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Level: Bachelor

Strategies for Teaching and Maintaining Chinese as Heritage Language for Chinese Children in Sweden

An investigation for identifying strategies that Chinese parents use helping their children learn and maintain their heritage language

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Abstract

Chinese as a heritage language is one of the fastest lost languages in the world. In fact, in most Chinese families that have left China, the heritage language is lost by the second generation. When people move from their homeland to a place where the primary language is different from their home language, one issue becomes whether their heritage language can be retained.

The situation in Sweden is quite different from that in English-speaking countries when it comes to maintaining Chinese as a heritage language. Most Chinese moving to Sweden have no prior exposure to the Swedish language. The purpose of this study is to find out which strategies Chinese parents use to help their children learn and maintain proficiency in the Chinese language. It also investigates the progress made using these strategies. A qualitative research approach was taken and semi-structured interviews of the children’s mothers were performed. Some of the children in the study were born in China and some were born in Sweden.

During these interviews, a number of strategies were identified that parents use to help their children learn and maintain the heritage language. These included, for instance, mother tongue education, watching Chinese TV and films, parents giving their children encouraging comments, and associating with other Chinese families. Some families recommended strategies that they felt would be beneficial for others, like delaying the start of daycare.

According to this study, the effects from, for example, mother tongue education and encouraging comments, should have implications on how educators shape their programs, and the way they engage the parents in their children’s language training.

When analyzing the various strategies and their effects on the children in the study, it became apparent that the younger sibling always shows a lower level of Chinese proficiency compared to the older sibling. This phenomenon is herein called the younger sibling syndrome.

Keywords: Heritage language maintenance, mother tongue education, children learning Chinese, language proficiency, language maintenance
摘要

汉语作为承袭语言是世界上消失速度最快的语言之一。事实上，在大多数离开中国的华人家庭中，承袭语言基本上到第二代就被遗失。当人们从他们的祖国迁移到一个主要语言与他们的母语不同的地方时，就要面对如何保留自己母语的问题。

在瑞典，汉语作为承袭语言在被传承方面的情况与英语国家截然不同。大多数移居瑞典的中国人早期很少接触过瑞典语。本论文的目的是找出生活在瑞典的中国父母使用哪些策略来帮助他们的孩子学习和维持他们的中文以及使用这些策略所取得的效果。本论文采取了质量研究方法，对孩子的母亲进行了半结构化访谈。研究中的一些孩子出生在中国，一些孩子出生在瑞典。

在这些访谈中，笔者归纳出了一些父母用来帮助孩子学习和保持传统语言的策略。它们包括：母语教育、观看中文电视和电影、父母给孩子鼓励性的评价，以及与其他中国家庭的交往等等。一些家庭推荐了他们认为对其他人有益的策略，比如推迟开始幼儿园的时间。

根据这项研究，例如母语教育和鼓励性评价的影响，会对教育者如何制定他们的教育计划，以及他们让父母参与孩子的语言培训的方式产生影响。

在分析各种策略及其对研究中儿童的影响时，很明显，与哥哥姐姐相比，弟弟妹妹的中文水平总是较低。这种现象在本文中被称为幼弟妹综合症。

关键词：承袭语言传承 母语教育 儿童汉语学习 语言能力 语言传承
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Appendix: Interview questions
1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Chinese as a heritage language

When people move from their homeland to a place where the primary language is different from their heritage language, one issue becomes whether their heritage language can be retained. For the adults, this is not such an issue, because adults will generally retain most, if not all, of their heritage language (Mu, 2016). However, for the children moving together with their families to a place where their heritage language is not spoken, this becomes a completely different issue.

Chinese as a heritage language is one of the fastest lost languages in the world (Fillmore, 2000). In fact, in most Chinese families that have left China, the mother tongue is lost by the second generation. When this happens, the children might also lose the knowledge about their own family and cultural belonging.

In some countries, the government provides various forms of heritage language schooling and provides parents with the best possible guidance on how to find and use such schools. It is also a common way parents use to maintain their children’s knowledge of their heritage language (Law, 2015). However, for parents to be successful in their endeavors to maintain their children’s proficiency in Chinese, they need to apply additional strategies and efforts, like collaborating with teachers and getting involved in the Chinese society (Fillmore, 2000). Mu (2014, p. 483) recommended that it is urgent work to help the children to maintain the home language in their early age and brought up the same suggestion of collaboration between teachers and parents.

Chinese as a heritage language in Sweden

Sweden as a destination country for Chinese emigrants is not as popular as the English-speaking countries, like Australia, Canada, New Zealand, UK, or USA. The population of overseas Chinese in Sweden is relatively small at about 38000 (Chang & Fan, 2023). It could therefore seem that maintaining the Chinese language would not be of any great importance. However, maintaining a heritage language has many benefits, like being able to communicate with older relatives. The children may also benefit economically in the future by knowing their home language (Mu, 2014). This applies to children growing up in a foreign country outside China, also in Sweden.

In Sweden, the language situation is more complex and challenging for Chinese immigrants than in a country having English as the primary language. Many Chinese families moving to an English-speaking country already have some exposure to the English language; some might even speak it with a high level of proficiency. This makes life easier, but at the same time, it might create a hindrance when it comes to maintaining their children’s heritage language (Brown, 2011, p. 31). In a study by Portes & Hao (1998), it is brought out that as soon as the children get some friends who speak

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1 Heritage language refers to the inherited language. It is in some academic works referred to as the home language. The Swedish National Agency for Education refers to it as the mother tongue. In this study, therefore, heritage language, home language, and mother tongue are used interchangeably. Likewise, mother tongue education will be used to include heritage language schools and home language schools.
English, they often times find it easier to talk English than Chinese at home. So even when their parents address them in Chinese, they tend to reply in English. When the parents understand English, there is no need for the children to exert themselves with the more difficult heritage language. Many parents slowly give in to letting their children respond in English. Although these children often can understand spoken Chinese, they themselves cannot speak Chinese.

While in Sweden, children do not start learning English until after they enter elementary school and therefore, English is not used in their daily communication. Chinese children learning Swedish at school and with their friends have often no possibility to use Swedish at home since their Chinese parents have limited knowledge of Swedish. This is because most Chinese parents moving to Sweden have no prior exposure to Swedish. They may know some English, but this is not a language that their children will use as their spoken language. The children have no choice but to reply back in Chinese when their Chinese parents speak to them.

To maintain their children's heritage language, Chinese parents can take advantage of the mother tongue classes that the Swedish government provides to children with mother tongues other than Swedish. According to the Swedish National Agency for Education (Swe: Skolverket), children living in Sweden who have another language as mother tongue, have the right to mother tongue education (Skolverket, 2023). This is in Sweden referred to as mother tongue tuition (Swe: modersmålundersövning). The main purpose for mother tongue education is to motivate the children's interest in conversing, reading, and writing in the mother tongue. It also aids in the development of language, identity, personality, and thinking ability. By further developing the child’s mother tongue, it is thought to improve the ability to learn not only Swedish and other languages, but also other school subjects. Children have the right to mother tongue education during the time they attend mandatory school and upper secondary school. The classes are provided once a week and last about 45 minutes. In most municipalities, all children independent of age and level of proficiency, attend the same class. When the number of Chinese children in a municipality is less than five, mother tongue education may not be offered.

As mentioned above, the municipalities in Sweden offer mother tongue education. This means that Chinese families living in Sweden can utilize this as a strategy to maintain their children's heritage language. Since there are no bilingual Swedish/Chinese schools in Sweden, all mother tongue education offered is on a weekly basis at a local school. There are also Chinese weekend schools in some of the larger cities in Sweden. These are for the most part private. They offer courses in the Chinese language as well as in other activities related to China and involve both adults and children.

1.2 Current Situation

There are few public tools available for Chinese parents when it comes to helping their children to learn and maintain Chinese. When left unattended, the language skills of children will quickly be forgotten. Also, when there is public schooling available in the heritage language, this alone is not sufficient for maintaining it (Law, 2015). Parents must take charge in active learning activities in order for their children to maintain their language skills, and even more so, to progress. If there were more strategies available for teaching and maintaining Chinese as a heritage language, teachers for mother
tongue education could interact with parents to apply these strategies in appropriate ways.

Some strategies have been suggested in the literature, like the mother tongue education classes mentioned above. Other examples of strategies are giving encouraging comments (Fillmore, 2000), bringing the family closer as a unit (Tannenbaum & Howie, 2002, p. 417), and participating in community-based programs (Kwon, 2017, p. 497).

It is important to maintain children’s heritage language in a country like Sweden, because some of the adult Chinese moving to Sweden will never fully comprehend spoken Swedish. If their children are not able to speak Chinese, the communication link between parent and child will suffer. There are no studies investigating strategies used to maintain Chinese as a heritage language in Sweden.

1.3 Research Questions

What strategies do Chinese parents use to help their children learn and maintain the heritage language while growing up in Sweden? How well are the children progressing according to the parents?

1.4 Aim of Research

The purpose of this study is to find out which strategies Chinese parents use to help their children learn and maintain the Chinese language as a heritage language. The benefit of this work will primarily be for researchers working in the field of heritage language maintenance, as well as for heritage language school teachers. As these teachers interact with parents to the children partaking in the classes, the parents as a secondary group may also benefit from using these strategies. The purpose of this study is further to find out the level of progress for each child according to the parents.
2 Literature Review

2.1 The Heritage Language

According to Benmamoun (2010), a heritage language is a language that was either interrupted or not completely acquired as a first language. When children already from birth become exposed to multiple languages, one of these tends to become a primary, whereas the other languages become weaker. Normally, it is the local language that becomes the primary, and the minority languages the ones considered incompletely acquired. One reason for this is that the minority language, or heritage language, only is used at home or in the immediate circuit of relatives or friends.

2.2 Benefits of Maintaining the Heritage Language

There are many benefits of retaining a heritage language when growing up in a foreign land. Mu (2014) looks at the benefits of maintaining the heritage language, specifically for Chinese people in Australia. Depending on the level of proficiency in the heritage language, the respondents to a survey showed varied levels of social, cultural, and symbolic capital, i.e., life advantages or benefits. This means that maintaining the heritage language directly translates into a higher standard of living, advantages that can be enjoyed also much later in life. The study suggested that there is a reciprocity between the proficiency of Chinese as a heritage language and various benefits in life. In another study by Mu (2016, pp. 300-302), an additional benefit for the children of maintaining their heritage language is to be able to communicate with Chinese friends and relatives, especially with the grandparents.

2.3 Difficulties in Maintaining the Heritage Language

The difficulty of maintaining the heritage language is universal. In some countries, the policy is for the newcomers to indulge in the language of the arrival country and forget their heritage language. According to Brown (2011, p. 31), this is the case in the United States, where it is expected for immigrants not only to learn English, but also lose their heritage language. Wang (2009, p. 13) expresses similar thoughts indicating that minority groups need to be persistent in their endeavors to keep their heritage language, in addition to their culture and their identity. The prior Bilingual Education Act in the United States has been replaced by “No Child Left Behind” and the consequence is that English has become the official language at school, taking focus away from minority languages. This is an indicator of the difficulty parents have to maintain their children’s heritage language, especially after moving to a country having English as the official language. When the parents speak English to some degree, they do not want their children to be looked at as a minority.

By means of the school system, the heritage language is often lost already by the second generation. Although these children keep their heritage language up to entering daycare, as soon as they enter, a language shift occurs. They become completely immersed in English in every school activity, and they rapidly lose their heritage language (Portes & Hao, 1998, p. 269). Brown (2011, p. 35) continues in this thought by stating that the parental involvement is not a guarantee for success in maintaining the heritage language for their children. The perception of the parents as far as their involvement in helping
their children maintain their heritage language, was very different from the perception of the children. One reason for this could be that the parents also improve in speaking English, and therefore more frequently accept their children talking to them in English. The parents might even at times talk to their children in English. Another reason could be that as English takes on a larger part of the home environment language, the parents see less need in forcing the heritage language onto their children. A conclusion from this is that many parents intend to maintain their children’s heritage language as long as they themselves do not fully understand the new language. As the parents become more and more fluent in the new language, they partly lose the motivation to maintain the heritage language within the family.

Fillmore (2000) gives real life examples of the difficulties that Chinese families face trying to teach their young children their heritage language. One such example showed the behavior of a young boy moving to the United States with his family when he was under the age of ten. After having learnt a little bit of English, he stopped speaking his heritage language all-together. His grandmother tried to talk to him in their heritage language, but his response was either in English or there was no response at all. When he was pushed, he did not speak at all. Since the grandmother did not understand English, their mutual communication was lost completely. The boy withdrew more and more from the home as he felt scolded for not speaking his heritage language. He spent all the more time outside the home with his English-speaking friends. The more he was scolded, and the more sanctions that were put upon him, the less prone he became to learn. His heritage language was completely lost. This is a very typical scenario for Chinese families living abroad. A similar experience is brought out in a paper by Mu (2016). It explains that children having a low proficiency feel discouraged from speaking Chinese as they often hear comments from relatives - especially their grandparents - like “how come you don’t speak Chinese?”. One child in the study expressed the desire to instead hear comments like “wow, you can speak Chinese!”. These types of comments could mean the difference between a desire to continue learning the heritage language or not. Parents face many challenges in trying to teach their children their heritage language at home. There are many feelings developed in children who are forced to learn their heritage language. These two papers by Fillmore (2000) and Mu (2016) show agreement in that negative comments given to the child may deter from wanting to learn or maintain the heritage language.

Mu (2016, p. 297) brings out some statistics which show that the language proficiency tipping point in age when the child moves to a non-Chinese speaking country, is twelve to thirteen years. At that age, they have acquired sufficient overall knowledge of Chinese to retain most of it. Children younger in age will, on the other hand, more easily lose their heritage language.

2.4 Strategies for Maintaining the Heritage Language

Many families try different strategies to help their children maintain, and progress in, their heritage language. Such strategies are included in the education system, in socialization with the local community, and in measures conducted at home.
2.4.1 The Education System

Law (2015) brings out that the main method used by Chinese families living in English-dominant societies is sending the children to heritage language schools. These are public heritage language schools offered by the local city on a weekly basis. It is brought out that most children feel that these schools are boring and that they do not make progress in their heritage language. This method by itself is not sufficient for maintaining a level of proficiency in the Chinese language. This shows the importance of not only using pedagogical strategies for teaching and maintaining language proficiency, but using these strategies in a way that makes the child want to accept them. The study further mentions that in some cities where the Chinese population is sufficiently large, there are Chinese/English bilingual schools. This means that the children get much of the training in both English and Chinese. These children have a much greater basis for maintaining and progressing in their heritage language. Because these bilingual schools are only found in a few cities, most Chinese families have to resort to the standard heritage language schools offered on a weekly basis. Families, educators, and community should work together in the cause of maintaining the heritage language. The article brings out that the family plays a vital role in this educational work.

2.4.2 Community-based Programs

Kwon (2017) refers to Asian families that, in addition to sending their children to heritage language school, also send them to community-based programs. Some families insist on a policy that only the heritage language may be spoken at home. Other families engage their children in translanguaging exercises, meaning that they involve them in training of English and the heritage language simultaneously. As an extension of this, transnationalism is used by some to make the children feel a stronger bond to their language of national origin.

Another strategy is brought out in a study by Hinton (1999), in which social interactions are shown to relate to the maintaining of the heritage language. The community was shown to have an important role when it comes to helping children maintain their heritage language. Organizations that can be of help in this regard are churches, heritage communities, and clubs.

2.4.3 Home Strategies

Huang & Liao (2023) make an analysis of four Australian families in which one of the parents has Chinese as heritage language, and the second parent English. All these families were interlingual, and the study shows that the children’s maintaining of the heritage language depend on many interacting factors. These includes the children’s attitude when it comes to learning Chinese, the type of language practice given, and the support given by parents and school. The self-efficacy of each child showed to be an important factor. All the children in the study were eleven or twelve years old. The principal reason for the Chinese parent to help their children maintain the Chinese language was for heritage, mainly in order for the child to be able to excel in life, but also for cognitive advantages. The non-Chinese speaking parent had very limited Chinese speaking ability, if any at all. Except for the three-to-four-hour heritage language school at the local community school, the exposure the children had to Chinese was quite limited, also at home. One strategy used by both teachers and parents for two
of the children was to regularly praise them for their efforts to learn Chinese. These children felt motivated and achieved high grades in all aspects of the language learning program. The other two children, on the other hand, displayed low levels of motivation to complete homework and reading tasks. They achieved significantly lower grades. One reason was that help given at home was limited.

One strategy that has been tried among Chinese families in Australia is to bring the family closer together as a unit. Tannenbaum & Howie (2002) investigated how the maintaining of the heritage language is related to having a cohesive family. The study concluded that the child is more prone to maintain the heritage language if they feel cohesion in their family. Li (1999) confirms this for families where the parents are very positive in regards to helping their children maintain or develop their heritage language.

In a study by Gonzalez et al. (2022, p. 1116), one mixed family (Mandarin/Cantonese), attempted to speak Mandarin Chinese at home, but often ended up in all-English conversations. Eventually, English became the only spoken language at home. Most families in the study used strategies such as having a home library of books, thus promoting Chinese development for their children. They tried to find time to regularly utilize printed reading material, and also introduced various reward strategies. One mother used pictures with some basic Chinese words to teach the children Chinese.
3 Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

A qualitative research approach was used to answer the research questions. It is suitable when the viewpoint of the participants, in particular in regards to their perspectives and experience are wanted (Hammarberg et al., 2016). Creswell (2014) points out that the selection of a research approach is based on the nature of the research problem or issue being addressed (p. 3). The research aim of the present study is to find out the strategies Chinese parents use to help their children learn and maintain their heritage language while growing up in Sweden, and the results and progress that the parents have noted applying these strategies. The inquiry on the experiences of Chinese parents is in the center of this study. Since the strategies that each family has adopted are quite distinct, and the results and effects are different from other families, an in-depth inquiry into the experiences of each family in their own context is needed. To fulfil such a task, a qualitative approach is more applicable since it is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning – as developed through experience – of individuals or groups ascribed to social or human problems (Creswell, 2014).

3.2 Research Instrument

The method used for data collection of this study was semi-structured interviews with some fixed and some open-ended questions, since semi-structured interview is a common research instrument in qualitative research (Denscombe, 2014). Additionally, semi-structured interviews are good at collecting historical information and allow researchers control over the line of questioning (Creswell, 2014). The interviewees can expound freely on their experiences while the researchers can control that the information is on the right track.

The research questions of this study are open, and the data collected to some part unpredictable. The semi-structured interview form is therefore optimal for drawing relevant data out of the interviewees. Additionally, the kind of data needed to answer the research questions are mainly based on experiences and perspectives of the interviewees, such as how well they thought that their children were progressing in the Chinese language. During a semi-structured interview, the interviewees can be invited to share their reflections on the topic and set follow-up questions. This can lead to that more information is provided than was originally intended by the question. Since this study is a collection, organization, and interpretation of verbal data, a semi-structured interview is suitable (Hammarberg et al., 2016).

The interview questions were designed to inquire about strategies that the parents use to help their children learn and maintain their mother tongue. For general information, the interviews contained questions about the parents age and educational level. For the Chinese parents, it was asked when they started to comprehend spoken Swedish. Since the age of the child is of importance when moving to a non-Chinese speaking country, this became one of the questions asked about the children (Mu, 2016). If the children in the present study were born in Sweden, the age was set to zero. It also inquired about whether they respond to their Chinese parents in Chinese or in Swedish, as this was a major issue in the articles by Fillmore (2000) and Mu (2016). The interviewees were asked whether they had applied any of a number of strategies, like using mother tongue education or watching Chinese TV. In addition, open questions were asked to find out
whether the families that participated had used any other strategies, or whether they
could think of any strategies that they think could be useful, but had not tried themselves.
They were also asked about the progress they felt their children had made in the Chinese
language. Even though the answers may be somewhat subjective based on the
judgement of the parents, it still gives some relative indication of the situation.
Depending on their answers, follow-up questions were asked via Wechat to obtain
further information, or to clarify the answers. All the questions asked during the
interviews are found in the appendix.

3.3 Sampling and Interviewees

Acronyms used in the tables:
Swe = Sweden/Swedish
Chi = Chinese Mandarin
Fu = Fuzhouhua = main dialect of Fuzhou
Comp = Year started to comprehend Swedish
Edu = Level of educational training
Uni = University
TS = Trade School
1-6 = Attended first six years of school
1-9 = Attended first nine years of school
1-12 = Attended high school
ci = child number i in the study
Daycare = preschool, in Sweden normally available from one year of age
MTE = Mother Tongue Education = Heritage Language School
NA = Not Available. In this municipality, the heritage language school was not offered

This study sampled families with at least one Chinese parent, living in the Southwest of
Sweden. The typical family constellations in this region are that both parents are
Chinese, one single Chinese mother, or Chinese mother with Swedish father. It is rare
to see families with a Chinese father and a Swedish mother. It is also rare to see a single
Chinese father having full custody of the children. These two latter groups are thus
excluded from the study. As far as young Chinese people and Chinese children living in
Sweden, many of them were born in China, and many were born in Sweden. In order for
each of these groups to be represented in this study, the families have been purposefully
selected. The following family constellations were selected:

- Five families with Chinese mother and Swedish father, all children except one
  born in Sweden
- Three families with both Chinese parents, all children except one born in
  Sweden
- Three families with Chinese single mother, all children born in China

The mother in all of these families was Chinese, so for consistency, it was a natural
choice to interview only the mother. The mother generally knows the family well, and
also knows the attitude of the father. All contacts were taken over the social platform
Wechat. This showed itself to be a suitable way to find and reach interviewees, since
many Chinese people use Wechat as a primary means of communication. All contacts
over Wechat were done person-to-person, and never in group chats. No information
during this study was broadcast to groups. One advantage of talking to the interviewees
directly, as opposed to using e.g., email, is the ability to persuade the interviewee to
answer all the questions (Denscombe, 2014). The semi-structured interview form is thus particularly suitable, as follow-up questions can be immediately asked based on the answers given by the interviewee.

Table 1: Family details

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<th>Mother</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/c20</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/c21</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Parents living separated

The fathers in families 1-5 are all Swedish and none of them speaks or understands Chinese. The two first children in family 5 are from a Chinese father, who after the first child arrived to Sweden, has had very little or no contact with the children.

3.4 The Interview Process

Since the main method used in this study was semi-structured interviews, the data collected focused on self-reports of the interviewees, on their beliefs and opinions. All interviewees were first contacted via the social platform Wechat, where they gave their written consent to participate. The interviews were later performed either by Wechat, by phone, or in person. With the consent of each interviewee, the interviews were recorded onto an audio device (Denscombe, 2014).

All interviews started with a greeting, an introduction, and an explanation of why the research is being done. It was stressed that all the data collected during the interviews are strictly confidential. Notes were taken during the interviews, and for redundancy, the interviews were recorded onto an audio device. The interview language varied between Chinese, English, and Swedish depending on the preferential choice of the interviewee. The interviews lasted between 25 and 60 minutes. After each interview, the interviewee was asked if she had any additional points to bring up. After that, the interviewee was thanked for having given up time to participate.

The time of the study was around Easter. In some cases, it made it easier to reach the interviewees, but in others, more difficult. Easter is a time of travel, and a couple of the families were not readily available. The varied work schedules of the interviewees, and their obligation to tend to their children also made it tricky to find suitable interview times. The interviews were all completed within the time span of three weeks.
3.5 Content Analysis

All the interviews were recorded on the allowance of the interviewees. In addition, careful notes were taken during the interviews and then trimmed. The codes were then extracted from these notes. In order to map the content of the data, the top-level strategy is divided into a number of sub-level strategies that the participating families were asked about. The coding used in the chapter Results & Analysis is provided in the right column.

Table 2: Coding of the data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sending the children to mother tongue education</td>
<td>MTE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching Chinese TV or film</td>
<td>TV/film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing Chinese board games, like Chinese chess or video games</td>
<td>Games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoiding watching Swedish TV or film</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only talking Chinese at home</td>
<td>Only Chi at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only talking Chinese during certain times, like during dinner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associating with other Chinese families with children</td>
<td>Meeting other Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving encouraging comments</td>
<td>Encouraging comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other strategies used by the families</td>
<td>Other ways</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.6 Data Quality

In qualitative research, validity, or credibility, is the criterion used when performing the evaluation of internal validity or the true value of the research (Hammarberg et al., 2016). The results should thus be presented adequately when it comes to the description of context. The results should further be recognizable by people sharing similar experiences. The data retrieved from the eleven different families in the present study all show the same general thought and the same general patterns. The answers given by the various families indicate consistency. The data is therefore considered reasonably accurate and appropriate, thus giving it validity. When there has been any doubt in the data collected, it has been possible to return to the interviewees confirming the validity of the data.

Reliability is assessed by the criterion dependability, or consistency. When provided the same data, other researchers should be able to find similar results, or similar patterns. When it comes to reliability of this study, the questions were constructed in such a way that if the same interviewees had been asked the same questions by a different researcher, the same answers would have been obtained by certain reasonableness. The interview guide was carefully designed before the interviews. During the interviews, it was made sure that the questions were not leading. Rather, the interviewees were given opportunity to express their experiences in an open atmosphere free of coercion.
Transferability, or applicability, is used as a criterion when evaluating the external validity. The results of a study should be able to be related to contexts outside the realm of the study, and be found applicable when viewed by other researchers. The results of this study with its limited number or participants, bring some level of transferability, because the samples are to some degree representative of all-Chinese families as well as of mixed families (Chinese mother and non-Chinese father) living in Sweden. The results may thus be regarded as reflecting the situation in Sweden, and should be able to be used as a basis for a comparison in other parts of the world.

Confirmability is a criterion for establishing that the findings of a study are shaped by the ones participating in the study, rather than of the researcher conducting the study. In other words, it is an indication of the level of confidence of the study. The data in the present study was produced with as much objectivity as possible and a sincere effort was made to make it free from any influence of the interviewer, giving it confirmability. In addition, the data in the study is taken from a representable pool of family constellations for Chinese families living in Sweden. This brings relevance and applicability to the findings.

3.7 Ethics Issues

This study follows the ethical regulations of Dalarna University. The collected personal data is adequately protected as requested by the rules. All participants were informed that they are partaking in a research study and that the intention of each interview conducted was to obtain material for the sole purpose of this study. All the participants gave their consent to participate and agreed that their words could be used for this research purpose. Even though data was collected about the children, it should be noted that the children were never interviewed, only the mother. In order to avoid any ethics issues, no minors were interviewed. As part of the interview, the age and academic training of the parents were asked. These questions may seem sensitive or private to some. Therefore, before each interview commenced, the interviewees were informed that they could decline to answer any question they would find uncomfortable. They were also informed of the purpose of the study. A self-evaluation of the interview questions was done. The result of this indicated no feelings of prying on sensitive or private information.
4 Results and Analysis

4.1 Strategies used by the Families

The interviews yielded the following data in regards strategies that the various families used. The specific strategies used are shown in Table 3 for mixed families and Table 4 for all-Chinese families. Since there are some fundamental differences between mixed and all-Chinese families when it comes to the results, they are divided into two separate sections.

The two main reasons for Chinese parents feeling it important for their children to speak Chinese was the ability to talk with Chinese-speaking relatives, and that Chinese is their mother tongue, their roots. The question “why do you think it is important for your child to speak Chinese?” seemed to surprise them. It was something obvious to them that their children should speak their mother tongue. The third biggest reason was to travel to China for leisure or for living in China. Speaking the language would make it easier to communicate. Future benefits like achieving a well-paid job or a successful carrier were not mentioned as important reasons. Maybe living in Sweden as opposed to the USA or Australia makes a difference, as Sweden has a relatively well-developed social security system.

4.1.1 Strategies used by Mixed Families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family/children</th>
<th>TV/film</th>
<th>Only Chinese at home</th>
<th>Encouraging comments</th>
<th>Meeting other Chinese</th>
<th>Children mutual talk</th>
<th>Other ways</th>
<th>Why important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1/c1, c2</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Tried but gave up</td>
<td>Yes, but no so meaningful</td>
<td>Yes but always talk Swe</td>
<td>Swe</td>
<td>Helping with MTE homework</td>
<td>Talk w/ relatives Visit China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/c3, c4</td>
<td>When small</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes but always talk Swe</td>
<td>Swe</td>
<td>Sing and read to them Pinyin</td>
<td>Talk w/ relatives Free, Big language Future jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/c5, c6</td>
<td>TV/film</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Seldom</td>
<td>Before pandemic</td>
<td>Swe</td>
<td>Chi weekend school Chi Piano teacher Wechat relatives</td>
<td>Roots Talk w/ relatives Move back?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/c7, c8</td>
<td>Film</td>
<td>Tried but gave up</td>
<td>Not felt needed</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Swe</td>
<td>Read and sing</td>
<td>Talk w/ relatives Visit China Express feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/c9, c10, c11</td>
<td>TV/film Board games</td>
<td>Yes with mom</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes but always talk Swe</td>
<td>Swe</td>
<td>Read Chi books &amp; stories</td>
<td>Talk w/ relatives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Only two out of five mixed families tried to encourage their children by commenting on their Chinese progress. The comments given by the mother of family 1, however, may not seem to be so meaningful. She would say to the older sibling “your Chinese is better than that of your brother”, and would say to the younger sibling “you write better Chinese than your sister”. It is questionable if such comments actually encourage a child to progress. The mother of family 2, on the other hand, would give her children comments like “your pronunciation is very good”. However, from Table 5 below, it does not seem to indicate a big advantage for their progress in the Chinese language for any of these two families.

The mother in family 5 never gives encouraging comments when it comes to her children learning Chinese. She thinks that learning Chinese is part of everyday life, and therefore, there is no need for encouraging comments. Her two older children (c9 and c10) both speak advanced Chinese, and this is attributed to the fact that she did not understand any Swedish during the first four years in Sweden. The younger of the two was born just after the mother arrived to Sweden. By that time, the oldest child was already six years old. The lack of encouraging comments has not inhibited them from learning Chinese.

All mixed families except family 1 made Chinese film and TV available for their children. As far as playing Chinese games, the mother in family 5 said: “playing Chinese board games, like Chinese chess, has always seemed to be a fun activity for the children - they have learned words from the games that we normally do not use in our daily speech.” It seems as if such games are beneficial for learning Chinese. The two older Children (c9 and c10) who frequently play games where Chinese words, characters, and logic are used both speak advanced Chinese. In order to be able to play these games, the ones participating have to be able to recognize some Chinese characters. This has, however, not helped these children to develop their ability to read Chinese.

In most mixed families, the Chinese parent read Chinese books and stories for their children. Some sang songs, sometimes sing-alongs. The oldest child (c9) in family 5 was born in China and was exposed to some reading and writing before arriving to Sweden at age 6. Even so, maintaining and adding to these skills have proven difficult. Almost fifteen years later, his reading and writing skills are very limited.

The mother in family 2 put in system to practice pinyin pronunciation with her children. She said: “regularly letting them repeat all the sounds in the pinyin system\textsuperscript{2} has made their pronunciation very good”. Pinyin is the method that children in China use learning Chinese, so the strategy of the mother in family 2 using Pinyin to teach her children proper pronunciation should be an excellent choice.

The mixed families have limited association with other mixed families, and even less with all-Chinese families. During these occasions, the children speak almost exclusively Swedish. The mother in family 2 said “since our husbands do not understand any Chinese, we all speak Swedish at gatherings”. Logically then, the children will have no reason to even try to speak Chinese to each other.

\textsuperscript{2} The pinyin system is a phonetic romanization system used to represent the standard sounds for Chinese characters.
4.1.2 Strategies used by all-Chinese Families

Encouraging comments were rarely, if ever, given by Chinese parents who only speak Chinese at home (see Table 4). They felt that it was not needed. Speaking Chinese should be an obvious part of family life. The only exception was the mother of family 7. She often tells her children that they are doing well when it comes to their Chinese. She tells them things like “you speak very well” or “you write very nicely”. She feels that this type of encouragement is important for their progress. Considering that both parents possess very limited ability to comprehend spoken Swedish, their children (c14 and c15) probably would learn and progress in their Chinese also if no encouraging comments had been given. In either case, the children surely enjoy to hear positive comments now and again.

From the interviews, a trend shows that when the parents do not speak any Swedish, the children will learn Chinese, even when encouraging comments are lacking completely. This is clearly seen in the children c18, c19, c20, and c21 of families 9, 10, and 11 (see Table 6). These three mothers all said that the children should grow up learning Chinese and that there was never a need to give encouraging comments. It was their daily language of communication. One mother said “we always talk Chinese so it would feel unnatural to tell the children that their Chinese is good”.

Table 4: Strategies used by all-Chinese families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family/children</th>
<th>TV/film Games</th>
<th>Only Chinese at home</th>
<th>Encouraging comments</th>
<th>Meeting other Chinese</th>
<th>Children mutual talk</th>
<th>Other ways</th>
<th>Why important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6/c12, c13</td>
<td>TV/film</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Seldom</td>
<td>Swe</td>
<td>Read Chi Go China often</td>
<td>Free</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/c14, c15</td>
<td>TV/film</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes Mixed Chi/Swe</td>
<td>Chi</td>
<td>Kids read Chi books, sing</td>
<td>Roots Talk w/ Relatives Go China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/c16, c17</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Mixed Hakka and Swe</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Swe</td>
<td>Help w/ homework</td>
<td>Talk w/ Relatives But not so important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/c18, c19</td>
<td>TV/film</td>
<td>Yes Mainly Fu</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes Speak Chi</td>
<td>Most Swe Some Chi</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Talk w/ Relatives Mother tongue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/c20</td>
<td>TV/film</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes Speak Chi</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Read books</td>
<td>Roots Talk w/ Relatives Future jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/c21</td>
<td>TV/film</td>
<td>50/50 Chi/Fu</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes Speak Chi or Fu</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Talk w/ Relatives Mother tongue</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For family 8, Hakka is the mother tongue rather than Mandarin. This explains the absence of Chinese film and TV as a strategy for family 8. It also explains why the parents in this family did not feel it important for the children to learn Mandarin. The mother said “almost nobody in the family speaks Mandarin, so I see no need for the children to learn it – Hakka is enough”. For all other all-Chinese families 6, 7, 9, 10, and 11, watching Chinese film and TV was something normal. Also playing Chinese games was relatively common among these families.

In most cases, all-Chinese parents read Chinese books and stories for their children. Some sang songs, sometimes sing-alongs. In some cases, they let the children read the books themselves, like in family 7. The mother of family 7 said “my oldest son has really progressed by doing this, and reads advanced Chinese, but my youngest son reads so-so”. Some of the families participating in the study had children already prior to arriving to Sweden. Being part of the Chinese school system, even only for a few years, would give children quite an extensive exposure to reading and writing Chinese. The mother in family 11 whose son (c21) was 14 years old when he came to Sweden said “my son read Chinese fluently when he came to Sweden and still reads fluently, but he has never had a habit of reading Chinese literature”.

With the exception of families 7 and 11, the children in the all-Chinese families when together with a sibling or a close friend, speak Swedish. Family 7 has the habit that when together as a family to always speak Chinese. The mother said “I don’t understand much Swedish, so my sons find it easier to talk to me in Chinese, and they almost always speak Chinese to each other”. When it comes to the child in Family 11, his Swedish is quite limited, so it is much easier for him to speak Chinese. The mother said “my son started working in a Chinese company quite early, and has never had much opportunity to practice Swedish”.

The three all-Chinese families 9, 10, and 11 have regular association with other all-Chinese families. During these occasions, only Chinese is spoken among the adults, and also mostly among the children. During Chinese gatherings, the children often partake of the food together with the adults. The common language for everybody at the gathering becomes Chinese (or the dialect of Chinese that is spoken by the ones present). The mother of family 10 said “my son has always been sitting together with the adults around the dinner table, and has been actively partaking in (Chinese) conversations”.

4.2 How each Child has Progressed

Of the 21 children in the study, 15 were born in Sweden. This is indicated with a “0” in the column “Age Swe”, i.e., the age when arriving to Sweden. The rest of the children were born in China and arrived in Sweden at the age indicated in this column. As noted in the Methodology chapter, all data about the children were collected from the mothers. Also here, a clear distinction can be seen when comparing mixed families with all-Chinese families.

In this study, the younger sibling consistently showed a lower level of language skills, and is here denoted as the “younger sibling syndrome”. This is in effect the case in all the families. When the older child grows up, the Chinese parent normally still has low ability to understand spoken Swedish, forcing the child to respond in Chinese. When the second child grows up, the same parent now has acquired a higher level of
comprehension in the Swedish language, and the child can respond more and more in Swedish.

### 4.2.1 How each Child has Progressed for Mixed Families

Table 5: Children details and progress in mixed families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Start</th>
<th>Daycare</th>
<th>Speaks – Reads – Writes</th>
<th>Respond</th>
<th>Enjoy MTE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Understands most, Speaks good Reads poorly, writes poorly Negative progress</td>
<td>Swe</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Understands most, speaks limited Reads poorly, writes poorly Negative progress</td>
<td>Swe</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Understands most, speaks limited Good pronunciation Reads poorly, writes poorly Positive progress</td>
<td>Swe</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Understands most Speaks limited Good pronunciation Reads poorly, writes poorly Positive progress</td>
<td>Most Swe Some Chi</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C5</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Understands completely Speaks limited sentence structure Reads poorly, writes poorly Positive progress</td>
<td>Swe</td>
<td>Some Chi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C6</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Understands completely, Speaks, reads &amp; writes poorly Negative progress</td>
<td>Swe</td>
<td>So so</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C7</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Understands quite a lot Speaks, reads &amp; writes poorly Negative progress</td>
<td>Swe</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C8</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Understands quite a lot Speaks simple sentence structure Good pronunciation Reads poorly, writes poorly Stagnating progress</td>
<td>Swe</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C9</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Speaks advanced Chi Writes some, reads poorly Slow positive progress</td>
<td>Most Chi Few Swe words</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C10</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Speaks advanced Chi Writes some, reads poorly Slow positive progress</td>
<td>Most Chi Few Swe words</td>
<td>Only at first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C11</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Speaks simple Chi Too young to read or write</td>
<td>Most Swe some Chi</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What happens as the mother learns Swedish? The mother in family 5 did not understand almost any Swedish as the two older children (c9 and c10) grew up. They both acquired advanced spoken Chinese. But when the third child (c11) came along, the mother had acquired an ability to understand spoken Swedish. The child knows this, and takes the path of least resistance, i.e., mostly responding in Swedish. This child shows clear traits of wanting to make Swedish the primary language, much more so than the two older
siblings. The mother said “even though I always speak Chinese to my youngest child, she almost always responds in Swedish - this was never the case with my two older children”. There are, however, exceptions like family 2, where the siblings (c3 and c4) are at similar levels when it comes to Chinese proficiency. The reason could be that they are very close in age, less than two years apart. The mother brings out another factor that also might have played a role in this as she said “my youngest daughter has always been closer to me, and therefore had greater opportunity to learn more Chinese”. The progress for each child in the mixed families can be seen in Table 5.

As the Chinese parent learns to understand spoken Swedish, the child tends to respond more and more in Swedish. When the child knows that the parent understands Swedish, there is nothing that hinders the responses to be in Swedish. This is manifested by the fact that many of the children born in Sweden show a negative progress in their Chinese language skills. The more Swedish that the Chinese parent learns, the less Chinese the child speaks. For the mixed families 1, 2, 3, and 4, the mother had learnt to understand spoken Swedish by the time the first child was born. The mother of family 3 said “when my daughter was born, I could understand Swedish quite well, so she sometimes responded in Chinese and sometimes in Swedish, but three years later when my son was born, my Swedish was much better so he never responded to me in Chinese”.

4.2.2 How each Child has Progressed for all-Chinese Families

When it comes to spoken Chinese, all families with only Chinese parents succeed consistently better than families having one Swedish parent. Even in the case of family 6, where both parents actually understood Swedish during the upbringing of the children, did the children have the habit of always responding in Chinese. The mother said “since both of us (parents) always spoke Chinese at home, it became natural also for the girls to speak Chinese”. The children obviously knew that their parents understood Swedish, but in this case, the path of least resistance became to respond in Chinese. One reason for this could be that the logic of thought of the two languages Chinese and Swedish is very different, and mixing the languages would make the daily interaction more complicated. One fact that stands out with this family is that they postponed sending their children to daycare, at age 1.5 and 2 years, respectively. This delayed the switch of primary language from Chinese to Swedish by up to a year. The progress for each child in the all-Chinese families can be seen in Table 6.

For the three families 9, 10, and 11 (c18, c19, c20, and c21), the single mothers did not understand spoken Swedish during the upbringing of the children, forcing the children to always respond in Chinese. These four children also came to Sweden quite late, with the exception of the girl in family 9 (c19). Although her mother does not understand any spoken Swedish, her Chinese is still not as proficient as that of her older brother (c18). This follows the pattern of the “younger sibling syndrome” described above in Section 4.2. However, in this case it does not depend on that the Chinese parent learns Swedish, but rather that the child is interacting with Swedish children. Being only six years old when arriving in Sweden, she picks up the language quickly.

Postponing to send the children to daycare is another indicator of success. For family 6, the difference is only half a year, but if this was a clear indicator, the younger sister (c13) should have a higher proficiency in Chinese. This is not the case. These siblings (c12 and c13) follow the same pattern of all siblings in the study. The younger has lower proficiency in Chinese.
Table 6: Children details and progress in all-Chinese families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Start</th>
<th>Daycare</th>
<th>Speaks – Reads – Writes</th>
<th>Respond</th>
<th>Enjoy</th>
<th>MTE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C12</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1,5</td>
<td></td>
<td>Speaks advanced Chi</td>
<td>Chi</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Writes, reads some</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Positive progress growing with lang</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C13</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Speaks advanced Chi</td>
<td>Chi</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Writes, reads less than older sister</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Positive progress but less than older sister</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C14</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>Speaks advanced Chi</td>
<td>Chi</td>
<td>So so</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reads very well, writes decent</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Positive progress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C15</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1,5</td>
<td></td>
<td>Speaks advanced Chi</td>
<td>Chi</td>
<td>So so</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reads and writes simple Chi</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Positive progress but less than older brother</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C16</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Understands some Chi Mandarin</td>
<td>Hakka</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Speaks simple Hakka</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Read a little, cannot write</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stagnated progress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C17</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Understands Chi Mandarin poorly</td>
<td>Hakka</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Speaks simple Hakka</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Read, write less than older brother</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stagnated progress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C18</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>Proficient in Mandarin, Fuzhouhua</td>
<td>Chi/Fu</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Read, write advanced level</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Always progressed since childhood</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C19</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>Proficient in Mandarin, Fuzhouhua</td>
<td>Chi/Fu</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Read simple Chi, writes poorly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lower level than older brother</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Always progressed since childhood</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C20</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>Proficient in Mandarin</td>
<td>Chi</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Understands Fu fully, speaks less</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Read, write advanced level</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Always progressed since childhood</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C21</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>Proficient in Mandarin, Fuzhouhua</td>
<td>Chi</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Read, write advanced level</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Always progressed since childhood</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

For family 7, the children (c14 and c15) also started daycare late, at 3 and 1.5 years, respectively. This could be an indicator of their ability to learn Chinese quickly, and also keep responding in Chinese. In this case, both parents possess a low level of Swedish spoken language comprehension. These two factors combined could very well be the reason for success.

4.3 Mother Tongue Education and Weekend Language Schools

The mother tongue education offered as weekly lessons by the municipalities were, with few exceptions, not appreciated by the children (see Tables 5 and 6). The main reasons were that it was too theoretical and too repetitive. The classes focused on Chinese characters and these had to be written repeatedly, many times. Most of the children felt that this was boring, and that they did not really learn anything from it. They would
rather have spent time working on their spoken Chinese. For the mixed family children born in Sweden who never had learnt to read or write Chinese characters in a Chinese school, the mother tongue education sometimes felt overwhelming. Only two of the children, both girls (c5 and c19), seemed to enjoy the classes. Although c20 and c21 also enjoyed the classes, the reason was that they were able to help the teacher. It was not because they felt encouraged being there as pupils. They were already teenagers when they arrived in Sweden, and their Chinese was at an advanced level. The mother of one of them (c20) said “my son enjoyed being used by the teacher, because it made him feel he was a teacher too”. For some of the Chinese-born children of the all-Chinese families, the classes became boring because it was too easy for them.

There are also Chinese weekend schools in some of the larger cities in Sweden. They offer different programs of Chinese at different levels, both for children and for adults. In this study, only family 3 sent their children to this kind of school. The mother said “we sent our children there for one semester and it was a good experience as our children met many other Chinese children, but it also took a lot of time away from our weekends”.

4.4 Strategies that the Families Recommended other Families to use

Most families, both mixed and all-Chinese realize what they should do, or what they should have done in order for their children to learn and maintain Chinese. This is clearly seen in the bullet list below listing strategies that the interviewees recommended other families to do. When asked the question “Which strategies would you recommend other families to use?”, these were their suggestions:

- postpone as long as possible to send the children to daycare
- let them play with other Chinese children
- get together more with Chinese families.
- study Chinese with them
- practice pinyin sounds with them
- watch TV where formal Chinese language is used
- read or sing to them in Chinese
- read or sing with them in Chinese
- travel in China
- send them to China to study
- make it a point not to speak Swedish at home
- speak only Chinese at home from the time the child was born
- spend time speaking Chinese with them when 2-3 years old
- spend regular time speaking only Chinese, like during dinner
- pretend not to understand Swedish

The recommendation to postpone sending the children to daycare came from family 3, although both children started daycare when they were one year old which is normal in Sweden. The mother said “we should have postponed sending our youngest to day care, his Swedish became better than that of his sister”. In other words, he came to be less proficient in Chinese than his older sister, again suggesting that the “younger sibling syndrome” described above in Section 4.2 is an inherent fact.

The mother of family 11 said “my child watched a lot of Chinese TV when growing up, but I think it would have been good if I had let him watch more formal language Chinese
TV”. The child (c21) was already 14 years old when he arrived to Sweden, so his Chinese was at an advanced level already then. Formal Chinese TV could possibly have been beneficial for him. For children who do not possess such a high level of Chinese, however, formal Chinese TV might be overwhelming.

Most all participants read or sang in Chinese to their children. The mother of Family 10 said “I often read to my son, but I also made him read to me”. Making the children active readers in this way surely gives better results than when simply passively reading to them.

The all-Chinese family 6 felt that traveling to China would be a good way for children to improve their Chinese. The mother said “when you travel, let the children as much as possible talk to local Chinese children”. Even though traveling is often done over shorter periods of time, this recommendation should be doable for both all-Chinese and mixed families.

To send the children to China over an extended period of time to live and study was suggested by the mother in family 4. She said “since very few people in China speak any foreign language, the children would be fully exposed to Chinese and they would be forced to speak Chinese all the time”. This is undoubtedly the fastest way to learn Chinese, both spoken and written. However, it might not be logistically possible to send the children to China over an extended period of time, especially not for mixed families. The Swedish parent may not find it a priority for the children to learn Chinese.

The suggestion of spending regular, scheduled time speaking Chinese with the children was given by several interviewees. The mother of family 1 said that “I wish we could have done this, but we just never had the time for it”.

The recommendation to only speak Chinese at home were given from some of the all-Chinese families. It seems like an easy strategy to live up to for them, but not as easy for the mixed families. With one of the parents being Swedish, the language at home that everybody understands is Swedish. Chinese would find itself faced out.

For the parent to pretend not to understand Swedish, however ingenious it might seem, may not be as easy as it sounds. The child knows that the parent understands, and will take the path of least resistance. As the child switches primary language from Chinese to Swedish, the path of least resistance is to respond in Swedish. For children born in Sweden, the primary language likely is Swedish already from start.

The mother of family 5 said “I have no recommendation for other families, because everybody is different”. Although this may be true, some of the recommendations given could be potential strategies for many families.
5 Discussion

5.1 Mixed and all-Chinese Families use Strategies Differently

Most strategies found in the literature as well as strategies found in the present study can be applied by both mixed and all-Chinese families. The results of these strategies and the progress that the children make depend on how the strategies are applied. Mixed families and all-Chinese families apply them in different ways. The differences are depicted in this discussion.

5.2 Reasons for Maintaining the Children’s Heritage Language

Mu (2014) expounds on the symbolic capital of maintaining the heritage language. This includes future benefits and advantages in life. This is supported by Huang & Liao (2023), that a main reason for maintaining the heritage language is for the child to be able to excel in life, and for cognitive advantages. Another important reason for the child to maintain the heritage language is to be able to communicate with friends and relatives in China, particularly with the grandparents (Mu, 2016). The results of the present study indicate that the most important reason for maintaining the mother tongue for Chinese people living in Sweden is to retain the roots, thus embracing the ability to communicate with relatives. Future advantages, such as finding a job, were secondary. There did not seem to be any obvious differences in this regard between mixed and all-Chinese families. One potential reason for the families in this study not seeing the future benefits as primary, could be the highly developed Swedish social security system. The worry about not succeeding secularly in Sweden might not be as great as in countries like Australia or the USA.

5.3 How Strategies are used Currently

In the study by Mu (2016, p. 297), it is brought out that the tipping point for language proficiency is twelve to thirteen years of age. In other words, a child aged eleven or younger when arriving to a non-Chinese speaking country is more prone to lose the heritage language, than a child age twelve or older. Although not always practical, a strategy could thus be to wait with the move until the child is twelve years old. That way, the child will have a larger change to retain the heritage language. The results of the present study support the study by Mu (2016) for children of age twelve or older. The results also support it for children age six or younger. For these younger children, however, the all-Chinese families are able to significantly better maintain their children’s proficiency in Chinese than the mixed families.

The most common strategy mentioned in the literature is sending the children to mother tongue education (heritage language schools). These are offered by many cities or municipalities providing weekly or biweekly sessions (Law, 2015). However, most children feel bored attending such schools, and do not greatly progress in the heritage language. According to Law (2015, p. 739), the parents need to take charge in helping their children with the school assignments in order to benefit. The results of the present study are in agreement with this, as most children felt the mother tongue school boring and of little benefit. In order to make such schools meaningful for the children, the parents need to be involved in preparing for the lessons. Some of the children of all-
Chinese families enjoyed the mother tongue classes, but the reason was that their Chinese was at such a high level, that they could help the teacher. Only one of the children in the mixed families enjoyed the classes. Most of them felt that they did not learn anything because the classes focused almost completely on writing Chinese characters, and were difficult, repetitive, and boring.

In the paper by Fillmore (2000), an example is given of a child, that when starting to learn English as a local language, almost immediately stopped speaking Chinese. The scolding by the parents made it worse. Would encouraging comments have helped? In the paper by Mu (2016), the strategy of giving encouraging comments should make a difference. The results of the present study indicate that encouraging comments do not have any major influence on whether the child will learn or retain the heritage language. The absence of encouraging comments in the all-Chinese families 6, 9, 10, and 11, does not seem to have deterred the children from becoming proficient in Chinese. Conversely, the encouraging comments given to the children in the mixed families 1 and 2 did not seem to have had any positive impact on the children’s progress in Chinese.

Entering daycare brings a language shift to the children (Portes & Hao, 1998, p. 269). Their heritage language is kept until then, but as they become immersed in the local language, they rapidly make the local language their primary. Postponing to send the children to daycare, could thus be an effective strategy for maintaining the heritage language. The results of the present study tend to support this. Some parents suggested this as a strategy, and some had postponed sending their children to daycare, although the underlying reason was not to better maintain the heritage language. Four of the all-Chinese children started daycare when they were older than one year, and they all speak Chinese at an advanced level. The two other all-Chinese children that were born in Sweden started daycare when they were one year old, and they only speak very limited Chinese. All of the mixed family children that were born in Sweden started daycare when they were one year old, and they all speak very limited Chinese.

Hinton (1999) mentions social interaction as a strategy used in areas where there are other Chinese families living in the neighborhood. This may include churches, clubs, and other heritage communities. Such social interaction is, according to Hinton, shown to relate to the maintaining of the heritage language. In Sweden, the neighboring communities do not normally offer any significant possibility for Chinese interaction. The results of the present study show that, for mixed families, the strategy of associating with other mixed families does not help the children to learn Chinese. These children always speak Swedish with each other during gatherings. When all-Chinese families associate with other all-Chinese families, on the other hand, in almost all occasions, the children speak Chinese with each other. So, for all-Chinese families, this strategy does help to maintain their children’s heritage language.

In the study by Tannenbaum & Howie (2002), the strategy of bringing the family closer together was investigated. In families having cohesion, i.e., being very close as a family, children were more inclined to maintain their heritage language. Being very close as a family at home could thus be a good strategy. In the present study, being close as a family was not a strategy brought out by any of the participants. The reason for this could be that families in Sweden are normally quite small. Only one of the eleven families participating in the study had more than two children. Having only three or four family members (or even two in the case of two of the families with single mothers), they already feel that they are close together.
One strategy used by both mixed and all-Chinese families as brought out by Gonzalez et al. (2022, p. 1116) was having a home library of books. This would help the children develop knowledge about Chinese. The strategy included regular utilization of printed reading material and pictures, and it also involved the children in extracurricular educational training. Also in the present study, several of the Chinese parents used books or songs, but for most part, they read or sang to their children. Very few let their children do the actual reading or singing.

Kwon (2017, p. 497) discusses the strategy of only speaking the mother tongue at home. This was by some combined with engaging the children in translanguaging exercises, i.e., training in the local language and the heritage language simultaneously. A related strategy, transnationalism was also used by some in order to instill a bond to the language of national origin. In the present study, the mother tongue was always spoken at home by all of the all-Chinese families. None of the mixed families practiced this as a strategy on a continual basis. This is clearly the most important aspect for learning and maintaining the heritage language.

5.4 Strategies that were Suggested During the Present Study

The participants in the present study were asked to recommend strategies for other families to use. These strategies were not necessarily strategies that they themselves used. Three of these recommended strategies were:

- Postpone as long as possible to send the children to daycare
- Only speak Chinese at home
- Pretend not to understand Swedish

The first point, postponing as long as possible to send the children to daycare, is quite interesting. It would require that a Chinese parent or other Chinese-speaking relative or friend is available to stay at home to take care of the children. This would have several effects. It gives the children a Chinese-spoken environment. It also delays the process for the children learning Swedish, thus delaying the change of primary language from Chinese to Swedish. Some might argue that it will have some detrimental effects in that the child does not get enough social interaction with other children. The last two points in the bullet list go hand in hand. Pretending not to understand Swedish seems to be a logic way to force the child to respond in Chinese. What happens if the parent keeps telling the child that he or she does not understand when the child speaks Swedish? Will the child then feel obligated to respond in Chinese, or will the child ignore the exhortation? After all, the child knows very well that the parent understands Swedish. The child will do what feels easiest to do, i.e., respond in the language that is the primary.
6 Limitations

This study includes a limited number of families with a limited number of children. The statistical viability is therefore dependent on the number of occurrences for each data. Only the mothers were interviewed, so the results depict their views. The children were not interviewed.
7 Conclusion and Future Work

7.1 Conclusion

What strategies do Chinese parents use to help their children learn and maintain the heritage language while growing up in Sweden?

Mother tongue education
Even though mother tongue education is not mandatory in Sweden, all families in the study chose to send their children to class. Only one of the families did not have this option as the classes were not offered in their municipality. However, very few of the children enjoyed the classes, and the realized benefit of these classes seems limited. The responses during the interviews indicate that attending mother tongue education classes does not contribute to learning or retaining Chinese to any significant degree.

Only speaking Chinese at home
This is a strategy that was only applied in all-Chinese families, where the parents either did not understand Swedish, or had the habit of never speaking Swedish at home. The children found it natural to always respond in Chinese. In the mixed families, some of the mothers tried to talk only Chinese at home when the children were small. In most cases, the mother understood Swedish already when the children were born. All the children that had Swedish as the primary language responded in Swedish. Even though all the mixed family children understand spoken Chinese, they can only speak limited to simple structure sentences. In regards to reading and writing Chinese, their ability is almost negligible. It seems that for mixed families, it is very difficult to teach the children to speak Chinese at any advanced level, especially if they are born in Sweden.

Encouraging comments
Except for one, none of the all-Chinese families gave their children encouraging comments about their children’s Chinese. This did not seem to inhibit their children from learning Chinese. Most mixed families who partook in this study did not give encouraging comments either. There is no conclusive evidence in this study that would suggest that encouraging comments help children to learn Chinese.

Associating with other Chinese families
For mixed families, to associate with other mixed families does not help the children to learn Chinese. The children in this study always spoke Swedish with each other during such gatherings. When all-Chinese families associate with other all-Chinese families, on almost all occasions, the children speak Chinese with each other. Associating with other Chinese families would therefore be a good strategy if the only spoken language during the gatherings is Chinese.

Postponing sending the children to daycare
When children start daycare, they make the local language their primary language. This study suggests that the longer the children postpone to attend daycare, the better their chances are to retain, and progress in, their heritage language.
How well are the children progressing according to the parents?

Among the mixed families, most of the children can understand spoken Chinese, some at an advanced level. Very few of the mothers indicated a positive progress. The level of spoken Chinese that they had reached at a young age either had stagnated or declined. When it came to reading or writing Chinese, most of the mixed family children had negligible skills. Among the all-Chinese families, almost all the children had progressed continually while growing up. This relates back to the strategy of only speaking Chinese at home.

The results further showed that the younger of the siblings always has a lower level of proficiency across the board. They will be less proficient in speaking, reading, and writing Chinese compared to the older sibling. This is herein denoted the younger sibling syndrome, as it seems to be an inherent fact.

7.2 Future Work

Some families suggested that pretending not to understand Swedish could be a logic way to force the child to respond in Chinese. What happens if the parent keeps telling the child that he or she does not understand when the child speaks Swedish? Will the child then feel obligated to respond in Chinese, or will the child ignore the exhortation? After all, the child knows very well that the parent understands Swedish. Since none of the mixed parents in the study applied this strategy, future research could focus on this.

Some families suggested that waiting as long as possible to send the children to daycare would delay the child learning Swedish. What effects would this have on the long-term progress for the child to learn Chinese? Would it delay the transition of making Swedish the primary language? This could be the focus of a future study.
References


Appendix

Interview Questions:

*Parent information*

*Father*
Chinese/Swedish/Other
Speaks Chinese at what level
Dialects
Age
Education
Came to Sweden which year
Level of Swedish
When start understanding Swedish

*Mother*
Chinese/Swedish/Other
Speaks Chinese at what level
Dialects
Age
Education
Came to Sweden which year
Level of Swedish
When start understanding Swedish

Why do you think it is important for your child to speak Chinese?
What dialects of Chinese do you teach your children?
Family language when together as a family
In what language do the children talk to each other
Children

Child 1
Male/female
Age
Born in Sweden/China
Age when coming to Sweden
Attends mother tongue education
Feels encouraged from this education
When addressed in Chinese, answers in Swedish/Chinese
Can formulate simple Chinese sentences
Can formulate advanced Chinese sentences
Speaks Chinese fluently/reads/writes
Speaks other dialect
Daycare from age

Child 2
Male/female
Age
Born in Sweden/China
Age when coming to Sweden
Attends mother tongue education
Feels encouraged from this education
When addressed in Chinese, answers in Swedish/Chinese
Can formulate simple Chinese sentences
Can formulate advanced Chinese sentences
Speaks Chinese fluently/reads/writes
Speaks other dialect
Daycare from age
Child 3
Male/female
Age
Born in Sweden/China
Age when coming to Sweden
Attends mother tongue education
Feels encouraged from this education
When addressed in Chinese, answers in Swedish/Chinese
Can formulate simple Chinese sentences
Can formulate advanced Chinese sentences
Speaks Chinese fluently/reads/writes
Speaks other dialect
Daycare from age

Strategies
Which of the following tools/strategies have you used regularly?
Sending the children to mother tongue education
Watching Chinese TV or film
Avoiding watching Swedish TV or film
Playing Chinese board games, like Chinese chess
Playing Chinese video games
Only talking Chinese at home
Only talking Chinese during certain times, like during dinner
Associating with other Chinese families with children
Giving encouraging comments
Other strategies you use
Which strategies would you recommend other families to use?
To what extent do you feel that your child is progressing?

(How long interview last, recorded)