural realities, their constructions were sometimes conflicting.

Alice at first discussed the universality of certain Chinese cultural products (for example, she stated that 'In Chinese traditional culture, our character is always shy'), as she wanted to emphasise what Chinese traditional culture is, and how it can be used to make sense of the character and behaviour of Chinese people. Then she stressed how, despite the universality of certain products, regional variations are also important markers of tradition:

It [culture] changes from north to south, but it's traditional anyway, the main traditional things are the same. Anyway, your country, your husband and your father are the most important things in your life. That is real Chinese culture.

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Although Alice toned down the assumption that Chinese culture is homogenous, she concluded by stating that particular cultural products (e.g., Confucian values) are common to all Chinese people and as such are an expression of real Chinese culture. Jun was equally convinced about the importance of teaching Chinese culture through shared cultural products:

[It's important] learning more about our culture. About the festivals but also about the background. About the teachings of 孔子 *Konzi* <Confucius> and how they affected so many people and other countries.

The importance of Confucianism in Chinese culture as a discourse of unity and tradition found wide currency amongst the teachers. A further example is offered by Nala, who shared her understanding of Chinese culture as the product of Confucianism and explained why it should have been taught in the classrooms:

I think that Chinese culture' real value to the world is that Chinese people is not aggressive in terms of culture. I think that is the product of the Confucian culture. It is about trying to balance between all sort of things and trying to find the harmony. Chinese people are very modest. I think that modesty is very important and needs to be taught to pupils.

In his work on small and large cultures Holliday (1999) cites a Chinese language education context, and argues that individuals' discourses of Confucianism are not necessarily aligned with a [Chinese] large culture paradigm, which is linked to a prescribed Chinese national entity. If individuals use their discourses of and about Confucianism to interpret its influence on other people—in his example, Holliday (1999) suggests that teachers used discourses of Confucianism and culture rather than their direct description to interpret their students' behaviour—they are, in fact, constructing a [Chinese] small culture. Furthermore, according to Holliday (1999), the

processes through which individuals use cultural products to construct their small culture[s] 'tells us something about the ways in which notions of large culture are reified, and dominant discourses of culture are set up' (p. 253). In line with the example given by Holliday (1999), the data in this study show that teachers used their own projected images of Confucianism and Chinese culture to construct their own Chinese small culture(s) in the context of the school. In addition, as they constructed such culture(s), they used ideas of authenticity and tradition to claim its value for the children (e.g. 'modesty is very important and needs to be taught to pupils').

A further interpretation of Confucianism as small culture is offered by Ting, who described a number of cultural products (e.g., behaviours) that she saw as lying at the core of Chinese culture. As she defined her understanding of Confucian cultural values, she also emphasised how Chinese values were different from British values:

We transmit the Confucian values to Chinese children. Respect the elderly, that's a big thing, and that's a big difference between mainstream British values and culture and Chinese families. Look at the differences between Chinese families and British families; in the Chinese families traditionally the elderly play a major role. There is an emphasis in respecting your elder. Don't speak back at your elder. Do as you are told. Behave conformably. Everything must be for the good of the family. These values are really Chinese.

As did her colleagues, Ting manifested the interiorisation of Chinese values when she used her constructed Chinese small culture to differentiate it from the dominant British society. Here, the position of Ting aligns with the findings discussed by Archer et al. (2010) on the importance of 'culture' in Chinese language schools. In their study, teachers and parents 'frequently engaged in a form of "fixing" of culture in order to produce themselves as powerful (cultural) subjects' (p. 413). As adults in this study

used their idealised constructions of Chinese culture to mark a distance between 'the Chinese' and 'the British' (or Westerners), they resisted the dominant discourses of the society surrounding them. Convinced of the importance of [their interpretation] of traditional [Confucian] Chinese education, teachers in this study saw in the classroom teaching as an opportunity to channel Chinese values that pupils could interiorise to improve not only as learners but also as people.

However, there was not always consensus on what traditional or authentic Chinese culture was and, despite the dominance of Confucianism in the teachers' discourses, some dissenting opinions emerged. As a Taiwanese citizen, Joy problematised the construction of Chinese culture at Deer River School as, in her view, both the official discourses of the school and the expectations of the parents centred on projecting the culture of Mainland China as 'Chinese' culture. She explained:

They [parents and teachers] think that Chinese culture should be from China not from other places like Taiwan. Even those who are Singaporean, Malaysian, and so on.

In her interview, Joy resisted dominant discourses of Chinese language (i.e. as the language of the Chinese nation state) by grounding her own authenticity and legitimacy as a Mandarin speaker in alternative linguistic and cultural attributes. The following excerpt demonstrates how she used these arguments to challenge the focus of the agenda of the school on Chinese culture as the culture of Mainland China and, by doing so, how she challenged the correspondence between Chinese culture and the political entity of the PRC:

Joy: Chinese culture? First of all I am not Chinese. At all. I told you before, I have my own language and culture.
However, Chinese culture is our [Taiwanese] way of life.

Researcher: I am confused, what does it mean that you are not Chinese?

Joy: {laughs} Well, I mean, not really like that. It's just that we have been apart for more than 50 years, from 1949, so we have our own living style. Taiwan is more traditional, there is a more traditional way to live. In 1960 something China had the Cultural Revolution, was it Mao Zedong, yeah? He destroyed most of the Chinese culture, so we maintained the culture. In China, they set up their own way of living but in Taiwan we kept on going the traditional way. In Taiwan there are a lot of Chinese mainlanders now coming to learn how to be traditionally Chinese.

Joy used tradition (e.g., living style) and historical reasons (e.g., that Taiwan was not influenced by the Cultural Revolution) as markers of cultural legitimacy. In a process of small culture formation, she used her own discourse of Chinese culture, or arguably that of Taiwan, to argue that Taiwan and not the PRC is the true representative of traditional Chinese culture.

As shown by their accounts, Ting and Joy used the same process of small culture formation to construct their status as legitimate cultural subjects. That position seemed to be important for them as teachers who were in a position to influence the pupils. In conclusion, the analysis reveals that teachers constructed Chinese culture differently according to their own locations and trajectories of experience (e.g., their provenance). Nevertheless, they all used their own discourses of and about Chinese culture to reinforce [their subjective] concepts of Chinese cultural authenticity and legitimacy. These two concepts were important because, as discussed in the next section, they informed teachers' motivations to teach Chinese culture in the classrooms.

Different motivations to teach culture

As teachers worked on incorporating what they interpreted as Chinese culture into their classroom teaching, they all wanted the school to be a locus for Chinese cultural preservation and transmission. Although teachers constructed Chinese culture according to their personal trajectories, they all shared the belief that teaching culture was an important way to instil traditional Chinese values and contribute to the personal improvement of pupils.

Convinced that forming pupils as individuals was part of her role of educator at Deer River, Ting argued the school taught Chinese values to make pupils 'better people': 'We transmit Chinese values. I want them to be better people'.

Other teachers were also concerned about promoting Chinese culture in the wider society. Nala explained how she saw her role as an educator beyond the educational remit of the school:

I started to teach for the local British people in higher education. Then I started to teach in the Chinese community school. I just feel I want my culture to be recognised not just by our own children but also by the local people.

Nala's desire for cultural recognition resonates with some of the literature on Chinese community schooling (e.g., Francis et al. 2005a, 2005b) which emphasises that teachers and parents want to foster the recognition of their culture in a society where they perceive themselves as a minority. However, in this study the importance of teaching culture to foster a sense of cultural recognition in the society did not find great currency amongst the teachers, who, in contrast, focused on more personal reasons.

For example, Alice explained that she taught in the hope that her pupils could one day remember her with affection:

I want them [pupils] to learn about my culture. I am happy to be Chinese. If I go back to China I wish that they could remember me. I would like them to think: 'Oh, my teacher taught me about these skills as a way to learn Chinese culture. Remembering this teacher for me it's a fantastic thing'.

Alice put real effort into promoting Chinese culture in the classroom in what she believed was the pupils' best interests. Rose shared the same view and argued that 'the school has its own goals but I still put extra work and do my own thing for the children'.

The teachers' accounts demonstrate how they appeared to be driven by three key beliefs about the importance of Chinese culture in their teaching: the desire to build up a meaningful relationship with pupils; to improve pupils as individuals; and, to promote Chinese culture within and outside the schools.

Next, I focus on pupils' perspectives to investigate how they engaged with the classroom teaching of culture.

Classroom learning and pupils' engagement

Here, I draw on the concept of received curriculum (Kelly, 1999), which refers to the reality of students' experiences, to explore how pupils responded to the classroom teaching of culture. Drawing both on excerpts from the focus group sessions with the pupils and on observational data, I discuss how such negotiation of the teaching and learning of culture impacted on and was affected by the relationships and interactions between pupils and teachers.

As far as the use of textbooks and other teaching resources was concerned, pupils echoed the concerns previously expressed by teachers. During the focus group at Deer River School pupils lamented the textbooks' lack of relevance to their daily life. For example Julian argued that:

The school is very repetitive. The things that we learn are always the same, [...] they are not relevant to normal life.

Julian and his classmates discussed how the classroom teaching was 'all about stories of animals and things like that'. In their accounts, these pupils expressed disengagement and possibly a lack of understanding of what their teacher wanted to convey to them.

Despite the efforts of the teachers to bring Chinese culture to life, the responses of the pupils were not necessarily enthusiastic. To illustrate this point, I discuss an incident which centres on the narration of a traditional Chinese fable at Apple Valley School, the fable of 'the frog of the bottom of the well' (井底之蛙 *jǐng dǐ zhī wā*). The fable talks about a frog who used to live a happy life at the bottom of a well. One day a turtle arrives at the well and she starts to suggest to the frog that there is a whole outside world. The most common interpretation of the fable argues that the frog, who is not keen on accepting alternative perspectives of the world, is condemned to remain bounded within its well and the metaphor of the frog of the bottom of the well is used to indicate a narrow-minded person. As detailed in the research field notes:

The teacher shows a short video in Chinese with the fable of 井底之蛙 *jǐng dǐ zhī wā* <frog of the bottom of the well>.

Pupils laugh. She asks them to interpret the story with no success. She then explains the moral behind the fable: some people are narrow-minded and presumptuous and see nothing beyond their own small world. Pupils start to question her interpretation. One asks 'how can a frog speak to a turtle?' Others make jokes and ask if only Chinese frogs can talk and if they necessarily speak Mandarin. The teacher seems a bit annoyed and replies: 'The point is not if they can talk or not. The point is what they want to teach you. 你们听得明白吗? *nǐ mén tīng dé míng bái má?* <Is it clear?>'. Pupils continue to tease her and another one makes a point that 'To be able to teach they [animals] need to be able to speak anyway'.

As discussed earlier on by Ting, many teachers taught Chinese language through proverbs and fables in the hope that pupils would interiorise values and moral teaching. However, here it is evident that pupils challenged the moral of the fable proposed by their teacher as it did not seem to have any meaning to them or their lives. As pupils laughed and teased the teacher, their lack of engagement affected the intent of the teacher to instil a sense of [Chinese] morality.

Experiential learning and pupils' engagement

Here, I discuss how pupils engaged with the experiential learning of culture (i.e., through festivals and celebrations) proposed by the schools.

Previous studies (e.g., Wang, 2017) tend to refer to 'cultural activities' as complementary elements to the formal classroom teaching and learning and their value for pupils and adults is not discussed in depth. Here, the research findings revealed that pupils who had the chance to be involved in different 'cultural activities'—mostly at Apple Valley School—highly valued the opportunity of experiencing Chinese culture as a way to [re]connect with their roots. The findings emerging from the wider study show how pupils enjoyed such activities regardless of their age and personal history. In this section, I discuss the accounts of 9-year-old British-born Kitty, and of 17 and 15-year-old Chinese-born Meili and Yang.

The field notes record how a number of pupils valued celebrations and festivals as an alternative to the routine of their lessons:

The opportunity to be part of some culture-focused activities is generating the pupils' interest and enthusiasm. In the classrooms they are starting to prepare to perform for the Chinese New Year. Rose's pupils are preparing a Chinese song and when I asked Grace how she felt she said that she is happy to perform, 'dress up like a traditional Chinese' and do something different.

The excerpt refers to the celebration of the Chinese New Year at Apple Valley School.

Another episode recorded in the research field notes centres on a play on the Ming dynasty that Kitty's teacher had organised:

The pupils attending year 4 have been working on a play on Li Shizhen (famous physician of the Ming dynasty). Kitty said that 'although we don't have any costumes and the performance is just for our classmates, it's great because we can understand how our ancestors lived'.

Kitty was not just happy about performing; she valued how through a performance she could gain more knowledge about her ancestors and learn historical facts related to her own heritage. In fact, the same field note records how she then pointed out that 'at [her mainstream] school everything [history lessons] is about Romans and Victorians and never about Chinese'.

Similarly to Kitty, many other pupils were interested in discovering something about the ancient Chinese, their ancestors, and possibly about themselves. As far as the process through which pupils constructed culture was concerned, they all used what Holliday (2011a) calls cultural resources (i.e., elements of a society) and drew them into their statements about culture. More importantly, they expressed an interest in Chinese culture because it could be relevant to their own roots. In addition, because of the cultural activities at the school they began to think about 'culture' as informing their own lives—that they too were linked to these cultural elements.

Pupils who had lived in China for most of their lives also valued the experiential activities. When I asked them why they attended a Chinese community school, Meili replied: 'You don't need to study Chinese [language] but you could forget Chinese culture'. Convinced of the importance of maintaining a connection with what she

perceived as Chinese culture, Meili focused her cartoon storyboard on the different cultural activities offered by the school (Figure 1):

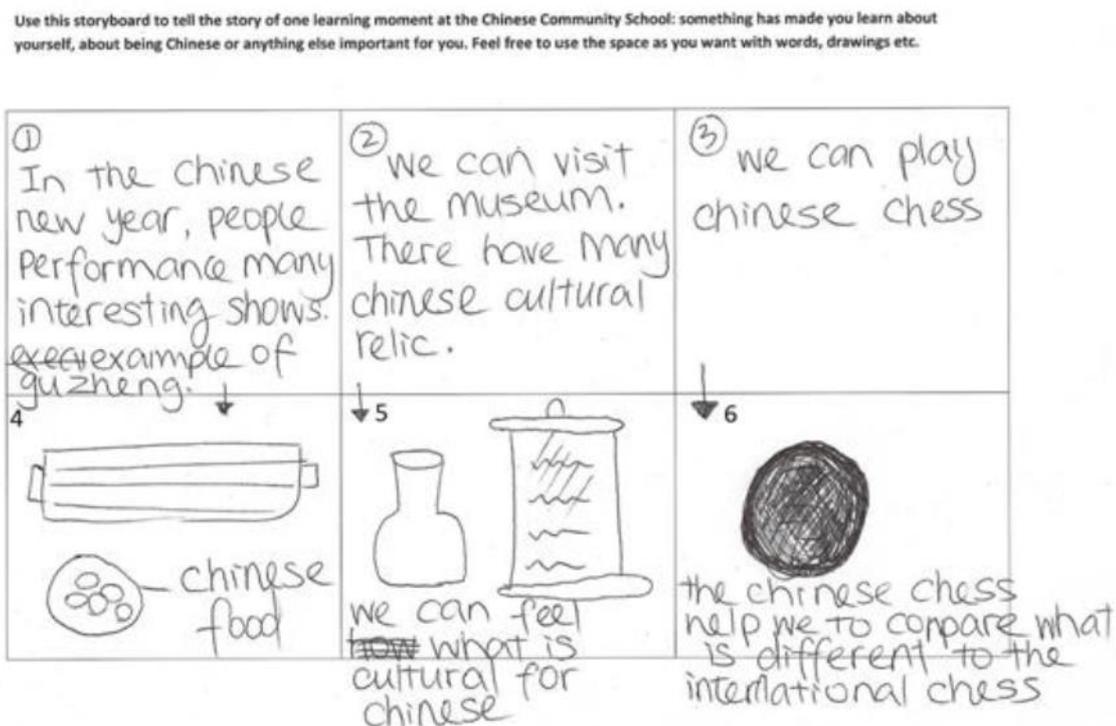


Figure 1 Cartoon storyboard created by Meili.

She depicted three key moments where culture could be learnt through experience: celebrating Chinese New Year and eating Chinese food, visiting the local museum which had a Chinese collection, and playing Chinese chess. She then illustrated her storyboard explaining why experiencing and learning Chinese culture was important for her although she had lived in China most of her life:

Meili: In the Chinese school because we have Chinese New Year we do many interesting things and we know many cultural things for Chinese [Chinese cultural things].

Researcher: Although you lived in China for many years you still feel that is important coming here and learning the culture?

Meili: Yes, so we can visit the museum. They have many Chinese cultures, we can play Chinese chess and international chess, how they are different.

Meili previously expressed a concern about 'forgetting about Chinese culture' as she lived in the UK. Then she explained how experiencing particular moments at the school helped to overcome her concern and still make her feel connected with her life back in China ('we can feel what is cultural for Chinese').

Her classmate Yang represented (Figure 2) how the celebration of the Chinese New Year at the school was a meaningful moment:

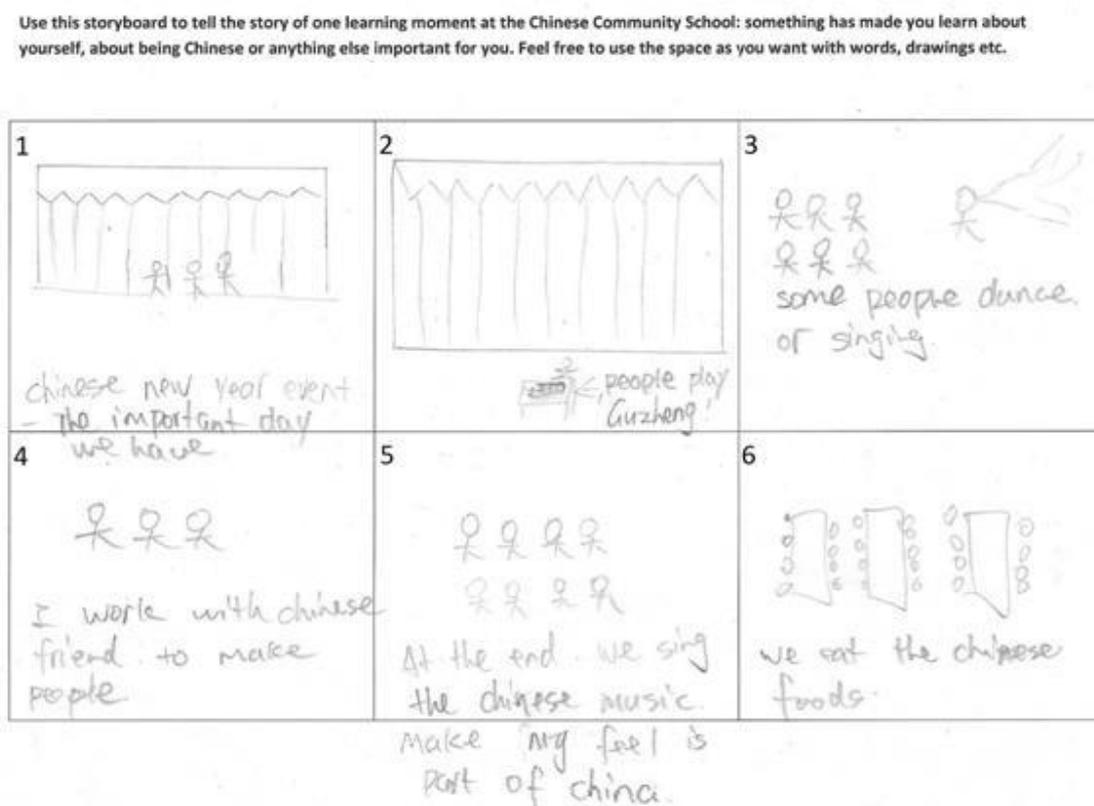


Figure 2 Cartoon storyboard created by Yang.

Yang brought together different elements such as the importance of celebrating, working with classmates, and eating together to express the value of the experiential learning of Chinese culture at the school. As he explained:

Here we have Chinese New Year; it's an important day and some people play 古筝 *gǔzhēng* and some people dance Chinese dancing and singing. I have to work with my Chinese friends to make people happy and at the end we can

sing Chinese music and we can feel that we are part of China.

The accounts of Meili and Yang aligned with those found in previous studies (Archer et al., 2010; Francis et al., 2008; Wang, 2017) where participants tend to construct a tangible and replicable vision of culture through particular artefacts (e.g., festivals, literature). Given the similarities between the positions of Meili and Yang and the findings from other studies, I became interested in exploring the process behind participants' constructions of culture, particularly through the use of Holliday's (1999) small culture paradigm. As Meili and Yang deconstructed Chinese culture through particular artefacts (e.g., Chinese food and music), and they expressed a need for cohesion with other Chinese people ('we can feel that we are part of China'), they also created building blocks for a small culture formation.

Furthermore, the examples discussed in the article, that possibly illuminate the perspectives of other pupils, challenged the findings of previous studies (e.g., Francis & Archer 2005a, 2005b; Archer 2010) arguing that adults tend to attribute more importance than do pupils to the transmission of Chinese culture. Here, the analysis shows that pupils actually valued learning Chinese culture through the experience of cultural activities, whereas what they did not engage with was the textbook-centred approach to the learning of culture and more widely the configuration of culture through symbolic meanings that they could not access (e.g., the meaning of particular fables).

Discussion and conclusions

This study has investigated how pupils and teachers attending two community schools in the UK constructed Chinese culture. Participants' perspectives have been investigated

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in relation to the theoretical and methodological framework offered by Holliday's (2013; 2016) 'grammar of culture'.

In the classrooms, the teaching and learning of culture was the result of a process of interaction between pupils and their teachers where interrelation and agency were central. Although both pupils and teachers agreed on the disadvantages of taking a textbook-centred approach to the teaching of culture, a gulf emerged in their expectations and motivations to teach and learn of Chinese culture. Whilst teachers wanted to transmit a sense of Chinese morality through language and particularly fables and legends, pupils wanted to learn about culture in real life situations they could relate to. As a result, pupils expressed dissatisfaction and disengagement with the classroom teaching of culture. In contrast, the analysis showed how pupils valued the experiential learning of culture through activities such as plays and celebrations in which they had the opportunity to [re]connect with their family and personal histories. Therefore, three main conclusions can be drawn from this study.

The first conclusion concerns the ways in which teachers and pupils understood and valued the transmission of culture in the context of the schools. In contrast to previous research (e.g., Archer 2010; Francis & Archer 2005a, 2005b; Li & Zhu, 2014), this study suggests that pupils and adults differ primarily in terms of the value they place on the teaching of Chinese culture as pupils valued the teaching of Chinese culture in the schools, but did so differently from the adults. Whilst teachers were concerned about the internalising of values and beliefs, pupils were interested in how Chinese culture could be meaningful for their family histories and their own identities.

The second conclusion concerns the nature of participants' constructions of Chinese culture that were analysed through the lens of the 'small culture' approach

(Holliday, 1999). The analysis of data demonstrated how participants used their statements about culture both to make sense of the cultural agenda of the schools, and, at the same time, to attribute cohesion to their perceived Chinese group. Furthermore, as they all projected their own images of Chinese culture, participants often sought validation from the past (e.g., teachers referring to the Confucian tradition) and at the same time they brought in their own life experiences (e.g., migrant pupils constructing Chinese culture through products such that they connected with their life in China). Although in this study fixed constructions of culture (e.g., how culture can be taught as a model) apparently resisted, the complexity of participants' accounts lies in that they disagreed on what constitute Chinese culture, on its significance in their lives, and on ways of teaching and learning Chinese culture in the schools.

The third conclusion concerns the representation in the literature of Chinese pupils as either a successful ethnic minority (e.g., Francis & Archer, 2005a, 2005b; Archer & Francis, 2007) or as conformist and even passive learners (e.g., Woodrow & Sham, 2001). In contrast, in this study the pupil-teacher interactions and the pupils' accounts showed a more vibrant image. Pupils played a major role in the dynamics of the schools not only as they engaged with cultural activities but also critiqued the pedagogies of the schools and even challenged their teachers. Being far from passive recipients of education, they demonstrated strong opinions about what made the teaching of culture relevant or irrelevant for them and what they wished to learn at school.

In this study, the theoretical and methodological framework suggested by Holliday (1999, 2013, 2016) has helped in understanding how individuals represent discourses of and about culture rather than seeking to pin down definitions of culture.

Overall, this study calls for an approach to the study of 'culture' based on individuals' everyday experiences of it with a particular focus on the underlying universal cultural processes—the shared manner in which we all engage with culture—that shape 'small cultures' formation (Holliday, 2016).

There is a need to embrace the complexity of the concept of 'culture' in the context of community schooling and, more broadly, in migratory contexts, where the maintenance of 'other' cultures is supported. Further research on Chinese community schooling should not aim to define culture, but rather, it should analyse the narratives of those involved in the schools in order to understand how they construct the culture(s) they are claiming to be representative of (Holliday, 2010b).

As argued by Holliday (2010a, 2016), the statements of and about culture that individuals articulate can be analysed by researchers to make sense of the ways in which they construct their identities through affiliation with particular groups. Such an 'intercultural' approach to the study of culture is important to avoid claims that may lead to stereotypical representations of particular groups. When researching within migrant communities, researchers have the responsibility not only to ensure effective participation of and communication with the participants, but also to maintain an ethical representation of those involved (Ganassin & Holmes, 2013). As O'Neill (2010) contends, researchers need to demonstrate a commitment to cultural and—it can be added, linguistic and social—justice to avoid cultural and linguistic domination, and misrecognition of their research participants. I see such responsibilities as being even more urgent in the current social and political context where migrants face increasing challenges and the (mis)representation of migrant communities as isolated and unwilling to integrate is potentially dangerous.

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Note

The two schools adopt the same textbooks: the 中文 *Zhongwen* series compiled by the College of Chinese Language and Culture of Jinan University (CCLC) for an audience of overseas learners.

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Figure captions

Figure 1. Cartoon storyboard created by Meili.

Figure 2. Cartoon storyboard created by Yang.