A review of the inaugural year of the Hungarian-Chinese bilingual elementary school

Linda Huang-McCullough

Abstract
Significant migration from the People’s Republic of China to Hungary began in the 1990s. Looking for entrepreneurial opportunities, these transnational Chinese have found significant success in operating restaurants and retail stores selling primarily clothes, shoes, and housewares. Following economic success, the growth of Chinese and mixed heritage families has become more visible in the past few years. Recognition of the permanence of Chinese immigrants in Hungary has culminated in the opening of the Hungarian and Chinese bilingual primary school in Budapest’s XVth district in 2004, funded by both Chinese and Hungarian governments. This first year of the school started with many challenges with behavior, discipline, adjusting the curriculum, and culture shock. For the most part, the year has been successful, as demonstrated by the advancement in Chinese language by native Chinese speaking children and the bilingual progression of the student body in general. This school has also served as a site for field research on child development of cultural identity (an examination of the Chinese term “lao wai”) and a study of cultural differences in self-concept.
1. Introduction

1.1 Case Study: a Chinese University Student in Hungary

I came to Hungary 2 years ago in 2003 to study at university. I was born in Shanghai and my parents are originally from Shanghai. They came to Hungary in 1995, together with my little brother. He is 13. My parents came to start a business. They have imports and exports. They bring stuff from China. Retailers come directly to them or they go to shops. They have an office in the eighth district. My parents know enough Hungarian to do a little business. Most of their friends are Chinese. In China, actually, I didn’t live with them. I lived with my grandmother because they were working so much. My parents and my brother came to Hungary and I stayed with grandmother to go to school. They used to visit me in China. My parents asked me to come to Hungary. There was a lot of paperwork. In China at the time, they give you a passport only if you are going somewhere and you have to show that you are invited and show many other paperwork. Then, to get a visa, there is even more paper. I study linguistics because I like the subject, that’s all. I studied English in China, something like 8 years. I have all different friends. I speak to my friends in English, Chinese if they are Chinese. My brother goes to a normal Hungarian school. He is in the seventh grade. His Chinese is not very good. He cannot write well. I do not take Hungarian lessons. I teach myself. I can, I study linguistics. When I am done with university, I will try to apply to school in the States. I don’t know if my parents will move back. Who knows. I don’t even know what I will do definitely.

- M Chen¹, age 22, Budapest, 2005

2. Chinese Hungarians

2.1 Pre 1989

Chinese have been in Europe for over 100 years, mostly in Western Europe in England, Germany, Spain, France, and Italy. Prior to 1989, Hungary had a small Chinese population. There were 15 native Chinese speakers reported in the 1930 Census. From 1900 – 1989, 400 Chinese applied for long-term stays in Hungary. They were mostly guest workers at a truck plant in Győr in 1997 and an assortment of students and researchers. Significant growth of the Chinese population in Hungary began in the 1990s.

2.2 Hungary Fever 2 – The Pull to Hungary

In the 1990s there was a surge in international migration from the People's Republic of China (PRC) to countries that historically hosted Chinese immigrants (hosting immigrants from other Chinese sending areas such as Hong Kong, Taiwan ROC, and Malaysia) such as Canada, Australia and the United States. Countries that had no history of Chinese immigration started to see an increase in Chinese newcomers as well. The largest growth in Chinese immigration occurred in Russia (Nyíri 1999: 30). In 1989 and through the 1990s, many Chinese saw the regime changes in Eastern Europe as an opportunity to move West and break into Europe.

Thousands migrated from Mainland China to Hungary after 1988, when the communist government in Hungary instituted visa-free travel for Chinese nationals. At that time, it was extremely difficult and expensive for Chinese to obtain a Chinese passport. They were issued passports only if they could produce documentation, credentials, and letters to prove that they had a legitimate invitation to go abroad, they could finance their trip abroad, and that they had the intention to return to China. Visas were an added nuisance and expense that had deterred many prospective migrants and potentially an even harder process than that of the passport. But with the visa waived, it motivated some individuals to seek the passport and, ultimately, mobility. The visa waiver was short lived. They were reinstated in 1992 but during that time, many Chinese took advantage of this small window of opportunity.

In addition to visa-free travel, Hungary had some unique features that made it attractive. Hungary had a reputation for having better living standards than its East European neighbors as well as a relatively free economy. Chinese returning to China also reported that Hungary was safe, with a good climate, but most important of all opportunities to make money.

The Chinese presence in Hungary peaked in 1991. Pál Nyíri estimates that the population was 30,000-40,000 (1999: 32). Rising interests in immigration to Hungary also meant rising attempts at illegal entries and rising business for illegal traffickers. From 1990 – 1998 Hungarian border guards apprehended 1866 individuals attempting illegal entries or exits. (Nyíri 1999: 38)

2.3 Hungary Fever – the push from China

“People migrate in the search for more and better economic opportunities (or more specifically, a more favorable ratio of economic opportunities to the number of people competing for them) on the one hand and of greater anonymity and individual freedom from social control on the other” (Nyíri 1999: 29). Factors in China were pushing entrepreneurial individuals out of the borders of China. In 1989 Chinese residents abroad did not have to pay taxes in China. Also in 1989, the Tiananmen Square protests that ended on June 4 caused a small political-based migration. More significantly, the incident also caused the government to tighten economic controls that breached the public’s confidence in China’s development. There was an air of uncertainty around the future growth of China’s young private sector and a recession from 1989 – 1991 negatively impacted managers as well as the workforce (Nyíri 2003: 242). In addition, foreign economic trade sanctions on China were also obstructing the potential for economic growth. These economic factors in combination with an overall lack of trust in the government motivated people to seek their fortunes elsewhere.

(Nyíri 1999: 29)
2.4 Chinese-Hungarians in the 21st Century

There is no dominant sending area that Chinese immigrants in Hungary originate from though Fujian and Zhejiang provinces in the south of China, bordering the South China Sea, have the most representation. These entrepreneurs have found their niche in operating Chinese fast food restaurants, retail stores specializing in cheap clothes and shoes, and housewares stores. In October 2004, The Budapest Business Journal reported the following:

From January 2003 to June 2003, Hungarians purchased Chinese clothing in the value of Ft 4 billion, during the first six months of this year, they lashed out Ft 21 million at Chinese stores. The local clothing retail stores have managed to increase their revenues by 12% during H1 of this year to reach Ft 149 billion.

There is also considerable success for Chinese wholesalers, known as shuttle traders, who move goods from China across eastern Europe from their Hungarian business hub. The Chinese retailers in Hungary can offer consumers items priced significantly lower than Western Europe based retailers thus creating a very loyal customer base of value-minded Hungarian shoppers. Hungarians have benefited from the birth of Chinese-owned businesses as consumers and as employees. Many Chinese businesses employ at least one Hungarian and if the Hungarian speaks (minimal) Chinese and Hungarian, they can earn more money than they would for a Hungarian employer.

Based on the estimates of Chinese organization leaders in Hungary, the Chinese population of Hungary is currently 10,000 – 15,000 (.1% - .15% of Hungary’s total population). Most of Hungary’s Chinese live in or near Budapest:

Other groups can also be found in areas strategic to trading goods across local borders: Nyíregyháza near the Ukraine and Romania and Szeged near Yugoslavia and Romania.

In the beginning, mostly single men migrated from China to Hungary. Or, these business-savvy men would leave their wives and children in China, work in Hungary, send money back to China, and visit their families occasionally. As businesses grew and men (and sometimes women) began to settle down in Hungary, families became the next logical development. In the 2001 Census, the Native Chinese speaking population in Hungary was about 42% female and 48% male. Combined with an increase in the presence of Chinese speaking children in Hungary, these statistics suggest that there might be more families in Hungary than in the last 15 years.

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ETHNIC CHINESE POPULATION BY BUDAPEST CITY DISTRICTS

As time passed, mixed Chinese Hungarian couples became more common. This was a natural development given that a lot of the immigrants were in Hungary on their own. When couples started to have children, these bi-racial families were challenged with raising their children with balanced exposure to Chinese and Hungarian culture and language. The presence of Chinese children and half-Chinese children in Hungary (the growth of Chinese families) was a sign that the Chinese population in Hungary was settling down. As of June 2004, there were 450 registered Chinese primary school children in Budapest though it has been estimated that there are more school aged Chinese children in and around the city. Children not attending school or attending private school are not counted in the official statistics.

There is an obvious discrepancy between the census numbers and what is reported by the Chinese organizations. The lowness of the census report is a study itself that is out of the scope of this paper.

Some parents left children in China and would want to bring their child to Hungary and enroll them in a bilingual school if it existed. These families are also considered an impetus for this school.

As of June 2004, there were 450 registered Chinese primary school children in Budapest though it has been estimated that there are more school aged Chinese children in and around the city. Children not attending school or attending private school are not counted in the official statistics. In order to give these children a fair shot at being both Hungarian and Chinese, their special educational and developmental needs had to be addressed.
3. The Hungarian-Chinese Bilingual Elementary School (Magyar-Kínai Két Tanítási Nyelvű Általános Iskola)

3.1 Getting Started

Chinese Hungarian relations have developed rapidly in recent years. Economic trade continues to grow while tourism and educational exchanges to and from both countries are on the rise. Movement between Hungary and China has become significant enough for airlines to offer non-stop flights between the two countries. Increasing contact between the two countries has created a demand for individuals fluent in both Chinese and Hungarian as well as familiar with both cultures. This need was one of the main reasons for the establishment of the Chinese-Hungarian Bilingual School which opened on September 2, 2004.

2004 marked the 55th year of diplomatic relations between Hungary and China. In June 2004, Chinese President Hu Jintao and Hungarian President Ferenc Mádl signed an agreement to “cooperative partnership” which is the highest level of cooperation in Chinese diplomacy. In this visit to Hungary, Hu Jintao and Ferenc Mádl also signed an agreement to establish a public bilingual school in Hungary. The school had been the brainchild of Peter Medgyessy who in 2003, when he was Hungarian Prime Minister, proposed the establishment of a Chinese-Hungarian Bilingual School during a visit to China. His vision was to expose children to Chinese culture during school hours so that they may develop an appreciation for and a personal connection to their cultural heritage. This need to make a cultural connection had also been expressed by the Chinese community. In talking with Chinese vendors at the Józsefvárosi piac (the large Chinese marketplace in Budapest) all people surveyed that had primary school aged children in Hungary said that their children had conversational Chinese skills but could neither read nor write. Some of these parents have enrolled their children in weekend Chinese school but all unanimously responded that they want to do more for their children’s Chinese education.

Hungarian education law states that primary school aged children residing in Hungary of Non-Hungarian citizens, meaning legal short-term and long-term residents including refugees, immigrants, and those seeking humanitarian aid are required by law to attend school. They are legally entitled to attend public school and this school is just one of the schools they may choose. Children at this school previously attended other public Hungarian primary schools, óvodá (Hungarian nursery school/kindergarten), or came from China and this year is their first school year in Hungary.

From its inception, the school administration has also planned on enrolling non-Chinese children, namely Hungarian children, so that they too have an opportunity to learn Chinese language and culture. Surprisingly a significant amount of Hungarian families were interested in enrolling in this school. Evelyn, a Hungarian student in this year’s fourth grade class, says that her parents enrolled her in the school because they thought the English program would be better than her previous school. Another Hungarian student, Adam in the second grade, says that his parents want him to learn Chinese because in the future Chinese will be almost as widely spoken as English. During the summer of 2004 the Ministry of Education was overwhelmed with the number of Hungarian applicants. For this initial pilot year, the administration decided to enroll children of parents who were employed within the Chinese community, for example working at the Chinese embassy or for a Chinese business. The school opened with 96 students, 80 Chinese children and 16 Hungarian or half Chinese children. The school has been enrolling new students throughout the school year. As of March 2005, there is also an Arabic family of two children and a Mongolian child in the student body. The school has also lost some students that have moved to China or have transferred to traditional primary schools. The net impact is that the total student population has not changed. As of March 2005, there were 97 students.

This school is a landmark step in the acceptance and integration of Chinese people in Hungary. The European Values Study, a poll in 32 European countries conducted by Tilberg University in the Netherlands, found that about 60% of Hungarians surveyed said they did not want immigrants or foreign workers as neighbors. By opening this state funded school, the government recognizes the permanence of this immigrant population as well as encourages more Chinese investors and their families to come to Hungary.

The school is a jointly funded project of the Hungarian and Chinese governments. By the opening of the school, the Hungarian Ministry of Education has invested more than 90 million forint (470,000 USD) in the school’s basic infrastructure and equipment. The authorities of the 15th District donated the building to the Education Ministry on a 50-year free lease. The facilities in the 30 year old building were entirely renovated with 28 classrooms complete with new furniture as well as refurbished sports facilities and cafeteria.

The Chinese Ministry of Education and the China national office for teaching Chinese as a foreign language (NOCFL) have provided educational materials and equipment for the school. They have recruited, trained, and sent 2 Chinese teachers, around 6,000 text books.

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6 Observational data and interviews have been collected at Józsefvárosi piac and at kínai áruház (Chinese stores) throughout central Budapest. This feedback has been collected from a random sampling of 10 different families.

7 I use the term “half-Chinese” because there are children that are Chinese-Russian and Chinese-Ukrainian.

8 The school occupies only half of the building. The school shares a building with the Arabic-Hungarian school thus creating a very international atmosphere.

9 The six other Chinese teachers were already living in Budapest at the start of the school year.
(reading, writing, and mathematics), assorted supplemental teaching materials, computers, printers, projectors, TVs, DVD players, and Chinese folk music instruments. This is the first time the Chinese government has ever been directly involved in funding a school overseas. Up until the opening of this school, there already existed private weekend Chinese schools, but this is the first public bilingual Chinese school in Hungary.

Support for the school has also come from the private sector. In July of 2004, the Hungarian Ministry of Education held a public meeting to present the plans of the school to the community and to increase community involvement with the development of the school. Local Chinese business people in Hungary in attendance donated 4 million forint (20,900 USD) to the school.

3.2. Curriculum
Currently the school is grades 1 – 4 with plans on expanding the grade levels, potentially all the way through gimnázium high school. There are already plans for a fifth grade class for the 2005 – 2006 school year. There are three first grade classes and one class each of grades 3 – 4. Diversity is encouraged by having children of all ethnicities mixed within their main classroom. For example, the three first grade classes are not divided into one class of Hungarian children, one class of Chinese-Hungarian children, and one class of Chinese children.

Standard Hungarian curriculum (reading, writing, mathematics, etc) is offered in the morning while Chinese language, Chinese culture and history, and electives (music, art, technika, etc) in the afternoon. The curriculum is flexible so that the varying languages levels of each individual student can be addressed as best as possible. All students (90% of the Chinese students were born in Hungary and speak Hungarian fluently) have Hungarian reading and writing (per standard Hungarian national curriculum). Children that do not speak Hungarian, i.e. children that arrived in Hungary within the last year, are offered additional Hungarian lessons taught by teachers trained to teach Hungarian as a foreign language. Similarly, Chinese classes are taught according to individual ability with non-Chinese speakers in the most elementary levels. All students are currently studying Chinese. Chinese is taught with textbooks provided by the Chinese Ministry of Education and are sent from China. Mathematics is offered in Chinese if the student is fluent enough to understand in Chinese, Hungarian if not. All students are taking English even though English is an optional class.

All this diversity in the curriculum aims to meet the goals of this school as outlined by the Ministry of Education:

Pedagogical principles of the Magyar-Kínai Két Tanítási Nyelvű Általános Iskola
The school should have a multicultural approach to education.

The education of Chinese students (and other nationalities) should be alongside Hungarian children.
Chinese language should be used in school as organically as a mother tongue, not just as a language that is taught. (In lower grades, there is the potential for Chinese and Hungarian native speaking teachers to teach simultaneously.)
Chinese language should be spoken during extracurricular activities and not just during academic classes. In this framework, language lessons are reinforced.
Chinese language should be optional for Hungarian students.
The program should be flexible so that it will be possible to introduce other languages into the curriculum.
After Hungarian and Chinese, the third language taught is English.
The requirements of the teaching plan should not alter from the requirements of Hungarian public education law.
The educational program should fit the EU guidelines for immigrant students.

3.3 Year 1 in Review
The administration (head principal and two vice principals) and teachers unanimously agree that the greatest challenge at the beginning of the school year was with behavior and discipline. At the opening ceremonies of the school, in front of Ministry of Education officials, Chinese dignitaries, and several representatives of the media, students were unable to walk in line, sit still, or remain quiet. Teachers speculated that because most children came from long-hour working double income families, parents did not have the opportunity to discipline their children or teach proper behavior. For many children, this school was their first school experience in Hungary and these students had to adjust to a new school culture. Confusion and language barrier manifested themselves in fighting, running, loud outbursts, and reluctance to complete school work. Teachers have worked to instill a basic level of decorum and order by being firm in the classroom and using routines and schedules so that students can understand what behavior is expected of them, when. It is now seven months into this initial school year and the principals and teachers report that basic discipline is no longer an issue.

The second major challenge for teachers was accommodating for the various learning levels of students based on their language abilities. In one class room there are five to six varying combination levels of Chinese and Hungarian abilities represented. Even though students are broken out to additional language courses if needed, core curriculum is taught as a whole class, in Hungarian, and thus teachers have had to break classrooms into sections and conduct multiple lessons at once. Teachers report that they feel that this approach has been successful because with the exception of a few students, students are reading at their age-appropriate Hungarian reading level.
Chinese teachers also report success in their language courses. The students that started the school year with simple conversational skills have progressed the most, primarily in speaking, then reading, then writing. These students have learned...
about 100 characters. Students already fluent in Chinese have maintained their age appropriate Chinese reading level. Non-Chinese speaking students have progressed the least. They are capable of reading pinyin pronunciation but have not learned a significant amount of vocabulary. This slowness in progression is likely due to the fact that Chinese teachers and Hungarian speaking students do not have a common language to teach and learn in.

Students appear very enthusiastic about both cultures. Many children very naturally and quickly switch between speaking Hungarian and Chinese. For example, in a second grade physical education class, students were running relay races. When a Hungarian speaking child was running, they cheered “Hajra!” When a Chinese speaking child was running, they cheered, “Jia yo!”

Bilingual children over the age of six very excitedly volunteer to translate for teachers and for students. Third and fourth grade students have a keen ability to reword their phrases when they are talking to a non-native speaker of their language and this conversation partner does not understand what is being said. In this case, these children are learning lessons in patience as well as developing complex communication skills.

The issue of parenting skills has been a constant concern for some teachers. In the beginning of the school year, mostly in the first grade and some of the second grade, it was obvious in the first few days that some children, from China, did not know several basic hygiene practices. Some children did not know how to properly use a toilet or toilet paper, flush a toilet, blow their noses, or brush their teeth. They also did not know when to wash their hands or faces (before meals, after using the restroom, after recess, etc). Teachers were not certain if there was an issue of serious neglect, bad parenting because parents were preoccupied with work, or a cultural difference because some children may have come from underdeveloped or rural areas. Regardless of cause, these hygiene issues were quickly and easily addressed and have become routine for these students.

Across all four grades, there are some students that consistently have behavior and discipline problems and fail to complete homework. Again, teachers speculate that many working parents have not invested time and interest in their children's education. These teachers are concerned that without support at home, these children may fall into remedial levels as they progress to higher grade levels.

In the last week of January 2005, the school had a very high incidence of chicken pox, head lice, and stomach flu. Children were coming to school sick, sometimes covered in chicken pox or projectile vomiting, when they should have been home recovering. Again, teachers were concerned that parents were not making child welfare a priority. Parents were contacted to send the children home and it was found that parents often did not understand the severity of their illnesses. In some cases, parents seemed to ignore how sick their child was so that they would not have to take time out from the work day. For some Chinese parents that were concerned about sick children, they did not know how to access a doctor, especially one that would speak Chinese, and they also did not know what medications to buy. Frequently, teachers had to buy medications for their students. Teachers often have had to play the role of a parent or a social-worker.

The most significant obstacle for the faulty has been the language disparity. Of the 20 teacher faculty, only two teachers speak both Hungarian and Chinese and one of these two teachers is a part-time instructor. The main impacts of this discrepancy are:

- Chinese teachers have difficulty adjusting to Hungarian learning style and school culture. It is difficult for them to know what the expectations are of them.
- Hungarian teachers do not understand teaching styles of Chinese teachers and vice versa, creating a large division in the faculty professionally and on an interpersonal level.
- Between the Chinese and Hungarian faculty, teachers cannot directly discuss a student's total learning progression.

### 3.4 Planning for the Future

The enrollment goal for the 2005 – 2006 school year is to have 60 – 70 new students to fill three new first grade classes as well as welcome new students to the second through fifth grades, as space permits. Peter Vigh, head principal, has headed an aggressive publicity campaign to increase interest, in both the Chinese and Hungarian communities, in this school. In a 12 week period, the school has been featured in seven television segments, seven newspaper and magazine articles, and two radio interviews. The aim is to represent the Chinese community in a positive light and for the public to see the value in multicultural learning. The administration hopes to have 20 – 30 new Hungarian students for the next school year. More teachers will be hired to accommodate the growing student body. Two Chinese teachers and five or six Hungarian teachers will be hired, hopefully some will be bilingual (though based on the teacher search for this school year, the prospects of finding teachers that speak Chinese and Hungarian or English appear low).

Though the first year has been considered successful, more outreach and education needs to be done within both Chinese and Hungarian communities to further mutual understanding between the two cultures. Chinese people in Hungary, and unfortunately Chinese children too, are occasionally subject to racial discrimination. Teachers of this school often bring students to a nearby playground where students from a neighboring mainstream primary school play as well. It has been observed that when students from the two schools are playing simultaneously, the students from each school do not play with each other. Hungarian teachers from the bilingual school report that they have
overheard negative racial comments from teachers as well as teachers not correcting inappropriate behavior. In one instance, a child from the mainstream school pointed at the swings and said to her teacher, “I can’t play there because the Chinese are playing there.” The teachers nodded in agreement and directed the student to play elsewhere.

Teachers and administrators also hope that the second year will have more involvement from the parents. The more about Hungary that parents understand, the smoother transition and integration children can have in their social development.

4. Research on Cultural Identity and Self-concept

There are currently two studies being conducted at the school. The first is an observation and interview based analysis of children between the ages of 6 – 12 and their reactions to the researcher’s multicultural identity: Chinese-American. Children of this age lack the cognitive ability to formulate complex opinions about culture. Their definition of culture is genetic rather learned or a combination of the two. However, Chinese children at this school will call a child who is born in Hungary of Chinese parents “Chinese” but will not define the researcher, who was born in the United States of Chinese parents, as Chinese. This issue has been documented in 14 unique episodes thus far in this school year.13 These exchanges usually start with a student asking, “What kind of person are you?” or asking the researcher if she is a “lao wai” or “wai guoren”, Chinese terms for a person from anywhere other than China. Here are two examples of typical exchanges of this nature.

**DIALOGUE 1:**
Researcher and 8 year old female, 2nd grade student from Zejiang, China.

**Student:** What kind of person am I?

**Researcher:** Yes, you are American. You can also call yourself Chinese-American.

**Student:** Why am I American?

**Researcher:** Because that’s where you come from.

**DIALOGUE 2:**
Researcher and 6 year old boy, 1st grade student from Shanghai, China.

**Student:** Are you “lao wai”?

**Researcher:** Yes, I am Chinese.

**Student:** Why do you speak English?

**Researcher:** Because I grew up in America.

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13 There have been more than 14 occurrences but I did not start documenting until after it happened a few times.
as basic demographic information (age, gender, family size, etc). The same interview will also be administered to a control group of Hungarian children. An investigation of Chinese children in mainstream Hungarian school and their definition of self would also be enlightening.

5. Conclusion

Multicultural education has become essential in creating diverse societies that are fair, understanding, and peaceful. In Hungary, the opening of the Hungarian-Chinese bilingual school has been a monumental step in bringing systematic legitimacy and recognition to the permanence of a small but significant population in Hungary. Hopefully, Hungary will continue to financially back programs, such as this, that promote diversity of thought throughout society.

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