

# LEARNING IN TWO LANGUAGES AND CULTURES

THE EXPERIENCE OF MAINLAND  
CHINESE FAMILIES IN BRITAIN



AN RAN

China Review Academic Publishers

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# **Learning in Two Languages and Cultures**

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in Britain**



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**China Review Academic Publishers**



**Cross-Cultural Communication Research Center**  
**South China University of Technology**

# Foreword

It gives me great pleasure to write the foreword to this book. When Professor An Ran began her studies in the UK in 1996, she was my first doctoral student from China. She found herself in a very linguistically diverse society. A recent survey showed, for instance, that over 300 different languages are spoken by London school children. The educational experiences of minority language speaking children have attracted growing interest in recent years but, in the mid-1990s when this study was in progress, Chinese children had received very little attention. Although there had been some discussion of the children from Hong Kong who had settled in the UK in the 1960s and the 1970s, no one had yet focused on children from Mainland China. Professor An Ran's research thus marked the start of an exciting voyage of discovery, the success of which depended on her status as an insider researcher, able to access information and insights available only to someone who shares the language and the culture of the participants in the process.

The study presented in this book provides very valuable insights for people in the West of the approaches to the teaching of reading and writing which characterize Chinese education and which, often, differ in important ways respects from what happens in western classrooms. Critically, it offers an alternative view of practices such as repetition and memorization which have a much lower profile in western education. In

an increasingly globalized world, such insights are of considerable importance.

The study also has important implications for intercultural communication. For me, one of the high points of the study was when I joined Professor An Ran in collecting data from parents and teachers. The aim was to explore the insights of both teachers and parents of children's progress in schools. Before and after scheduled parent-teacher meetings, Professor An Ran interviewed parents first about their expectations of the meetings and, later, about the extent to which these expectations had been met. I did the same with the teachers. On analyzing the responses, it emerged that Chinese parents expressed frustration because the teachers seemed unwilling to identify their children's weaknesses. While it was true that teachers did not speak in terms of weaknesses, they did, in fact, talk about 'targets' to be achieved. It rapidly became clear that parents and teachers had the same goals, but their use of language made it appear that this was not the case.

This realization has important implications for improving the educational experiences of Chinese children in the UK: simple explanations of the expectations of both teachers and parents have the potential to reduce misunderstanding and improve cooperation. The methodology employed by Professor An Ran was essential in arriving at this realization. It was driven by the desire to improve educational outcomes for Chinese children and achieved by using a multi-method approach which gave voice to all the participants. Unlike essentialist approaches, the research issues were allowed to emerge from the data rather than being imposed by the researcher.

I commend this book to students and researchers interested in using qualitative methodologies to explore issues of educational importance,

particularly in the context of globalization.

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## Abstract

This thesis explores some of the educational experiences of mainland Chinese families in the UK. Parents and children from seventeen Chinese families were interviewed and observed. These data were supplemented by interview, questionnaire and observational data collected from mainstream and community school teachers who taught some of the children from the families in question. The data were video or tape-recorded and analysed using Nud. ist (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorising), a qualitative data analysis software package.

The thesis focuses, in particular, on the perceptions of Mainland Chinese families of British education, and explores the reasons for parents high expectations. It looks in some considerable depth at literacy learning at home and the ways in which mothers and children behave when reading together. It also considers Chinese language and literacy learning in the broader Chinese community, especially in relation to Putonghua-speaking students. Attention is paid to the problems which sometimes arise in communication between Chinese parents and mainstream teachers. Finally, the implications of differences in educational philosophy and teaching and learning styles are considered in relation to both the Chinese community and mainstream British education.

# Acknowledgments

First I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Viv Edwards, for her consistent encouragement and great help. I dedicate this thesis to her with my sincere thanks and as a small gift from an overseas student. I hope that she has enjoyed watching one of her students growing up academically through her patient and careful guidance.

I would also like to express my gratitude to all the Chinese parents, children, community school teachers, and to the mainstream British teachers, whom I had interviewed or who assisted with my research in other ways. Their friendly help and honest opinions made the process of data collection smooth and enjoyable.

I wish to thank the staff of the Reading & Language Information Centre. They have been both friendly and kind-like members of my family. They have given me lots of practical help and encouragement in my work and in my private life in the UK. They have also provided me with a very comfortable working environment for the three years of my Ph.D. research.

I owe a real debt of gratitude to my parents who have been looking after my son in China during my time in the UK. They have supported me spiritually and also practically. I thank my son, Anbo, too, who understands his mother's situation and has motivated me to finish my thesis as quickly as possible.



Last but not least, I offer sincere thanks to all the friends who have helped and supported me. It is you who have given me the courage and confidence to come this far.

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# Chapter 1.

## Introduction

My thesis sets out to present a critical ethnography of the education of Mainland Chinese children - at home, in a community school setting and in aspects of mainstream schooling - in the town of Reading in southwest England.

In May of 1995, I came to University of Reading as a visiting scholar from the People's Republic of China. The Mainland Chinese form a close knit community in Reading, composed largely of students registered for higher degrees and their dependents. As a member of this community, I soon got to know all of the twenty or so families and their children and I noticed that, almost without exception, parents were preoccupied with their children's education. A pattern soon became apparent. When the families first arrive in the UK, parents feel anxious about their children's level of English. Common reactions are to look for suitable books and videos and even to try and speak English to the children themselves. As time goes on, however, there is a gradual shift from Chinese to English. Children begin to speak English among themselves and are sometimes reluctant to use Chinese even with their parents. This reaction causes deep anxiety in parents: 'We will be returning to China one day. And even if we don't go back, we are Chinese, it's essential that our children speak the language.'

When I had the opportunity to extend my stay and to register for a higher degree, parental concern about their children's education seemed an obvious starting point for my research. I was interested in working in the field of cross-cultural communication and multicultural education; in particular, I wanted to identify research questions which were relevant to my community. The opportunity soon arose both for me to study in depth the teaching of Mandarin or Putonghua, a matter of concern for Mainland Chinese families.

Although there was already a well-established Chinese Sunday School serving the Hong Kong Chinese community, the medium of instruction was Cantonese. Mainland Chinese parents were very keen for their children to attend Putonghua classes but had not yet found a way of overcoming the various obstacles: as students on very small incomes, they could not afford to pay the teachers and to rent classrooms. These problems were finally resolved when the Reading Chinese School generously allocated the use of a classroom to the Putonghua classes, and I became a volunteer teacher.

My community involvement allowed me to observe the teaching of Putonghua not only in a community school setting, but also in the Children's homes. My data consist not only of formal interviews and video-recordings but also informal conversations with parents and children who accept me as their friend. This experience allowed me to identify a range of other situations which I wanted to explore. The focus for the thesis broadened to include the perceptions of Chinese families of British education, paying particular attention to the maintenance of language and literacy in Chinese and to the question of cross-cultural communication between Chinese parents and British teachers.

## A framework for research

At the beginning of the research process, I was able to formulate a number of key questions which would help me understand the experience of Chinese families:

- What are the attitudes of Mainstream Chinese parents to both British and Chinese education?
- Are there any problems in communication between Chinese parents and British teachers?
- What are the main issues for community language teaching in the Mainland Chinese community?
- What is the nature of the literacy teaching and learning which takes place at home?

There was a dearth of information on these questions. Any study which set out to explore issues of this nature was likely to be breaking much new ground. For this reason, ethnography, with its emphasis on generating rather than testing hypotheses, was the most appropriate framework for research. Various researchers have adopted this approach in relation to many different aspects of culture and society, including the study of language and literacy learning. Arguably, the most notable of these is Heath (1983) who undertook a ground breaking study of literacy learning in three communities - African American, White working class and White middle class - in the Piedmont region of the USA. Similar studies of homes, classrooms, and neighbourhoods have subsequently been undertaken by many other writers (see, for instance, Michaels, 1986; Auerbach, 1989; Au, 1993).



### *The reliability of qualitative research*

Mason (1996: 36) argues that the researcher actively constructs knowledge about that world and is therefore involved in *generating* rather than *collecting* data. This process of data generation is intellectual, analytical and interpretive. It is impossible to take a neutral stance: the researcher is necessarily *active and reflexive* in the process of data generation. This realisation gives rise to some important questions concerning the reliability of data. As Mason (1996: 52) points out: 'How can you be sure that you are not simply inventing data, or getting it "wrong" ?'

Important and frequently cited discussions of the generalizability of qualitative research can be found in Stake (1978), Guba & Lincoln (1982), Goetz & LeCompte (1984) and Schofield (1993). Stake (1978) agrees that one cannot confidently generalize from a single case to the target population, since single members often poorly represent whole populations. However, he points out one can take the findings from one study and apply them to understanding another similar situation.

In a similar vein, Guba & Lincoln (1982: 238) argue that 'generalizations are impossible since phenomena are neither time-nor context-free'. They suggest replacing the concept of generalizability with that of 'fittingness' by which they mean that the researcher should supply full information about the entity studied and the setting in which that entity was found. Goetz & LeCompte (1984: 228) also emphasize the importance of clear and detailed description in deciding the extent to which findings from one study are applicable to other situations. They emphasize 'comparability' and 'translatability'. That is, the findings should be 'sufficiently well described and defined that other researchers can use the results of the study as a basis for comparison'.

Schofield (1993: 93) also argues that data collection and analysis are influenced by the researcher's individual attributes and perspectives. He thinks the goal of qualitative research is not to produce a standardized set of results that other researchers can reproduce, but rather 'a coherent and illuminating description' of a situation that is based on detailed study. He also points out that qualitative researchers need to consider seriously the internal validity of their work.

In ethnographic research, this internal validity is usually achieved in two main ways - through triangulation, respondent validation.

## Triangulation

Triangulation is one of the best known ethnographic techniques for ensuring the accuracy of data collection and analysis. The term originates from land surveying where it is used to locate one's position on a map using two landmarks (Webb et al, 1966). As Hammersley & Atkinson (1991: 199) explain, 'links between concepts and indicators are checked by recourse to other indicators'. The two main techniques are data triangulation and methodological triangulation. In data triangulation, the information may be collected from different sources; whereas methodological triangulation refers to different methods to data collection.

In the present thesis, I used both data and methodological triangulation techniques. For instance, the data for my research come from parents, mainstream teachers, community school teachers and students; I collected these data through interviews, observation, questionnaires and documentation.