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Analysis of the Current Situation of Chinese Language Learning among Chinese-Mauritian Children

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Abstract: With the development of society, the ways, conditions, and motivations for Chinese language learning among early Chinese-Mauritians and the new generation of Chinese-Mauritians have undergone significant changes. Therefore, this article focuses on the new generation of Chinese-Mauritians to explore the current status of Chinese language learning among Chinese-Mauritian children. It also discusses the motivations for Chinese language learning among the new generation of Chinese-Mauritians and the existing issues in the Chinese language learning process, along with providing targeted recommendations.

Keywords: Mauritius; Chinese-Mauritian Children; Chinese Language Teaching.

1. Introduction

Mauritius is an African island nation located in the southwestern Indian Ocean. It boasts a diverse population and a complex linguistic landscape. The majority of the population on the island is of Indian descent, alongside Chinese and Creole populations, with English recognized as the official language by the government. However, due to the influence of previous French colonization, French has a significant presence, resulting in the phenomenon of bilingualism with English and French being used as common languages of communication. The indigenous population tends to use Creole as their primary language. Chinese, as a language of communication among the Chinese-Mauritian community, is not commonly seen on the island and is mainly limited to certain Chinese organizations and associations.

Given that the early Chinese-Mauritian generation's Chinese language learning patterns are no longer relevant, this paper focuses on the new generation of Chinese-Mauritians who were born and raised in Mauritius, received their education there, and have a higher level of integration into the local society. Using students from the Chinese-Mauritian children's classes at the Confucius Institute at the University of Mauritius as a case study, this research aims to explore the new changes and shortcomings in the current state of Chinese language learning among the new generation of Chinese-Mauritians in Mauritius.

2. Current Status of Chinese Language Teaching in Mauritius

With the emergence of the concept of "economic globalization" and the continuous strengthening of China's comprehensive national strength, there has been a growing trend of cooperation between China and Mauritius in the fields of economy, trade, and culture. This has ignited a surge in the interest in learning Chinese in Mauritius. The education ministries of both countries have also collaborated on educational exchanges, promoting the development of Chinese language education in Mauritius. Currently, there are several well-known Chinese language teaching institutions in the region, including the following:

1.Xinhua School

Xinhua School was established by the first wave of Chinese immigrants from Meixian, Guangdong, who came to Mauritius. Initially, its primary goal was to preserve the ethnic identity of the Chinese community, and as a result, it conducted Chinese education in Hakka dialect and traditional Chinese characters. As the number of students increased and educational experience grew, it gradually evolved into the first systematic Chinese school in Mauritius. It offers primary education from grades one to six, as well as a junior high school section. Today, Xinhua School, as the oldest Chinese school in the local community, still plays a significant role. However, it has transitioned from a full-time school to a Chinese language supplementary school, mainly operating on weekends. Teachers are predominantly locally-based Chinese immigrants or native teachers who work part-time on weekends. The curriculum uses textbooks like "Chinese" developed by the Jinan University Chinese Language Institute.

2. Gandhi Institute

The Gandhi Institute is an Oriental language and arts college established through cooperation and support from the Indian government and Mauritius. It is the only place in Mauritius where one can pursue higher education in Chinese language studies. The educational system is comprehensive, and students who have completed Chinese language learning from grades one to six in high school can enroll in the college section. The Gandhi Institute employs professional Chinese language teachers and Chinese volunteers dispatched by The Chinese Language Council International (Hanban) to conduct classes. It primarily caters to local students rather than the Chinese-Mauritian community and has its own set of teaching materials.

3.China Cultural Center

The China Cultural Center, established by the government, serves as a cultural hub with a mission to promote Chinese culture. It not only takes on the task of Chinese language instruction but also hosts a wide range of cultural activities in the local area and administers HSK (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi) examinations. In addition to language courses, the China Cultural Center offers short-term training in various Chinese arts and skills, such as painting and the erhu. The teachers at the center are experienced instructors dispatched from China, and they use the "Practical Chinese Coursebook" as the primary teaching material.

4.Confucius Institute

The Confucius Institute at the University of Mauritius was

founded through a collaboration between Zhejiang Sci-Tech University and the University of Mauritius, officially inaugurated in December 2016. It has injected fresh vitality into Chinese language education in Mauritius. The Confucius Institute offers a relatively extensive range of courses compared to other schools. It provides various types of classes, including classes for faculty, students, Chinese-Mauritian students, and children. Moreover, the curriculum is diverse, encompassing not only traditional language instruction but also Chinese cultural experience courses such as calligraphy, Tai Chi, and painting. The teachers at the Confucius Institute are Chinese volunteers and official Chinese teachers dispatched by the Sino-Foreign Language Exchange and Cooperation Center. The teaching materials used include "HSK Standard Course," "New Practical Chinese Coursebook," and "Happy Chinese," among others.

5.Local Primary and Secondary Schools Offering Chinese Courses

The Ministry of Education in Mauritius has entered into a cooperation agreement with the Ministry of Education in China to introduce Chinese language classes in selected primary and secondary schools. Chinese language teachers are provided by China for these classes. This type of Chinese language instruction primarily targets local primary and secondary school students. These students typically have no prior knowledge of Chinese and take Chinese as a second language elective course. However, the prevalence of these courses is relatively low. Among the more than 270 primary schools in Mauritius, only 26 offer Chinese courses, and among the 68 secondary schools, only 15 do so. The students' proficiency levels vary, and the content taught is relatively basic. Teachers for these classes are volunteers dispatched by the Sino-Foreign Language Exchange and Cooperation Center.

3. Survey of Chinese Language Learning Among the New Generation of Chinese-Mauritian Children

The survey participants consist of 12 students from the Chinese-Mauritian children's class at the Confucius Institute in Mauritius. The author will employ interview methods and classroom observation to analyze the participants' personal characteristics, language abilities, pathways to acquiring Chinese, and motivations for learning Chinese.

1. Personal Characteristics

The 12 participants in the survey are students from the Chinese-Mauritian children's class at the Confucius Institute in Mauritius. The following are the key personal characteristics of these participants:

Background: All 12 participants are part of the new generation of Chinese-Mauritian children. They were born and raised in Mauritius.

Gender: Among the participants, 9 are male, and 3 are female.

Parental Ethnicity: 8 of the participants have both parents of Chinese ethnicity, constituting 67% of the group. The remaining 4 participants have one Chinese parent, making up 33%.

Nationality: Two of the participants maintain Chinese nationality, while the others hold Mauritian nationality or other foreign nationalities.

Language Environment: Mauritius is a multilingual country, and these participants are exposed to a linguistically diverse environment. They have the opportunity to learn and use multiple languages, including English, French, Creole, and Chinese, in their daily lives.

School Attendance: The participants attend different schools in Mauritius, and this diversity in school environments may influence their language acquisition and learning experiences.

Table 1. Schools Attended

School Type	Number of Students
Private English School	3
Public French School (with Chinese classes)	2
Public French School (without Chinese classes)	7
Total	12

2. Main Pathways for Chinese Language Input and Output

Due to the diversity of their environment, the surveyed individuals need to communicate in various languages in different social situations. Exploring when they use Chinese for communication and the frequency of its use provides valuable insights into their Chinese language learning patterns. Through inquiries with the respondents, the author identified four common settings where Chinese language is used by all participants: home, school, Chinese language supplementary classes, and social circles. The table below illustrates the frequency of Chinese language use in different social settings:

Table 2. Frequency of Chinese Language Use in Different Settings

	Always	Most of the Time	Occasionally	Never
Home	17%	41%	17%	25%
School	0%	8%	17%	75%
Supplementary Classes	25%	58%	17%	0%
Social Circles	8%	33%	25%	34%

From Table 2, it is evident that most students have opportunities to use Chinese at home. Two students (17%) consistently use Chinese at home, and both share a common trait: both of their parents are Chinese, and they are only children. This indicates that there is no other language environment at home, making it the best time for them to practice Chinese. Additionally, five students (41%) mostly use Chinese at home, and two students (17%) use it occasionally. Among these seven students, six have parents who are both Chinese, and one has a Chinese mother. They all have siblings and typically communicate with their parents in Chinese at home. Siblings, on the other hand, use the local language and occasionally use Chinese. The difference in the frequency of Chinese language use at home primarily depends on the extent of communication with their parents.

Lastly, three students (25%) never use Chinese at home. All three come from families where only one parent is Chinese. To ensure smooth communication within the family, they all use the local language and do not use Chinese.

These observations highlight the influence of family dynamics and language environment on the frequency of Chinese language use at home.

In the school setting, aside from the 2 students attending schools with Chinese classes and another student with

Chinese friends who mostly or occasionally use Chinese at school, the remaining students do not have opportunities to use Chinese at school.

However, in Chinese language supplementary classes, students who consistently or most of the time use Chinese are those who have received good Chinese language training in their home environment. Due to teacher inquiries and classroom requirements, everyone is required to respond in Chinese. Therefore, there are no students who never use Chinese in the supplementary classes.

Lastly, in terms of the students' social circles, those who consistently or most of the time use Chinese tend to have Chinese social circles. Their parents might be colleagues at the same Chinese company or neighbors, which to some extent influences their social circles. On the other hand, students who occasionally or never use Chinese in their social circles tend to have local friends. Their parents are often employed in local companies, making them more integrated into the local community.

From this, it is evident that in their daily lives, the family and Chinese language schools are the most conducive places for language learning. Most students receive ample language input and practice in these two settings. Based on the statistical data from the school environment, students who excel in Chinese language output at school have received substantial language training in their home environment. Therefore, the family environment is the most crucial place for Chinese language training for Chinese-Mauritian children. It indirectly affects their ability to use Chinese in other settings. Additionally, the family environment can also have an impact on the children's social circles, which, in turn, influences their language learning. Besides the frequency of language use, the homogeneity of the language environment at home is another influencing factor. Students in a monolingual language environment tend to use Chinese much more frequently than those with a multilingual environment.

4. Motivations for Learning Chinese

4.1. Profound Cultural Identity and Mother Tongue Affection from Parents

The parents of the new generation of Chinese-Mauritians were born and raised in China, and they strongly identify with Chinese culture and their own Chinese ethnicity. They believe that their descendants are also Chinese and should inherit these cultural ties and connections. This sentiment is very similar to that of the earliest Chinese immigrants. During the interviews, all students expressed variations of the following sentiment: "I didn't know why I had to learn Chinese at first, but my mom/dad said I'm Chinese, so I have to learn it."

4.2. Cultural and Identity Affirmation

Due to the influence and guidance of their parents, even though they are in a foreign country, these children gradually develop a sense of "I am Chinese." They begin to identify with their Chinese heritage and embrace the Chinese language and culture. Language serves as a marker of ethnicity, a crucial component of cultural identity, and a symbol of group identity. Therefore, a shared language within an ethnic group is a vital part of ethnic identity. It directly impacts the development of self-confidence, the formation of a healthy personality, and an increase in happiness among the younger generation during their integration into the ethnic group (Cho, 2000; Tse, 2001).

4.3. Kinship Motivation

In the surveyed group, there is no phenomenon of the entire family immigrating together. Most relatives, aside from their parents, remain in China. These children need a common language to facilitate communication within their extended families. Whether or not they share a common language has a significant impact on the students' sense of family integration. For many students, especially those whose parents are of mixed ethnicity, there is a noticeable negative emotional response when other family members communicate in Chinese. This desire to integrate into their family lineage motivates them to excel in Chinese. Kinship motivation is a new type of motivation that has emerged in modern society, especially after the development of the internet and communication devices. Early Chinese immigrants often had limited family communication due to the lack of advanced communication tools, and it was typically confined to the immediate family.

5. Current Issues in Chinese Language Teaching

1.Only emphasis on Communication Skills Due to Motivational Factors

From the three identified motivational factors, it is evident that both students and parents primarily focus on whether students can communicate in Chinese. This emphasis has led to the neglect of reading and writing skills in non-Chinese language environments. This phenomenon is not unique and is a common characteristic among global Chinese communities learning Chinese. Furthermore, this utilitarian motivation tends to limit the development of literary skills, as the acquired knowledge is often confined to daily communication. In the early stages of Chinese language learning, practicality and interest can be effective in sparking learning enthusiasm. However, for older students who already have a certain level of Chinese language proficiency but continue to study communicative texts, this approach can hinder their progress. Implementing more advanced Chinese language teaching in a timely manner is more conducive to helping students discover the beauty of the Chinese language, cultivating literary skills, and nurturing their emotional development.

2.Issues with Curriculum Design

As mentioned earlier, Mauritius has numerous Chinese language teaching institutions, each with its own timeline, objectives, and motivations for teaching Chinese. These institutions have their own teaching staff and materials, and they often operate independently. There is limited collaboration and exchange of resources among these schools. This has led to a fragmented approach to Chinese language education in Mauritius, rather than a cohesive and integrated system.

Additionally, the grouping of students into classes is not always finely tuned, and students with vastly different proficiency levels are often placed in the same class. For example, among the 12 Chinese-Mauritian students you mentioned, there was a significant variation in vocabulary proficiency, with a maximum difference of 220 words. This issue is partly due to the limited number of Chinese-Mauritian students and teachers available, making it difficult to implement more refined class placement. The gap in proficiency levels also stems from differences in family education backgrounds.

3.Issues at the Teacher Level

Currently, Mauritius lacks a long-term, professional, collaborative, and efficient team of Chinese language teachers. In the earlier years, Chinese language teachers were often individuals who had married into the Chinese-Mauritian community or locals who could speak Chinese. Only a few of them had received formal training in language teaching, and most did not possess specialized knowledge in Chinese language teaching, education, or linguistic theory.

In recent years, efforts have been made to address this issue and enhance the professionalism of the teaching team. The Chinese Language Council International (Hanban) has been dispatching Chinese language teacher volunteers and sponsored teachers to provide support. These teachers typically have backgrounds in language teaching and possess some level of professional knowledge. However, there is a high turnover rate among these dispatched teachers, which creates instability. Most of them can only teach in Mauritius for 1-2 years, which is not conducive to the long-term development of Chinese language learning for students.

6. Strategies and Recommendations for Addressing Current Chinese Language Learning Issues

1. Change Parents' Perceptions of Chinese Language Learning

Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are the four essential components of language learning, and they complement each other. Parents' utilitarian motivation for Chinese language learning often influences the balanced development of their children's language skills. Parents should first recognize the importance of coordinating the development of these four language skills. This awareness is crucial for creating a healthy and balanced language learning environment for children during the critical period of language development between the ages of 2 and 6.

2. Improving the Curriculum System and Enhancing Cultural and Literary Proficiency for Higher-Grade Students

Currently, there is a shortage of Chinese language learning materials in Mauritius, and the existing materials tend to be relatively monotonous in format and lack specificity, making it challenging to meet the diverse Chinese language learning needs of students of all age groups. Therefore, as students' Chinese language proficiency continues to improve, Chinese language education should move beyond the confines of purely communicative materials and gradually introduce content related to culture and literature. This approach aims to cultivate literary skills on the foundation of communicative competence. While maintaining the continuity of teaching materials, schools should also enhance their overall quality and move towards long-term development. Combining this with the local context, it is essential to establish reasonable curriculum structures, effective teaching management, and detailed standards to ensure that Chinese schools or Chinese language classrooms have a clear path for long-term development.

3. Foster more local Chinese language teachers and overseas volunteers from the local community

To address the issue of high turnover and instability among Chinese language teachers, there should be a strong focus on developing local Chinese language teachers and recruiting overseas volunteers from the local community. Many of these individuals may have previously studied in China and are returning to engage in Chinese language education or are Chinese nationals studying or residing in the local area. These teachers not only possess expertise in Chinese language instruction but are also more stable, given their local residence, compared to foreign-deployed teachers. This approach is conducive to the long-term development of students and schools. For teachers who have been working at Chinese language teaching centers established in earlier years, additional training in theoretical knowledge should be provided to better integrate their teaching experience with professional theories, maximizing their effectiveness.

7. Conclusion

From the late 20th century to today, Chinese language education in Mauritius has evolved from initially scattered, non-professional teaching by teachers with experience to a relatively systematic and professionally oriented approach. This is already a significant progress and improvement. However, in the context of the rapidly changing world, Chinese language learning is no longer limited to simple communication. Whether for the ethnic Chinese community or local Chinese language enthusiasts, there is a growing need for a more systematic, comprehensive, and in-depth Chinese language education system. Local Chinese language education in Mauritius still requires further practical exploration and development to achieve better and faster progress.

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