

Article

Putonghua or fangyan? Family Language Policy and Heritage Language Transmission in Chinese Migrant Families in Italy

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Abstract

This article examines heritage language transmission within Chinese migrant families in Italy, focussing on the role of Family Language Policy and the interplay between standard (*Putonghua*) and non-standard local varieties (*fangyan*). Drawing on semi-structured interviews with six families and the primary school teachers of their children (aged 6–8), the study adopts a multi-perspective design to explore how reported language practices, beliefs, and attitudes interact across family and school domains. Findings indicate a predominant shift towards Putonghua as the primary heritage language, often at the expense of fangyan, which tends to be marginalised by parents or reported as being retained only as passive competence among children. This shift reflects practical considerations and evaluative orientations related to prestige, usefulness, and standardisation. Variation across families shows that alternative orientations persist, with one family valuing fangyan for intergenerational continuity. Teachers' perspectives further suggest a limited awareness of internal linguistic diversity within the student population. The convergence of family-driven shifts and school-based perceptions may contribute to processes of increasing standardisation in the representation and transmission of heritage varieties. This article contributes to research on heritage language maintenance by offering contextually situated insights into how the interplay between social actors and contextual factors may shape linguistic diversity within diasporic communities.

Keywords: family language policy; heritage language; Chinese diaspora; Italy; Putonghua; fangyan

1. Introduction

This article explores intergenerational linguistic transmission within the Chinese diaspora in Italy. More specifically, it aims to draw attention to the linguistic varieties, standard or non-standard, on which diasporic families' choices and practices tend to focus in their daily lives, in order to identify some of the factors that may influence second-generation children's maintenance of their heritage language(s).

According to data provided by the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies ([Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2025](#)), global migration from the People's Republic of China (PRC, henceforth) has increased by 69% over the last two decades, rising from over 6.8 million in 2005 to over 11.7 million in 2024, accounting for approximately 0.8% of the Chinese population (i.e., people holding Chinese citizenship). Primary destinations remain concentrated in North America and Asia: the United States hosts approximately 21% of Chinese migrants, followed by Canada (12%) and Japan (7%), while Australia and New Zealand together represent another significant share (approximately 7%).



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Within Europe, Italy has been a key destination since the early twentieth century (Brigadoi Cologna, 2017), and it currently hosts approximately 2% of the global Chinese migrant population. More specifically, among the more than 5,300,000 foreign citizens (i.e., individuals without Italian citizenship) residing in Italy, the Chinese community is the fourth-largest, after the Romanian, Albanian and Moroccan communities. It is predominantly located in northern Italy, particularly in the regions of Lombardy (24.8%), Veneto (12.4%) and Emilia-Romagna (9.6%), as well as in central Italy, especially in the region of Tuscany (18.7%). The community exhibits a near-perfect gender balance (49.4% men and 50.6% women), with a relatively young age profile and an average age of 34. In particular, minors account for 19.3% of the total population. Among them, according to the national report on foreign minor-aged students (Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito, 2024), almost nine out of ten (89.5%) belong to the second-generation population (i.e., individuals born in the host country to foreign-born parents, as defined by Rumbaut, 2004).

These data reflect a common characteristic of many Chinese diasporic communities, which have historically been organised around family units, and represent an important indicator of their stability within the Italian social context. Currently, Chinese families in Italy include at least two generations: while most adults belong to the first generation of migrants (i.e., born and raised in China), there is a growing presence of second-generation individuals, with a third generation in its early stages. This situation entails intergenerational, cultural, and linguistic challenges: while the first generation often remains strongly rooted in a Chinese identity, younger generations navigate ongoing processes of identity construction, not yet fully detached from their origins, while also engaging with complex dynamics of self-identification (Brigadoi Cologna, 2017).

In this regard, the Italian context offers a particularly relevant case study for investigating heritage language (HL, henceforth) maintenance—assuming Rothman's (2009, p. 156) definition of HL as “a language spoken at home or otherwise readily available to young children, and crucially this language is not a dominant language of the larger (national) society”, without implying anything with regard to level of competence or acquisition outcomes (Kupisch & Rothman, 2018). However, the Italian context has only recently received attention in research on HLs and their speakers with a migrant background (e.g., Abdelsayed & Bellinzona, 2024; Cocchi & Pierantozzi, 2024; Moro & Russo, 2025), and studies specifically focussing on Chinese heritage language speakers remain limited (e.g., Borghetti & Li, 2023; Paciocco, 2018, 2021), while studies and reflections on younger individuals of Chinese descent have mainly been conducted within sociological, ethno-anthropological, and educational frameworks (e.g., Brigadoi Cologna, 2020; Ceccagno, 2004; Costantini, 2023; Pedone, 2008; Scolaro, 2025; Rizzuto, 2025).

In order to contribute to this field, this study involves children of Chinese descent aged six to eight. For each child, key agents from the main domains of their daily social network—namely, the family and school contexts—were also involved. All participants are based in the Metropolitan City of Bologna, in the region of Emilia-Romagna, which remains a relatively under-researched area. According to regional statistical data (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2024, 2025), Chinese nationals—the fifth-largest foreign group in the region—account for 5.2% of foreign residents (over 29,000 individuals) and are characterised by a high level of entrepreneurship, especially in the retail, textile, and restaurant sectors. Bologna Province hosts the largest Chinese population in the region, with more than 4000 officially registered Chinese residents living in the municipality of Bologna.

Drawing on the theoretical framework of Family Language Policy (hereinafter FLP), the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of second-generation children's language choices and practices, with particular attention to the roles of parents and teachers in

shaping their linguistic environment and experiences (Curd-Christiansen, 2022; Schwartz & Verschik, 2013).

In the following sections, the theoretical framework of FLP in migration contexts is outlined (Section 2.1), followed by a brief overview of the sociolinguistic context of the Chinese diasporic communities in Italy (Section 2.2), both of which serve to introduce the present study (Section 2.3). Particular attention is then paid to the description of the participants (Section 3.1) and to the methodology of data collection (Section 3.2) and analysis (Section 3.3). After presenting selected significant results through excerpts from parents' and teachers' interviews (Section 4), the article concludes by raising reflections on what kind of "heritage" diasporic families may choose to transmit, and on what this may imply for the survival of original polyglossia of the first generations (Section 5).

2. Theoretical and Contextual Frameworks

2.1. Family Language Policy in the Context of Migration

Multilingual families with a migration background often experience multiple levels of pressure on their daily language planning, choices and practices. On the one hand, there is pressure from the broader external society, in both its human and institutional components, represented, for example, by language ideologies regarding status and value, as well as by socio-economic, socio-political, and educational realities. On the other hand, there is pressure from internal factors, such as identity- and culture-related aspects, as well as parents' own beliefs and aspirations regarding whether and how family languages should be maintained and transmitted to younger generations (Curd-Christiansen, 2013; Curdt-Christiansen & Huang, 2020; Curdt-Christiansen & La Morgia, 2018; Lanza & Gomes, 2020). An influential mechanism through which these external and internal pressures interact is standard language ideology, which refers to the societal belief that one standardised variety constitutes the most prestigious, correct, and socially valuable form of a language, in opposition to its non-standard varieties (Milroy & Milroy, 1985). This perspective can, therefore, shape parental evaluations of different linguistic varieties and influence decisions regarding family language maintenance and intergenerational transmission.

In this regard, Spolsky (2012) considers families to be a crucial factor in shaping children's linguistic environment, as well as in influencing the way and pace at which language shift occurs, understood as the disruption of natural intergenerational transmission of home languages, which is often recognised as the key marker of language loss at the community level. Home, in fact, represents one of the main societal domains—alongside school, work, government, and church—which govern language choices and uses, and where they can be observed in order to explain interactions between micro- and macro-levels of sociolinguistics interests (Fishman, 1972). Specifically, in multilingual contexts, it represents a key domain for the intergenerational transmission of minority and heritage languages, particularly in contexts where opportunities for use in public domains are reduced. Accordingly, King and Curdt-Christiansen (2021, p. 94) state that Family Language Policy—defined not only as explicit and overt, but also as implicit and covert ways in which family members plan, negotiate, and manage language use within the home and across family interactions (Curd-Christiansen, 2009; King et al., 2008)—“has important implications for policymakers at macro (national), meso (educational), and micro (family) levels, as it not only concerns explicit and deliberate language planning, but also meaning-making and language-mediated experiences in families”.

Investigating this multifaceted domain in which FLP operates also entails recognising the diversity of diasporic family experiences, as well as the variability in perceptions of multilingualism across generations and even among individuals within the same family.

This perspective leads scholars to focus more closely on situated practices, rather than on overall patterns of language maintenance or shift (Zhu & Li, 2016).

To account analytically for this complexity, a well-established methodological approach to the study of FLP, and the one adopted in the present study, is that proposed by Spolsky (2004, p. 5), which is based on three interrelated components: (1) *language practices*, defined as “the habitual pattern of selecting among the varieties that make up the linguistic repertoire”; (2) *language beliefs* “about language and language use”; and (3) *language management*, understood as “any specific efforts to modify or influence practice by any kind of language intervention or planning”.

In-depth interviews make it possible to investigate these aspects, with the aim of gaining deeper insight into family interactions, as well as parental decisions regarding children’s language education. However, parents are not the only influential figures within family language policy processes. Research has increasingly highlighted the role of children as active participants in family language practices, as well as the influence of schools and communities on children’s linguistic and identity development (Curdtt-Christiansen & Sun, 2022; Schwartz & Verschik, 2013; Smith-Christmas, 2020; Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009).

For this reason, over the past two decades, empirical research has increasingly emphasised that families should not be seen as static or homogeneous units. Rather, they are dynamic spaces shaped by broader social forces. As a result, the study of FLP has expanded beyond a sole focus on parents to consider the perspective of multiple social actors involved in children’s linguistic environments, including children themselves, educators, and community members (Lanza & Svendsen, 2007; Palviainen, 2020). Such an approach can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how FLP operates across different social domains and relationships, and of the linguistic and non-linguistic phenomena related to it.

This broader perspective is particularly relevant when studying children in early schooling, whose linguistic experiences are shaped simultaneously by family and school settings. It becomes even more relevant when FLP research focuses on second-generation children in migration contexts and on the role of heritage language maintenance practices in their linguistic and identity development (Paciocco, 2021; Shen & Jiang, 2021; Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009).

2.2. Language Repertoires Within the Chinese Diaspora in Italy

While the previous section discussed FLP in migration contexts more broadly, understanding language transmission within Chinese families in Italy requires attention to the specific sociolinguistic characteristics of this diaspora.

It is worth noting that, when national statistical data are used to describe the presence of migrant communities in Italy (see Section 1), the prevailing approach tends to adopt a sociodemographic lens strictly tied to the citizenship-based dichotomy ‘Italians vs. foreigners’. However, this perspective fails to capture crucial aspects related to the defining parameters of ‘foreignness’ and the nuanced ways in which this ‘otherness’ is constructed and represented within a given national context. A significant limitation of macro-level datasets lies in their inability to account for the internal complexity and heterogeneity inherent in migrant communities. These populations are frequently conceptualised as monolithic entities, with the implicit assumption that members share uniform characteristics based solely on a single national origin—even though this is rarely the case. As Canagarajah and Silberstein (2012, p. 82) observe: “Diaspora has to be treated as a ‘community’ that embodies difference, not similarity. This does not mean that there is no affinity

or solidarity among people with a common heritage. But this sense of ‘community’ too has to be achieved [and negotiated] situationally through language”.

The Chinese diaspora illustrates how such internal diversity cannot be adequately captured by broad categories, which tend instead to overlook the complex reality of diverse regional origins and fragmented linguistic repertoires, as well as their connections to linguistic, cultural or identity-related heritage.

The Chinese diaspora, in fact, is characterised by marked geo-dialectal diversity. Understanding the linguistic diversity of the Chinese diaspora in Italy requires considering its migration history. Historically, the southern coastal Zhejiang province has been the most important source of migration from the PRC to Europe and, with regard to Italy, the primary origin of the largest Chinese group in the country. As early as the late nineteenth century, merchants from this region established the first communities through trade and intermarriage. In Italy, the earliest settlements developed in the city of Milan. Following World War II, a second major wave of migration in the 1980s consolidated Zhejiang as the dominant area of origin for the Chinese diaspora in Italy—especially from Qingtian County and from Wencheng and Rui’an Counties in the inland region of Wenzhou City. These flows were later joined in the 1990s by migrants from Fujian province, as well as smaller groups from northeastern regions of the PRC, such as the provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, Heilongjiang, and Shandong (Brigadoi Cologna, 2003; Ceccagno, 2003; Chang, 2012).

Despite the strong predominance of migrants from Zhejiang, the overall configuration of the community still reflects diverse origins—not only at the inter-regional level, but also within Zhejiang itself—which entail significant linguistic implications. In fact, while the term ‘Chinese’ is commonly used to refer to Modern Standard Chinese (also known as ‘Mandarin Chinese’ or ‘Putonghua’, literally meaning ‘common language’), which is the official national language and the outcome of a twentieth-century standardisation process aimed at national unity in a linguistically fragmented country, the linguistic landscape of mainland China remains highly diverse. It is composed of numerous fangyan (local varieties), which are conventionally grouped into ten macro-groups, each encompassing a wide range of distinct varieties.

The varieties most frequently encountered in Italy belong to the Wu and Min macro-groups, respectively associated with people from Zhejiang and Fujian. The former is typically divided into six groups, while the latter comprises eight. Although these varieties are not officially recognised with the status of ‘languages’ but rather as ‘dialects’, they function as distinct sister languages and are largely mutually unintelligible—even within the same macro-group (Arcodia & Basciano, 2020; Ceccagno, 2001; Pedone, 2006). Without engaging in the linguistic debate on this issue or adopting any political stance, the term ‘dialect’ is also used throughout this paper to refer to fangyan, as a general and widely accepted label for non-standard varieties.

For first-generation migrants who arrived before 2000, these local varieties often constituted their ‘mother tongue’, with Putonghua functioning as a lingua franca in formal contexts or as a means of communication among speakers from different regions. Studies on the second generation who were young at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Ceccagno, 2001, 2004; Pedone, 2006) show that local varieties still played a significant role in daily use, often more than Putonghua, whose identity value remained relatively limited.

However, more recent research on younger generations (Brigadoi Cologna, 2023; Rizzuto, 2022) reveals a marked shift towards Putonghua, both in terms of preference and prevalence in daily use, often at the expense of family heritage varieties, for which they may have only passive competence or none at all. Several factors may explain this shift. These include the growing availability of Chinese Heritage Language Schools (Pellin, 2025) as forms of complementary informal language education, where the variety promoted as

the ‘heritage’ language is Putonghua, as well as the increasing use of digital technologies and social media, where Putonghua again serves as the main language of communication (Brigadoi Cologna, 2023). Beyond these structural factors, language maintenance and shift can also be interpreted through the framework of ethnolinguistic vitality theory (Giles et al., 1977)—which offers a useful perspective for interpreting speakers’ evaluations of different Chinese varieties. In particular, it highlights how speakers’ evaluations may be influenced by perceptions of the prestige of the ethnolinguistic group and the variety spoken, as well as varieties’ long-term viability, institutional support for them, and the demographic strength of the group within the territory.

Consequently, familial linguistic repertoires emerge as heterogeneous, yet fragmented, systems shaped by generational differences (Arcodia & Basciano, 2020) in experiences, habits, and attitudes. This raises a crucial question for FLP research: which specific variety of ‘Chinese’ is actually being transmitted and maintained within these households? Drawing on empirical data from first-hand accounts provided by the family involved, the present study seeks to offer insights into this question and to contribute to the interpretation of current dynamics within Chinese families in the Italian social context.

2.3. The Present Study

The study was conducted during the 2021/2022 school year in the first- and second-grade classes of two Italian public primary schools located in highly multicultural areas of Bologna (Emilia-Romagna). Its broader aim was to explore early school-aged second-generation children’s multilingual repertoires, their language use across everyday contexts, and the factors shaping these practices.

These factors are not solely attributable to children’s choices but rather to a broader network of influences. In fact, during early schooling, children’s linguistic, cognitive, and social development does not occur only through everyday experiences; rather, it is significantly shaped by the choices, practices, and beliefs of key external actors within their social network—most notably family members and school actors, who represent the primary contexts in which children spend their time and consequently shape their linguistic environment (Schwartz, 2010). For this reason, and in response to the growing need in FLP research to move beyond a sole focus on parents and pay greater attention to the interplay between family and school domains in shaping children’s linguistic practices, one parent and one teacher were involved for each child.

Three research questions guided the broader study: (1) how children use and perceive the different languages within their multilingual repertoires; (2) what attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions parents hold regarding their children’s multilingualism; and (3) what attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions teachers hold regarding their students’ multilingualism. While the broader study addressed all three research questions, the present article focusses on one specific theme that emerged consistently across the dataset, namely the perceived shift from Chinese dialects to Putonghua in the intergenerational transmission of heritage language within Chinese families in Italy. Rather than addressing each research question separately, this article focusses on this theme as it emerged across the dataset through the triangulation of multiple perspectives. However, this theme was addressed more explicitly by adult participants, whose accounts therefore constitute the primary source of the excerpts presented in the findings section.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Children were selected based on the following two socio-biographic criteria: (a) both parents were required to be born in China, and (b) the children were required to have

spent most of their lives in Italy without interruptions, regardless of whether they were born in Italy or not. These two criteria made it possible to focus on a specific configuration of transnational families in which both parents share the same country of origin, while at the same time allowing for variation in children’s individual biographies.

From the list of all students of Chinese origin enrolled in the first- and second-grade classes, those who met the selected criteria were identified, and consent forms were distributed to their families. A total of six families agreed to participate, and their children were therefore included in the study. All of them were born in Italy to Chinese-born parents. Table 1 presents the main biographical data, compiled through the triangulation of information provided by children, parents, and teachers. Children are identified by pseudonyms, which reflect the presence of either an Italian or a Chinese given name.

Table 1. Biographical data of children.

Child (Female or Male)	Place of Birth	Age (at Time of Interview)	Nursery School Attendance (Ages 0–3)	Pre-Primary School Attendance (Ages 3–6)	Chinese Heritage Language School Attendance
Zhen (M)	Italy	6	No	Yes, for one year (at age 3)	Not yet (planned enrolment)
An (F)	Italy	7	No	Yes, for two years (at ages 3 and 4)	Not yet (planned enrolment)
Ju (F)	Italy	7	No	Yes, intermittently for a few months	Yes, just started
Yang (M)	Italy	7	No	Yes, for three years	Yes, just started
Aurora (F)	Italy	8	No	Yes, for three years	No
Shu (F)	Italy	8	No	Yes, first year in China, then two years in Italy	Not yet (planned enrolment)

For each child, one parent was also involved, with families free to choose which parent would participate. Five parents agreed to participate immediately, while one mother initially expressed reluctance, as she perceived her own educational and life experience as insufficiently relevant to the purposes of the study. Table 2 presents the main biographical data of the parents, using pseudonyms for all participants.

Table 2. Biographical data of parents.

Parent	Year and Place of Birth	Year of Arrival in Italy (Length of Stay)	Current Occupation	Italian Language Courses Attendance
Wu (Zhen’s mother)	1984, Zhejiang Province (PRC)	2010 (12 years)	Homemaker	Yes, for a few months upon arrival in Italy
Qin (An’s mother)	1987, Qingtian County (Zhejiang Province, PRC)	2003 (19 years)	Self-employed (restaurant owner)	Yes, for some years of secondary school upon arrival in Italy
Zhu (Ju’s mother)	1995, Qingtian County (Zhejiang Province, PRC)	2010 (12 years)	Self-employed (retail sector)	Yes, for some years of secondary school upon arrival in Italy

Table 2. *Cont.*

Parent	Year and Place of Birth	Year of Arrival in Italy (Length of Stay)	Current Occupation	Italian Language Courses Attendance
Chen (Yang's mother)	1989, Fujian Province (PRC)	2012 (10 years)	Self-employed (hairdresser)	No
Zheng (Aurora's father)	1978, Rui'an County (Zhejiang Province, PRC)	2012 (10 years)	Self-employed (hairdresser)	No
Huang (Shu's mother)	1981, Qingtian County (Zhejiang Province, PRC)	2008 (14 years)	Factory worker (textile sector)	No

Finally, one teacher per child was also involved. In this case, the only requirement was that the teacher had maintained an uninterrupted relationship with the student, in order to ensure a high degree of familiarity with the child's biography and family, as well as with the child's behaviour and habits at school.

The sample is based on six focal child cases, each also examined through the perspective of one parent and one teacher, resulting in a total of eighteen participants. This multi-perspective design allows for the triangulation of data and a richer understanding of the reported phenomena under investigation. While the number of focal cases is limited, the study aims to provide in-depth qualitative insights rather than achieve statistical representativeness, in line with its exploratory nature.

3.2. Data Collection

The study was conducted through semi-structured interviews, designed and adapted for a network of participants belonging to different social categories. This choice was informed by a social-network perspective (Borgatti & Ofem, 2010), which emphasises the importance of examining social phenomena through the relationships connecting different actors. Rather than focussing on isolated individuals, this perspective highlights how language practices and beliefs emerge within a broader social environment shaped by interactions among family members, children, and school actors. Accordingly, the study adopted a multi-perspective design involving participants occupying different positions within children's social networks.

The interview protocol was specifically developed for the purpose of this study. Although different interview guides were designed for each participant group, they all shared a common structure based on the three components of the FLP research model proposed by Spolsky (2004): language practices, language beliefs, and language management (see Section 2.1). These components were adapted to each group through differentiated yet coherent sets of questions.¹

The location, language, and length of the interviews varied across participant groups. Interviews with children and teachers were conducted within school settings, whereas interviews with parents took place in a range of contexts, including workplaces, public parks, and cafés. With regard to language choice, in order to facilitate participants' expression and minimise linguistic barriers—and given the researcher's competence in both Italian and Putonghua—participants were free to use the language in which they felt most comfortable. As a result, teachers were interviewed in Italian, parents in Putonghua, and children primarily in Putonghua, with occasional instances of code-switching into Italian.

Interviews lasted approximately 20 to 60 min—depending on the participant, with shorter sessions for children and longer ones for adults—and were audio-recorded.

It is also important to acknowledge that the researcher's identity—as a second-generation young adult of Chinese descent—may have played an important role in the interactions with participants. On the one hand, both children and parents may have implicitly perceived a sense of proximity or shared belonging to the same ingroup, shaped by both physical appearance and biographical background, which may have facilitated openness in discussing interview topics. On the other hand, teachers may have perceived the researcher as a more accessible interlocutor for addressing uncertainties and challenges related to students of Chinese descent and the communities to which they belong. It is not by chance that the decision to focus on this specific diasporic context was also partly informed by teachers' expressed interest in gaining a deeper understanding of Chinese communities in Italy. These communities are often perceived as both well-established within Italian society and, at the same time, relatively closed to external interaction—a perception that may hinder the development of collaborative relationships between schools and families.

3.3. Data Analysis

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed orthographically, without the use of detailed conversation-analytic conventions, as the focus of the analysis was on thematic content rather than on fine-grained interactional features such as pauses, overlaps, or prosody. Pseudonyms (see Tables 1 and 2) are used to identify participants.

The interviews were analysed in the original languages used by participants (Italian and Putonghua). Excerpts selected for publication were subsequently translated into English by the author. The translations aim to remain as faithful as possible to the original meaning while ensuring readability in English.

The analysis of the transcripts was conducted through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using NVivo and was informed by selected principles of Grounded Theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007), particularly the iterative movement between data collection, coding, and conceptual development. As noted by Bryant and Charmaz (2007, p. 1), this approach “encourage[s] researchers' persistent interaction with their data, while remaining constantly involved with their emerging analysis”, thereby allowing “the collected data [to become] progressively more focused and the analysis successively more theoretical”.

Initial descriptive codes were generated inductively from the data and subsequently grouped into broader conceptual categories through iterative comparison across interviews and participant groups. Coding was refined through successive analytical cycles in order to identify recurring patterns and develop the themes discussed in this article. Analytical rigour was supported through iterative coding procedures and the triangulation of data collected from children, parents, and teachers, allowing themes to be examined across different perspectives and social domains.

In this article, the focus is placed specifically on results concerning participants' reported language use, as reconstructed through the perspectives of different social actors involved in children's linguistic environments, particularly parents and teachers. While children's interviews contributed to the broader study and informed the interpretation of reported language practices, the specific theme examined in this article emerged primarily through adult participants' reflections on intergenerational language transmission.

In Section 4, the emerging patterns are illustrated through selected interview excerpts and interpreted primarily through the lens of language attitudes (Garrett, 2010; Santello, 2015), understood as evaluative orientations towards languages—considered not only as abstract systems, but also as social objects, always in relation to speakers, other languages, and specific social environments. These orientations are inherently non-neutral

and multidimensional, encompassing dimensions such as prestige, attractiveness, dynamism, and efficiency, and are therefore closely connected to issues of power, legitimacy, and belonging.

4. Results

During the interviews, both children and parents were asked to indicate the languages used at home. Table 3 summarises the home-language patterns reported by parents and children. The order of participants has been reorganised (see Tables 1 and 2) in order to highlight the emerging patterns more clearly. When not explicitly specified by participants (e.g., ‘*Qingtianhua*’—Qingtian’s fangyan), local varieties are referred to using the general term ‘fangyan’.

Table 3. Languages used in the home domain.

Parent		Languages Used with Children	Child		Languages Used with Parents
Chen (Yang’s mother)	-	Putonghua	Yang	-	Putonghua
Zheng (Aurora’s father)	-	Putonghua	Aurora	-	Putonghua
Zhu (Ju’s mother)	-	Putonghua	Ju	-	Putonghua
Qin (An’s mother)	-	Putonghua	An	-	Putonghua Parents’ fangyan (passive competence only)
Huang (Shu’s mother)	-	Putonghua Qingtianhua (sometimes)	Shu	-	Putonghua Parents’ fangyan (passive competence only)
Wu (Zhen’s mother)	-	fangyan (mainly) Putonghua	Zhen	-	Putonghua Parents’ fangyan (passive competence only)

The patterns reported in Table 3 are based on participants’ accounts during the interviews. Information in the ‘Parent’ columns reflects parents’ descriptions of the languages they use with their children. Information in the ‘Child’ columns reflects children’s own accounts when available; when children did not explicitly discuss language use, the information is based on parental reports. More specifically, children’s interviews generally provided contextual information regarding reported language practices and perceived language competences, rather than extended reflections on the distinction between Putonghua and fangyan, which constitutes the central focus of the present article.

4.1. Children’s Language Use from the Perspective of Parents

As shown in Table 3, three main patterns emerge regarding the languages used by parents when interacting with their children. The most frequent pattern, reported by four out of six parents, consists of the exclusive use of Putonghua. The other two patterns, each represented by one case, involve the use of both Putonghua and fangyan, either as a secondary or as the main language in daily interaction. Tables 4 and 5 present selected excerpts from interviews that illustrate how participants themselves explain these patterns. The standard variety is referred to both through the expression ‘普通话’ *pǔtōnghuà*—translated as ‘Putonghua’, and through the broader term ‘中文’ *zhōngwén*—translated as ‘Chinese’ (e.g., Excerpts 3 and 5).

Table 4. Pattern 1: exclusive use of Putonghua. Excerpts from parents' interviews.

Parent	Excerpt
Chen (Yang's mother)	Excerpt 1. Original 在家，我们基本上都说普通话，不说方言 [...] 我们自己会说方言，但小孩不会，我们也不想教，因为感觉他现在在学的语种已经很多了，不需要别的。方言他基本上也没什么用。普通话在中国已经够用了 [...] 普通话和方言之间，我会选普通话，因为普通话在全中国都可以说，方言你只用在的地方，其他地方用不了。 Excerpt 1. Translated At home, we basically speak Putonghua and not fangyan [...] We can speak fangyan, but our child can't, and we don't want to teach him, because it feels like he's already learning quite a few languages and doesn't need to learn any more. Fangyan is not particularly useful for him anyway. Putonghua is already enough in China [...] Between Putonghua and fangyan, I would choose Putonghua, because it can be spoken all over China, whereas fangyan is only used in one place and can't be used elsewhere.
Zheng (Aurora's father)	Excerpt 2. Original 在家都是普通话，因为她温州话已经听不懂了。再说，现在中国的小孩子已经没说温州话了。可能就是老一辈会说了。还是会消失的 [...] 温州话很多人就是很难听懂。如果只有你一个人会说的话，别人会感觉你很古怪了！所以，我感觉也没必要了，因为在中国也没有人学了方言，为什么要在意大利学呢？ Excerpt 2. Translated At home we only speak Putonghua, because she no longer understands <i>Wenzhouhua</i> [Wenzhou's fangyan]. Besides, children in China nowadays don't speak <i>Wenzhouhua</i> anymore. Probably only the older generation still does. It will eventually disappear [...] <i>Wenzhouhua</i> is very hard for many people to understand. If you're the only one who speaks it, others would find you strange! So, I feel it's unnecessary. Because even in China nobody is learning fangyan anymore, why would you learn it in Italy?
Qin (An's mother)	Excerpt 3. Original 我和我老公会方言。她能听懂，但是不愿意说，因为看电视她接触的都是中文嘛 [...] 我觉得方言也没有很重要。中文比较重要，因为自己是中国人，必须会中国话 [...] 方言呢，现在就是我们青田那边，说的人越来越少了。说也是重要的东西。但是，因为小孩子再接触的话，会比较混，中文发音也会有一点不标准。她现在中文发音还是很标准，就是跟我说的也差不多。如果从小开始讲青田话，她会不一样一点，就会有一点不标准。 Excerpt 3. Translated My husband and I can speak fangyan. She can understand it, but she doesn't want to speak it, because she is mostly exposed to Chinese through television [...] I don't think fangyan is that important. Chinese is important, because we are Chinese—one must be able to speak Chinese [...] As for fangyan, it is only spoken in Qingtian, and fewer and fewer people are using it now. It is also important to be able to speak it, but if a child is exposed to it as well, it may lead to some confusion, and Chinese pronunciation may become less standard. At the moment, her pronunciation is standard—very similar to mine. If she had started speaking Qingtianhua from an early age, it would be a bit different, and her pronunciation would be slightly less standard.

Table 4 presents excerpts illustrating the most frequent pattern, namely the exclusive use of Putonghua. In Excerpt 1, Yang's mother explains this choice in terms of the limited usefulness of local varieties outside their specific regional context in China, thus considering their transmission unnecessary. Similarly, in Excerpt 2, Aurora's father emphasises the perceived decline of fangyan, describing it as close to extinction and lacking value even within China, which further reduces its relevance in the Italian context.

In Excerpt 3, An's mother aligns with these perspectives, but introduces an additional concern: she suggests that early exposure to local varieties may negatively affect children's pronunciation in the standard variety. This may reflect an underlying belief in the need to prioritise linguistic standardisation in children's development.

Table 5. Pattern 2 and Pattern 3: mixed use. Excerpts from parents' interviews.

Parent	Excerpt
Huang (Shu's mother)	Excerpt 4. Original 跟她，有时候会说本地话，有时候没说 [...] 她听得懂。有一些会说，有一些不会。她以前小时候是很厉害的，跟我们都说青田话的！但是现在在这里跟我都说普通话了。 Excerpt 4. Translated With her, sometimes I speak the local language, sometimes I don't [...] She understands it. She can say some things, but not others. Before, when she was little, she was very good at it, speaking Qingtianhua with us all the time! But now, here, she only speaks Putonghua with me.
Wu (Zhen's mother)	Excerpt 5. Original 一般在家里都是跟他说我们自己的方言 [...] 他都能听懂，但是说不来。他会跟我说普通话 [...] 学会方言的话，是为了父母学的；学中文是为了以后 [...] 我坚持跟他说家乡话，家乡话在外面说的少，很难学。普通话外面听得多，用手机看，不怕学不会 [...] 虽然普通话我跟他偶尔说说的，他普通话就说得很好。不过，我觉得方言也很重要，因为毕竟还有老人。我的想法还是有点传统的：中国人毕竟是中国人，不管以后会发生什么事情，肯定会归根的。所以，家乡话也要学一点，普通话也要学，都挺重要的。 Excerpt 5. Translated At home we generally speak our own fangyan with him [...] He understands everything, but he can't speak it. He speaks Putonghua with me [...] Learning fangyan is mainly for parents; learning Chinese is for the future [...] I insist on speaking my hometown language with him: it's rarely used outside, so it's hard to learn. Putonghua can easily be heard outside, can be watched on the phone, so there's no worry about not learning it [...] Even though I only speak Putonghua with him occasionally, he speaks it very well. But I still think fangyan is also very important, because after all there are still elderly people. My thinking is a bit traditional: Chinese people are Chinese, after all, and we will certainly return to our roots, whatever happens in the future. So, it's important to learn some of the hometown language as well as Putonghua—both matter.

Table 5 presents excerpts illustrating the two patterns involving mixed use of Putonghua and fangyan. In Excerpt 4, Shu's mother describes a shift in her daughter's language practices across time and contexts: while the child previously used Qingtianhua when living in China with her grandparents, she now predominantly uses Putonghua in Italy. This comparison highlights how changing social environments may shape language use.

A different configuration emerges in Excerpt 5, where fangyan constitutes the primary language used at home. While acknowledging the importance of learning Putonghua, Zhen's mother emphasises the value of maintaining the local variety as a means of preserving family ties, particularly with older generations. In this case, the home is constructed as the primary—and possibly the only—space for exposure to and transmission of fangyan.

Despite the variation in parental practices, where fangyan may still retain a marginal role, children's reported language use also shows a predominance of Putonghua. As indicated in Table 3, even when fangyan are mentioned, their use is typically reported as passive: children are generally described by their parents as understanding them when used by parents, but not as actively speaking them.

Overall, the findings suggest that the heritage language maintained within most of these families largely corresponds to Standard Chinese (Putonghua). At the same time, participants' accounts reveal different rationales underlying this preference, including considerations of usefulness, correctness, future opportunities, and the perceived declining relevance of local varieties. Across the interviews, parents also occasionally referred to environmental factors as central to this process, highlighting not only their own role, but

also the influence of digital media (e.g., television, mobile phones, and tablets), as well as Chinese Heritage Language Schools (CHLS) and their teachers.

Indeed, out of the six children involved, two were already attending CHLS, while three were about to enrol (see Table 1). Only one parent, Aurora's father, reported that they did not intend to enrol their daughter before the end of primary education. Excerpt 6 illustrates his reasoning.

Excerpt 6. Original

学习中文是必要。她在iPad上自学了，我们也没教她。她都能听懂，但是有一些东西也是说不出来意思，写也不会写的[...] 不过，我的想法就是，现在因为在意大利，她必须先把意大利语学好，然后可以去接触中文了[...] 不能把她混起来，就是说两个都学不好。

Excerpt 6. Translated

Learning Chinese is necessary. She learned it on her own using the iPad—we didn't teach her. She can understand everything, but there are still things she can't express, and she also can't write it [...] But my thinking is that, since she's in Italy now, she needs to learn Italian well first, and then she can start learning Chinese [...] We don't want to confuse her, otherwise she might not learn either of them properly.

Aurora's father prioritises the acquisition of Italian, given the child's residence in Italy. This belief shapes family language management, leading to the decision not to enrol the child in a Chinese Heritage Language School at this stage, but rather to provide more opportunities to strengthen her competence in Italian.

However, as initially hypothesised, parental choices and the family domain are not the only factors influencing heritage language maintenance. Other dimensions also play a role, including children's perspectives and attitudes (as reported here by their teachers), along with teachers' attitudes towards multilingualism, as well as their practices in everyday school activities. The following section therefore turns to these aspects in order to provide a more comprehensive account of the phenomenon.

4.2. Children's Language Use from the Perspective of Teachers

Building on Excerpt 6, it can be observed that, despite Aurora's father's efforts to minimise potential "confusion" by prioritising the societal language, his daughter is described differently by her teacher, as illustrated in Excerpt 7.

Excerpt 7. Original

A lei piace parlare cinese, quindi capita tante volte in classe che lei lo parli [...] Anche quando parliamo del fatto che ci sono tante etnie in classe e ne enfatizziamo la presenza come una risorsa, lei si carica e comincia a dirci parole in cinese [...] Vedo che in italiano ha ancora delle grosse difficoltà, perché in casa non ha una famiglia italiana che l'aiuta. Però ci tiene molto a essere brava in italiano e non disdegna il cinese: è la sua lingua madre e per lei è importante, l'abbiamo notato in molte occasioni.

Excerpt 7. Translated

She likes speaking Chinese, so she often speaks it in class [...] Even when we discuss the presence of many different ethnicities in the class and emphasise it as a resource, she becomes enthusiastic and starts saying words in Chinese [...] I can see that she still has significant difficulties with Italian, because at home she doesn't have an Italian-speaking family to help her. But she cares a lot about

being good at Italian and doesn't neglect Chinese either: it's her mother tongue, and it's important to her—we've noticed this on many occasions.

Aurora's teacher perceives the child as appearing to display a strong sense of affiliation with her home language, describing her as enthusiastic when given opportunities to express and valorise Chinese within the school context ("She likes speaking Chinese, so she often speaks it in class [...] Even when we discuss the presence of many different ethnicities in the class and emphasise it as a resource, she becomes enthusiastic and starts saying words in Chinese"). Such opportunities for students to share elements of their linguistic repertoires are reported as created by the teacher herself, presenting multilingualism as a resource.

However, not all children respond to teachers' supportive attitudes in the same way. While Aurora is described as engaging positively, other cases are portrayed by teachers as showing more limited forms of engagement—as presented in Table 6—which lead teachers to draw conclusions about children's language attitudes and behaviours.

Table 6. Excerpts from teachers' interviews.

Teacher	Excerpt
An's teacher	Excerpt 8. Original Parla del cinese solo quando siamo noi a stimolarla a farci conoscere qualche parolina. Lei non è una bimba che parla molto in generale. Però anche le cose che dice, le dice talmente a bassa voce che non sento. Quando l'ho raccontato alla mamma, lei era meravigliata perché dice che a casa parla a voce molto alta! Però questo lo fa anche l'altro studente cinese. Ne abbiamo anche parlato con una psicologa della scuola e lei ha detto che un po' tutti i bambini cinesi tendono a parlare in questo modo o addirittura tendono a non parlare, quindi sembra una cosa comune. Excerpt 8. Translated She only speaks about Chinese when we encourage her to share a few words with the class. She isn't a child who talks much in general. Even when she does speak, she does so in such a low voice that I can't hear her. When I told her mother about this, she was surprised because she says she speaks very loudly at home! But the other Chinese student does the same. We also discussed this with the school psychologist, who told us that almost all Chinese children tend to speak like this, or even tend not to speak at all, so it seems to be quite common.
Yang's teacher	Excerpt 9. Original Spesso gli chiedo come si dice una cosa in cinese, ma lui a scuola non lo parla assolutamente, è argomento azzerato. Non lo usa neanche con i compagni cinesi con cui lo potrebbe parlare: non si parlano oppure parlano in italiano. È come se fossero a compartimento stagno: c'è il momento in cui si parla cinese e quello in cui si parla italiano [...] Si capisce proprio l'importanza della lingua in famiglia: è una cosa bella, perché è giusto che i bambini non perdano le loro origini. Ma è anche un'arma a doppio taglio: è come se distinguessero in modo netto le due lingue, e spesso prevale il cinese, perché lo parlano a casa e frequentano l'altra scuola, quindi c'è anche un riconoscimento istituzionale [...] È come se il cinese fosse la loro lingua, mentre l'italiano solo un mezzo che devono imparare per comunicare con i compagni di classe. Excerpt 9. Translated I often ask him how to say something in Chinese, but at school he doesn't speak it at all—it's completely off the table. He doesn't use it even with the other Chinese students he could use it with: either they don't speak to each other, or they speak Italian. It's as if they're in separate compartments: there's a time to speak Chinese and a time to speak Italian [...] You can really see how important language is within the family: it's a good thing, because it's right that children don't lose their roots. But it's also a double-edged sword: it's as if they make a very clear distinction between the two languages, and Chinese tends to predominate, because they speak it at home and attend the other school, so there is also institutional recognition [...] It's as if Chinese were their language, while Italian is just a means they need to learn to communicate with their classmates.

In Excerpt 8, An's teacher attributes the child's low level of verbal participation ("She isn't a child who talks much in general") to a broader tendency among Chinese students ("almost all Chinese children tend to speak like this, or even tend not to speak at all"), referring to what is perceived as a common behavioural pattern. Similarly, in Excerpt 9, Yang's teacher describes a rigid separation between languages, suggesting that Chinese is confined to the home domain while Italian functions primarily as a tool for school communication ("it's as if they make a very clear distinction between the two languages, and Chinese tends to predominate [...] It's as if Chinese were their language, while Italian is just a means they need to learn to communicate with their classmates").

These perspectives provide indirect insights into how home language practices are reflected, negotiated, or reinterpreted within the school context. Importantly, they should be understood as teachers' interpretations of children's linguistic behaviour rather than as direct evidence of children's language attitudes, identities or experiences. Therefore, the generalisations discussed are analysed here as discursive constructions rather than empirical claims. Some interpretations may sometimes move beyond observations of individual children and be extended to broader generalisations about Chinese students as a group. Such interpretations may reflect the persistence of stereotypical representations that overlook the heterogeneity of students' experiences and linguistic trajectories. In Excerpt 8, for instance, observations concerning an individual child are extended to broader assumptions about 'Chinese children' as a group, potentially obscuring important differences across individuals, families, and linguistic backgrounds. This, in turn, may in some cases influence how multilingualism is perceived and addressed within educational settings, reinforcing simplified or essentialised views of students' linguistic repertoires.

5. Discussion

When considering which variety of Chinese families refer to when discussing heritage language maintenance, the predominant pattern emerging from the data is the exclusive use of Putonghua, the standard variety. This choice appears to be primarily motivated by evaluative orientations towards language status, particularly in terms of prestige in relation to other varieties (Santello, 2015)—in this case, Chinese local varieties. Beyond prestige, Putonghua is also associated with notions of usefulness as well as standardisation, which may be linked to broader notions of linguistic efficiency (Santello, 2015). These evaluative orientations are not ideologically neutral and may be interpreted as reflecting broader standard language ideology (Milroy & Milroy, 1985), whereby Putonghua is constructed as the legitimate and socially valued variety, while fangyan are generally represented as locally bound varieties, and perceived as less useful or less beneficial for children's linguistic development. This hierarchical organisation of linguistic varieties is reproduced within language practices, where decisions about language transmission are shaped not only by perceived communicative usefulness, but also by the symbolic capital associated with standardised language forms.

However, the preference for Putonghua is not always the result of an explicit and deliberate parental decision. The sociolinguistic environment, as well as its transformations across different life stages, plays a crucial role in shaping language practices (Excerpt 4).

Parents' accounts also suggest perceptions of differential vitality across Chinese linguistic varieties. For instance, parents explain their choice not to transmit fangyan by describing it as being spoken by fewer people (e.g., Excerpt 3) and as gradually losing relevance even within contemporary Chinese society (e.g., Excerpt 2). Such perceptions suggest that language transmission decisions may also be influenced by beliefs about the long-term viability and future prospects of different linguistic varieties (Giles et al., 1977).

At the same time, one family still prioritises the use of fangyan within the home and emphasises the importance of maintaining and transmitting it to future generations (Excerpt 5). Given the limited opportunities to encounter non-standard varieties outside the family domain, the home emerges as the primary—if not the only—site for their intergenerational transmission, where fangyan can continue to be used and valued (Fishman, 1972; Spolsky, 2012). In this case, local varieties retain a strong symbolic value through familial affiliation and intergenerational ties, partially counterbalancing the prestige and wider utility associated with the standard variety.

Despite this variability, the overall trend in this dataset points towards a shift in favour of Putonghua. This represents a significant change compared to earlier studies conducted by Ceccagno (2001, 2004) and Pedone (2006), at the turn of the twenty-first century, which examined second-generation youth in the cities of Prato (Tuscany) and Rome, and documented a predominance of fangyan in everyday family interactions. While the limited scale of the present study does not allow claims about broader community-wide change, the findings appear consistent with a possible reversal of this pattern, with Standard Chinese becoming both the primary variety used and transmitted by parents and the only one actively used among children. If confirmed by future research, this shift may suggest a re-configuration of language choices and practices within Chinese migrant families, whereby Putonghua increasingly occupies both public and private spheres, while fangyan becomes confined to a shrinking family domain.

Teachers' perspectives—based on interview accounts and on classroom-based perceptions of the students' language behaviour, rather than on direct observational data collected in situ—provide an additional dimension to this shift. When referring to students' 'home language' or 'mother tongue', there appears to be limited awareness of internal linguistic diversity. The data suggest a tendency to equate 'Chinese' with a single linguistic entity, identified with the standard variety. This may reflect the increasing visibility and prominence of China and of its standard language in transnational contexts. At the same time, these perceptions may coexist with the persistence of stereotypical views, whereby students of Chinese descent are treated as a homogeneous group characterised by shared linguistic and behavioural traits.

By triangulating the perspectives of different social categories, this study provides some empirical evidence suggestive of an ongoing shift in language practices affecting heritage language transmission within selected Chinese families in Italy. While further studies are needed to strengthen these findings, the framework emerging from this analysis raises broader questions about the future of linguistic diversity within the Chinese diaspora. Specifically, it invites reflection on whether the heterogeneity that characterised earlier generations is gradually being replaced by a more standardised and homogenised linguistic repertoire—as noted by Brigadoi Cologna (2023), a key scholar on the Chinese diaspora in Italy. In this perspective, documenting and valorising local varieties still present among first-generation speakers may represent an important area for future research, particularly in light of their potential disappearance. More broadly, the findings raise the question of whether—and how—the maintenance of fangyan alongside Putonghua could be supported, despite the latter's growing prestige and functional dominance, before these varieties become further marginalised across generations.

6. Conclusions

The excerpts discussed in this article have illustrated how parents' attitudes towards different varieties within the same linguistic diasystem (namely local or minor varieties and the standard one), as well as towards home and societal languages, may shape their daily

language choices, practices, and strategies. In doing so, they contribute to the development of family language policies, whether explicitly or implicitly.

Furthermore, the study has tried to demonstrate the value of adopting a social network perspective within FLP research. By investigating language use not only from the perspective of parents, but also taking into account the role and perspective of other social domains—particularly the educational context—it has been possible to provide a more nuanced understanding of the factors shaping children’s linguistic environment, as well as of how these factors are perceived and interpreted across family and school domains.

Assuming that family and school share a central educational responsibility during childhood, it is desirable that these environments foster awareness of linguistic repertoires, openness to diversity, and opportunities for self-reflection. Such conditions could potentially support the identity development of second-generation children, whose potential struggles during this long journey should stem from processes of self-exploration, rather than from external pressures or expectations regarding who they should be or what they should know.

This study is not without limitations. The number of focal child cases is limited, and the findings are therefore not intended to be statistically representative of the broader population of Chinese families in Italy. Accordingly, any claims regarding broader diasporic trends should be understood as tentative and exploratory. Rather than aiming for generalisation, the study adopts an in-depth, multi-perspective design, which allows for the triangulation of diverse accounts and provides a contextually grounded understanding of the phenomena under investigation. At the same time, the focus on a specific age group and geographical context highlights the context-dependent nature of the findings, which may vary across different regions, ages, and migration trajectories. More specifically, all focal families were recruited in Bologna (Emilia-Romagna), and the findings should therefore be interpreted in relation to the characteristics of this particular local context. Chinese communities in other Italian regions may differ in terms of settlement patterns, community size, and socio-economic profiles. Such factors may influence family language practices, opportunities for heritage language use, and the relative vitality of different Chinese varieties.

A further limitation concerns the nature of the data collected. The findings are based primarily on participants’ self-reported accounts of language practices rather than on direct observations of family interactions or elicited language samples. Consequently, the study provides insights into how participants describe, interpret, and evaluate their language use, rather than offering direct evidence of their actual language practices. Future research could complement interview data with observational approaches and recordings of naturally occurring interactions, in order to further examine the relationship between reported language practices and everyday language use.

Moreover, future research could build on these findings by expanding the number of focal cases, and by including participants from different age groups, as well as a wider range of local contexts within Italy, in order to explore how similar dynamics may be observed under different conditions. Such an expansion may reveal a greater degree of variability in family language practices and attitudes than was observable within the present dataset. At the same time, a comparative perspective across different national contexts would be particularly valuable. Chinese diasporic communities in other parts of the world—such as Anglophone countries, Southeast Asia, or other European settings—are characterised by different migration histories and geo-dialectal compositions (Ceccagno, 2001; Pedone, 2013), which may result in the presence of other local varieties with different degrees of vitality and status. Examining how these differences shape language beliefs and intergenerational transmission practices would make it possible to better contextualise the

patterns observed in the Italian cases. In this perspective, rather than focussing solely on the distribution of languages within families, further studies could more explicitly investigate how different varieties of Chinese are hierarchised, valued, or marginalised across generations and social domains.

Within this framework, particular attention could also be devoted to the ways in which the perceived ongoing shift towards Putonghua is not only reflected in language practices, but also reproduced through beliefs about correctness, usefulness, and legitimacy. Exploring how these beliefs are negotiated may provide further insights into the mechanisms through which certain varieties are maintained while others are progressively abandoned.

Finally, the findings point to the relevance of examining whether—and under what conditions—space remains for the transmission of local varieties within diasporic contexts, and how such a transmission might be supported without positioning these varieties in opposition to the standard language, but rather as part of a broader and internally diverse linguistic repertoire. Local varieties may represent important resources for intergenerational communication, family memory, and connections with specific regional identities and histories. Their maintenance may therefore contribute to preserving the internal linguistic diversity that has historically characterised the Chinese diaspora. In practical terms, opportunities for their transmission are likely to depend primarily on family-level practices and intergenerational interaction, given the limited institutional presence of fangyan in diasporic contexts. At the same time, greater scholarly and community attention to these varieties—for example, through documentation projects and the collection of oral histories—may contribute to increasing awareness of their existence and cultural significance, thereby helping to preserve knowledge of the linguistic diversity historically present within Chinese diasporic communities.

To conclude, the findings suggest that heritage language maintenance within the Chinese diaspora cannot be understood simply as the preservation of ‘Chinese’, but requires attention to the internal diversity of Chinese linguistic repertoires and to the shifting relationships between standard and non-standard varieties across generations.

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Note

- ¹ As a brief example, with regard to language practices, children were asked to describe their daily language use (e.g., “Who wakes you up in the morning? What do they say to you?”); parents were asked about the language used with their children across different contexts and interlocutors; and teachers were asked about students’ behaviour with respect to both their home language (e.g., “Have they ever tried to use it at school?”) and Italian in the classroom. Due to space constraints, the full interview protocols are not included in this article, but are available from the author upon request.

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