Reports

Communication, Language and Identity — Attitudes toward Preserving Children’s Linguistic Identity in the UK among Parents from Mainland China

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Introduction

Chinese communities have existed in several European countries for most of the twentieth century. They are among Europe’s oldest immigrant communities, and are now, according to Benton (1998: vii), among the biggest and, economically, the most powerful in several countries.

Britain is one of the countries that have hosted the largest Chinese communities in Europe. Due to historical reasons, up to about 20 years ago, Britain’s Chinese community was dominated by Hong Kong, Singaporean and Malaysian Chinese to the almost total exclusion of other Chinese groups (Pieke 1998: 8). However, the last 20 years or so have witnessed a different trend of Chinese migration in Europe (Benton and Pieke 1998; Nyiri 1999), including Britain. With the onset of reforms in Mainland China in 1978 and the liberalization of the emigration law of 1985, the Chinese government’s strict control over population mobility that had been put in place since the mid-1950s was relaxed significantly. By the mid-1990s, administrative measures had ceased to effectively restrict both the internal and international movement of the Chinese. On the other hand, as Mette Thunø argues in a recent paper, the Chinese government has been positioning to free itself from the straightjacket of its own overseas Chinese policies (Thunø 2000). The increased attention given to “new migrants” in the media and official documents signals the beginning of a much broader approach to emigration and

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Emigration from the PRC (People’s Republic of China) has thus experienced a boom since the beginning of the gaige kaifang ("reform and opening-up"), which accelerated in the 1990s. Initially headed mainly to North America and Australia, students, business people and redundant urban workers currently make their way to Europe in increasing numbers. The composition of the Chinese community in Europe is therefore changing. One noticeable group of migrants is made up of students and scholars who started to go abroad in significant numbers from 1978 and settled abroad after the 1989 crackdown in Tiananmen Square (Nyiri 1999: 29). As Pieke points out, “the trickle of students and professionals heading for jobs in Hong Kong or graduate programs in the West (mainly the United States) and Japan in the 1970s quickly swelled to a torrent during the ‘leave China fever’ of the late 1980s. This massive outflow of people does not yet show much sign of abating, especially after the disillusionment and cynicism about China’s future caused by the brutal suppression of the 1989 protest movement.” People migrate in search of better economic opportunities (or more specifically, a more favorable ratio of economic opportunities to the number of people competing for them) on the one hand and greater anonymity and individual freedom from social control on the other (Nyiri 1999: 29).

The group of migrants this article investigates differs from earlier Chinese migrants. A large number of earlier migrants went to Europe to join relatives or acquaintances who had established a foothold in the host countries. They had little choice upon arrival apart from perhaps working for 20 years in a restaurant before opening a small restaurant of their own. The latter migrants, on the other hand, have normally received higher education in Mainland China, and come from localities without a strong tradition of migration. They arrive as students or exchange scholars, and as such have a greater chance of upward mobility in the new environment. Although they “by and large distance themselves from Cantonese-speaking groups by sticking to Mandarin,” in one way or another they are also involved with members of the overseas Chinese communities, such as participating in cultural events and working in or doing business with overseas Chinese enterprises (Nyiri 1999: 44).

In this report, the terms “Chinese migrants” and “professional migrants” are used to refer to this particular group.

**Rationale for this Study**

As Mainland China re-emerges as a great power in the economic and, increasingly, political and military spheres, a reorientation in the overseas Chinese communities