Connecting Through Language: Heritage Language Learning and Lived Experiences Among Chinese Adoptees in the Netherlands

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Heritage Language Learning and Lived Experiences

Among Chinese Adoptees in the Netherlands

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by

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Contents

1. Introduction: Reconnecting with Cultural Heritage

Over the past decades, international adoption from China has reshaped family structures across Europe and North America. In the Netherlands, thousands of Chinese children, primarily girls, were adopted during the height of China's One-Child Policy (1980–2016). This policy aimed to slow population growth due to limited resources.[1] Cultural preferences for sons and strict enforcement in rural areas led many families to abandon infant girls, who were then placed in the international adoption system. As a result, a unique group of adoptees grew up in predominantly white, Dutch-speaking families while maintaining visible ties to their Chinese heritage. Despite being generally integrated into Dutch society, their visible difference and lack of cultural continuity often result in a complex relationship to identity, language, and belonging.

In this context, *heritage language learning*—the process of learning a language tied to one's cultural or familial roots—offers adoptees a way to reconnect with their roots. By engaging with their heritage language, adoptees attempt to reconstruct their sense of self, explore their origins, and foster a sense of belonging. While heritage language learning has been widely explored in relation to immigrant families and diasporic communities, the experiences of transnational adoptees remain understudied, particularly in the Dutch context. Transnational adoptees represent a distinctive case. Unlike children of immigrants, they often grow up without any linguistic or cultural support from their birth families or communities. Their engagement with a heritage language is often shaped by emotional, symbolic, or identity-related motivations, rather than familial or practical need.[2]

Yet research has largely overlooked the deeper dimensions of this process. Most studies adopt a technical approach, focusing on infant language retention or the cognitive

[1] Wang, Gu, and Cai. "China's One-Child Policy."
[2] Mu, *Learning Chinese*; Louie, *How Chinese Are You?*, 226–258.

effects of early exposure. They often overlook adoptees' lived experiences,including their motivations, the role of language in cultural connection, and the social barriers they face. This thesis aims to address this gap by exploring how Chinese adoptees in the Netherlands engage with Mandarin Chinese (from now on: Mandarin) as a heritage language, and how this process can either support or complicate their sense of belonging.

The central question guiding this study is: How does heritage language learning facilitate Chinese adoptees in the Netherlands in (re)connecting with their cultural heritage, and what motivates them to engage in this process? To explore this, the thesis considers three sub-questions. First, it examines what motivates Chinese adoptees in the Netherlands to engage in heritage language learning, looking at both internal and external motivations. Second, it investigates how this process fosters, or sometimes complicates, a sense of cultural connection and belonging, with attention to the symbolic and emotional roles language can play. Finally, it explores the broader personal, social, and cultural factors that shape adoptees' experiences, including the availability of support networks, societal attitudes, and personal identity aspirations.

For Chinese adoptees in the Netherlands, navigating a visible racial identity as part of an ethnic minority in a predominantly Dutch society often complicates their sense of cultural connection and belonging. This challenge is amplified by the loss of their birth language, which is a key link to their heritage. Language is not only a tool for communication but also a way to engage with cultural practices and build identity. However, for Chinese adoptees, the path to cultural reconnection through language is not always straightforward. While language is commonly associated with cultural identification, it does not automatically foster (a sense of) belonging.

The significance of this research lies mainly in centering the voices of adoptees themselves, whose experiences are often described by researchers or institutions rather than

by adoptees directly. It also contributes to the limited research on adoption and heritage language learning in the Netherlands, a context shaped by strong assimilationist discourse and limited institutional support for non-European languages. In addition, it uses heritage language learning as a lens to explore broader questions of identity and belonging. Prior research on adoptees mostly focused on early language loss or psychological adjustment in childhood, focusing less on how adoptees attempt to reclaim or resist connections to their heritage culture later in life. By foregrounding the perspectives of Chinese adoptees in the Netherlands, this study offers a deeper understanding of how language functions not only as a cognitive skill, but as an emotional, symbolic, and political resource.

The study draws on two main theoretical frameworks: Pierre Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital and symbolic power,[3] and Bonny Norton's poststructuralist model of identity,[4] which also draws on Benedict Anderson's idea of imagined communities.[5] Bourdieu helps explain how language legitimacy is shaped by power hierarchies, while Norton shows that identity is fluid and shaped by social contexts. While these frameworks do not directly engage with adoptee subjectivity and emotional experience, they are useful for understanding why adoptees may feel included in or excluded from heritage language spaces. This study builds on these theories while also challenging their limits by integrating the narratives of adoptees themselves.

This research employs a qualitative approach, centered on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight Chinese adoptees in the Netherlands who have learned Mandarin as their heritage language. Although some participants came from regions where other Sinitic languages, such as Cantonese, are spoken, the study only focuses on Mandarin learners for three reasons. First, Mandarin holds official status as China's national language and is the

[3] Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*.
[4] Norton and Toohey, "Identity, Language Learning."
[5] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

main language used in transnational adoption programs and heritage resources. Second, it is the primary language taught in formal courses, cultural organizations, and digital platforms available to adoptees, making it more accessible. Lastly, Mandarin carries broader recognition as a marker of "Chineseness" globally, even for adoptees whose birth families may have spoken other regional languages.

Participants were recruited through social media groups, adoptee networks, and personal contacts. The interviews explored motivations, challenges, emotional experiences, perceived barriers, and reflections on identity and belonging. Thematic analysis was then used to identify recurring patterns in their narratives, focusing on how Mandarin serves as a tool for cultural reconnection.

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 provides a theoretical and empirical literature review on heritage language learning, identity, and adoption. Chapter 3 offers background on intercountry adoption from China, with a focus on the Dutch context, including the history of Chinese adoption in the Netherlands and the sociolinguistic environment that shapes adoptees' experiences. Chapter 4 outlines the methodological framework, covering participant selection, data collection, and ethical considerations. Chapter 5 presents the thematic analysis of the interviews. The final chapter concludes the thesis by linking key findings of the analysis to the theoretical frameworks, discusses implications, and suggests directions for future research.

2. Heritage Language, Identity, and Belonging: A Theoretical Framework

Heritage language learning has long interested researchers in linguistics, education, and the social sciences, particularly in relation to migration, identity, and belonging. Scholars have explored how heritage languages act not only as tools for communication but also as symbols of cultural continuity, community membership, and emotional connection. At the same time, the literature raises important questions: Who counts as a "heritage speaker"? What motivates people to reclaim or reject a heritage language? And how do power structures shape access, legitimacy, and recognition in this process?

While much of the research focuses on immigrant families and diasporic communities, less attention has been paid to transnational adoptees, who are often culturally and linguistically disconnected from their roots. This literature review maps out key theoretical and empirical debates on heritage language learning, with an emphasis on how language relates to identity, agency, symbolic power, and belonging. It introduces key frameworks, including Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital and Norton's poststructuralist model of language and identity, and applies them to the experiences of Chinese adoptees—a group uniquely positioned between cultural absence and the desire to reconnect.

Heritage language learning refers to the process of engaging with a language connected to one's cultural or family background but not necessarily used as a dominant language. The term heritage language is often used interchangeably with "home language", "mother tongue", or "community language".[6] A heritage language is any language other than the dominant societal language (e.g. Dutch in the Netherlands) that is tied to one's cultural heritage, regardless of whether it is spoken at home or formally learned in schools.[7]

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[6] He and Xiao, *Chinese as Heritage Language*, 1–12.
[7] Chinen and Tucker, "Heritage Language Development"; Cho, Cho, and Tse, "Why Ethnic Minorities."

2.1 Linguistic Capital, Poststructuralism, Identity, and Investment

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of *linguistic capital* frames language as a form of symbolic power. Bourdieu argues that language is not merely a communicative tool; it carries social, economic, and symbolic value within specific contexts.[8] Some languages are considered more "valuable" than others because of their institutional support and prestige. For example, English holds more symbolic and economic capital globally than regional or minority languages. In the Netherlands, Dutch is the dominant language. It provides access to education, employment, and social integration.

Bourdieu introduces the concept of *linguistic habitus*, which refers to how individuals internalize linguistic norms and reinforce the dominance of the socially legitimate language.[9] For instance, someone raised in a Dutch-speaking environment may view Dutch as the "natural" or "correct" language for public life. This view reflects not only personal upbringing but also broader sociopolitical dynamics that privilege Dutch over other languages. Bourdieu also argues that legitimacy is not just about speaking correctly but about gaining social recognition.[10] Bourdieu writes: "The competence adequate to produce sentences that are likely to be understood may be quite inadequate to produce sentences that are likely to be listened to, likely to be recognized as acceptable in all the situations in which there is occasion to speak."[11] In other words, even if a speaker becomes fluent in a less dominant language, they may still be perceived as inauthentic if they fail to match the expected norms of pronunciation, cultural fluency, or social belonging.

While Bourdieu's framework has been influential, it has faced criticism. Seim and McCarthy argue that it relies too heavily on structural determinism—the idea that existing

[8] Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 18.
[9] Bourdieu, 17.
[10] Bourdieu, 55.
[11] Bourdieu, 58.

structures, whether linguistic, cultural, or social, shape and limit individual choices and life outcomes.[12] Structural determinism suggests that structural forces override personal agency and consistently reproduce inequalities at the group level.[13] Seim and McCarthy contend that Bourdieu's focus on social positions may obscure the potential for individual and collective action to transform these structures. On the other hand, Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital has been widely supported as a valuable tool for understanding how language works as a form of symbolic power in education, economy, and society. For instance, Gerhards shows how English proficiency functions as transnational linguistic capital across Europe.[14] However, critics have also noted that Bourdieu's theories can be abstract and difficult to apply in practice, with concepts like habitus lacking clear definitions.[15] Nonetheless, Bourdieu's work remains essential for understanding how inequality and power are reproduced in society.

Bonny Norton offers a complementary yet distinct way to understand language learning. Norton and Toohey note that "contemporary poststructuralist theories of language, identity, and power offer new perspectives on language learning and teaching."[16] These theories move away from fixed models of motivation and instead highlight learning as a dynamic, socially embedded process. *Poststructuralist theory* challenges essentialist views of identity, emphasizing that meaning and identity are socially constructed, context-dependent, and fluid. Rather than viewing language learners as stable subjects with fixed motivations, this perspective shows how people are shaped by power relations and how their identities shift over time and across settings. While traditional motivation theories assume that the desire to learn a language is a stable psychological trait, Norton introduces the concept of

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[12] Seim and McCarthy, "Classes Without Labor."
[13] Lindsay, "Structural Determinism."
[14] Gerhards, "Transnational Linguistic Capital."
[15] Robbins, *Bourdieu and Culture*.
[16] Norton and Toohey, "Identity, Language Learning," 412.

investment. This refers to a dynamic, socially situated process shaped by identity, cultural connections, and access to linguistic communities. This framework challenges the assumption that learners fail due to lack of motivation. Instead it poses the following questions: What are learners investing in? What do they hope to gain from speaking this language, and are they welcomed into that community? In classrooms or societies where learners are marginalized, whether it be due to racism, accent bias, or cultural difference, their investment may diminish, even if they are highly motivated.[17]

One of Norton's key contributions is the idea of *imagined communities*, a concept borrowed from Benedict Anderson. This refers to the aspirational or projected social groups that language learners hope to join. In other words, a learner's identity is fundamentally shaped not only by their present circumstances but also by their hopes for the future. The target language community can become a community of the imagination—a desired space that offers new possibilities for identity. A learner's investment in a language often takes place within the context of these imagined communities and imagined identities.[18] It emphasizes how learners envision who they and their communities might become through language.[19] For example, a learner may envision themselves one day connecting with family abroad, joining a diaspora community, or reclaiming a lost heritage. These imagined identities can be powerful motivators, but they may also lead to disillusionment if the real community does not accept the learner.

Norton's poststructuralist approach emphasizes both structure and agency, making it useful for analyzing heritage language learning among individuals who are marginalized or in uncertain social positions. Norton's theory is particularly attuned to the emotional, symbolic, and relational aspects of language learning. It has been praised for shifting the focus of

[17] Norton and Toohey, 421.
[18] Norton and Toohey, 415.
[19] Norton and Toohey, 422.

language learning from purely cognitive models to ones that incorporate sociocultural context, power dynamics, and learner agency.[20] However, while the framework addresses identity, critics argue that it may diminish structural constraints such as racism, exclusion, or inequality that limit learners' access to meaningful engagement. Even so, Norton's work has been essential for showing how language learning is deeply intertwined with identity, power, and the learner's changing position within dynamic social environments.

2.2 (Re)learning a Language

Engaging in heritage language learning requires motivation. For many Chinese adoptees, who are often culturally estranged from their birth language, this motivation often stems from emotional or symbolic sources rather than practical need. Drawing on Anderson's concept of imagined communities and Norton's adaptation of it, adoptees may pursue Mandarin as a means of connecting to an imagined cultural belonging. Even when fluency remains out of reach, language can carry deep emotional and symbolic meaning.

Mu emphasizes that heritage language learners often feel a symbolic connection to a language they do not actively speak.[21] He cites earlier studies showing that this bond can exist even without language use. Mu argues that heritage language learning is not only about gaining linguistic skills but is also deeply linked to identity and cultural reconnection. Similarly, Louie explores this dynamic among Chinese adoptees in the United States. She notes that some adoptees describe an "invisible link" to their Chinese heritage, even if they do not engage with it linguistically.[22] She further argues that adoptees may identify strongly with aspects of Chinese or Asian culture, such as food, festivals, or aesthetics, without necessarily seeking to learn Mandarin.[23] This distinction between cultural affiliation and

[20] Darvin and Norton, "Identity and Model."
[21] Mu, *Learning Chinese*, 26–29.
[22] Louie, *How Chinese Are You?*, 226.
[23] Louie, 231.

linguistic engagement complicates assumptions that identity must be tied to speaking the language.

On the other hand, some adoptees express that learning Mandarin is crucial for accessing deeper layers of cultural belonging. Lin, Wu, and Leung, in their narrative inquiry of U.S.-born Chinese adoptees teaching English in Taiwan, cite one participant who claimed she would "not have been able to really enter into the culture" without speaking Mandarin.[24] This highlights how language learning can act as a gateway to cultural legitimacy by providing access to shared practices and social connections. These motivations align with Norton's concept of investment, where learners' emotional and symbolic commitment to a language is often shaped by their imagined future selves and communities.[25]

While symbolic motivations often inspire adoptees to learn their heritage language, structural barriers can stand in the way. Unlike many heritage speakers who grow up in bilingual or culturally reinforcing environments, Chinese adoptees are usually raised in monolingual, predominantly white households with little exposure to Mandarin. The Dutch educational system reflects these limits, offering minimal support for non-European heritage languages. In his study on Chinese heritage language learners in Australia, Mu raises the importance of examining the phenomenon of Chinese populations learning Chinese in nations where the language is neither required nor the primary language of instruction.[26] Maintaining the heritage language, Mandarin in this case, while switching to English is one of the emerging challenges in relation to this population. This shift happens when the dominant language of the host country gradually replaces the heritage language. It affects not only adoptees but also larger Chinese-speaking communities abroad. For Chinese adoptees raised in non-Chinese-speaking households, this shift is even more pronounced. Without sustained

[24] Lin, Wu, and Leung, "Life and Work," 1799.
[25] Norton and Toohey, "Identity, Language Learning."
[26] Mu, *Learning Chinese*, 25.

reinforcement, learning the language becomes much harder. Sacré, Cawayu, and Clemente-Martínez describe this as cultural and linguistic erasure—a loss deepened by adoption, which severs early language ties and replaces them with new sociocultural expectations.[27]

Lin, Wu, and Leung's study on Chinese adoptees teaching English in Taiwan illustrates how heritage language learning facilitates cultural integration while simultaneously exposing tensions around linguistic belonging. Through the experiences of three U.S.-raised adoptees, the study reveals how Mandarin proficiency shapes access to cultural identity. One participant explained that to her, learning the language was essential for feeling included and accepted within Chinese culture.[28] This duality of language as both a bridge and a gatekeeper underscores how linguistic competence enables deeper cultural participation, yet adoptees who lack fluency may be marginalized as inauthentic, even within diasporic spaces. As Raja argues, language is not merely a communicative tool but "a primary channel through which cultural concepts, ideas, and practices are floated".[29] Heritage language learning, then, gives adoptees access to cultural values beyond vocabulary and grammar.

Bourdieu's concept of social legitimacy complicates this relationship. He argues that linguistic competence is judged not only by fluency but also by whether speakers are seen as culturally "authentic".[30] For adoptees, this means that accents, unfamiliarity with social norms, or divergent cultural fluency can mark them as outsiders, even when their linguistic proficiency is high. This kind of symbolic exclusion reinforces hierarchies where their legitimacy is constantly questioned, showing how language can both be a source of connection and a means of exclusion.

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[27] Sacré, Cawayu, and Clemente-Martínez, "Adoptees Relearning," 270.
[28] Lin, Wu, and Leung, "Life and Work," 1799.
[29] Raja, "The Importance of Language."
[30] Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 58.

Hillewaert critiques essentialist ideas about language and ethnicity, arguing that linguistic affiliation is not a straightforward indicator of identity. She explains that "only in particular historical contexts do linguistic distinctions become noticeable and interpretable as indicators of ethnic affiliation."[31] This means that adoptees may still be marked as outsiders, even when they linguistically "belong". This dynamic reflects the intersection of Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power and Norton's idea of investment. While adoptees may initially be highly invested in reclaiming their heritage language, if they experience exclusion or judgment from native speakers, their willingness to continue learning may decrease.

Adoptees often navigate complex identity issues, balancing visible markers of Chinese ethnicity with lives rooted in Western cultures. Adoptees may "look Chinese" but "feel Dutch", creating dissonance between appearance and self-identification. Sometimes, language helps bridge this gap. In other cases, cultural connection happens through non-linguistic means. Louie describes one adoptee whose strongest tie to Chinese culture came not through Mandarin but through her participation in lion dancing.[32] As mentioned earlier, Hillewaert argues that assuming people can be easily identified by the language they speak is a common but misleading belief. She sees linguistic heritage as a social construct rather than an inherent fact.[33] In other words, language is not the only or most valid form of cultural expression. Even among adoptees exposed to both cultures, learning a heritage language is not guaranteed. Louie notes that while some adoptees have no desire to visit China or to learn Mandarin, they nevertheless identify strongly with aspects of Asian culture.[34] This suggests that heritage identity extends beyond language and can be expressed through other cultural markets, such as traditions, food, or social affiliations.

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[31] Hillewaert, "Reimagining Linguistic Heritage," 399.
[32] Louie, *How Chinese Are You?*, 226.
[33] Hillewaert, "Reimagining Linguistic Heritage," 399.
[34] Louie, *How Chinese Are You?*, 231.

Returning to the role of heritage language learning, Shin shows how it can positively shape racial and cultural identity for adoptees and their families. She argues that engaging with a heritage language can support the development of a more affirmative and confident identity,[35] a view that aligns with Norton's idea of identity as dynamic, relational, and shaped by social power. By engaging with their heritage language, adoptees can build a stronger sense of belonging and connection to their cultural roots.

These studies reveal that identity formation is not a simple process of "reclaiming" a lost past. Instead, it involves navigating the linguistic, racial, and emotional aspects of belonging while facing internal doubts and external judgments. Adoptees are often perceived as cultural insiders based on appearance but as outsiders when they speak, act, or express themselves in ways that do not align with cultural expectations. As a result, their relationship to both Dutch and Chinese identities is often questioned by others and negotiated internally. These tensions emphasize that language learning is not just about shaping identity but about managing belonging within overlapping, and sometimes conflicting, social expectations. Beyond personal motivations, heritage language learning can be framed as a political or postcolonial act. Sacré, Cawayu, and Clemente-Martínez position adoptees' return to a heritage language as a form of reclaiming what has been historically erased. They state that relearning a heritage language is a way to challenge the historical erasure of one's original linguistic and cultural identity. Although heritage language loss is frequently thought of as an inevitable outcome of transnational adoption, it has impacts that go beyond linguistic ability; it is not simply a private matter but is shaped by one's social position and context.[36] For transnational adoptees, heritage language learning may not only be a personal journey, but also a broader socio-historical act of reasserting one's place within a cultural lineage.

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[35] Shin, "Transforming Culture and Identity," 163.
[36] Sacré, Cawayu, and Clemente-Martínez, "Adoptees Relearning," 270.

According to Sacré, Cawayu, and Clemente-Martínez, learning one's heritage language can challenge the dominant narrative that language loss is a natural or benign outcome of adoption. They argue that adoptees' disconnection from their language and culture is shaped by broader systems of inequality, including colonial histories and global adoption practices. This perspective reframes heritage language learning as more than a personal effort; it is also a socio-historical response to cultural displacement. In this context, language learning becomes a way to resist symbolic domination and reclaim a place within a cultural lineage—what Bourdieu would describe as a contest over symbolic capital. This process also aligns with Norton's model of investment, especially when learners create counter-narratives that resist marginalization and seek recognition on their own terms.

The existing literature provides a complex picture of how Chinese adoptees' engage with heritage language learning. Broadly, it can be grouped into three strands: studies that focus on symbolic and emotional affiliation with the heritage language (Mu; Louie); those that examine structural and sociolinguistic barriers to legitimacy and belonging (Sacré, Cawayu, and Clemente-Martínez; Lin, Wu and Leung; Bourdieu); and studies that explore language as a site of identity negotiation, resistance, and political reclamation (Sacré, Cawayu, and Clemente-Martínez; Norton and Toohey; Shin). These perspectives, along with the theoretical frameworks of Bourdieu and Norton, offer valuable insights into the power dynamics, symbolic hierarchies, and identity struggles involved in learning a heritage language. However, much of this research relies on abstract or generalized frameworks and does not fully address the lived experiences of transnational adoptees. Additionally, most existing work is based in North American contexts, leaving the Dutch sociocultural setting relatively unexplored, particularly regarding assimilationist discourse and institutional neglect surrounding non-European heritage languages. Moreover, the emotional complexity

of navigating racialized perception, symbolic belonging, and linguistic legitimacy remains undertheorized in much of the current research.

Building on this existing literature, this thesis applies Bourdieu's and Norton's frameworks to Chinese adoptees in the Netherlands. It focuses on the emotional and symbolic aspects of heritage language learning and the lived experiences of adoptees as they navigate belonging, authenticity, and identity in both Dutch and diasporic Chinese contexts. By centering first-person narratives, this study explores how adoptees articulate the meaning of language in their lives, and how their narratives are shaped by broader structural, racial, and cultural dynamics.

3. Transnational Adoption: China and the Dutch Context

3.1 From China, to the Netherlands

Intercountry adoption is the legal process by which a child from one country (the State of origin) is adopted by parents residing in another country (the receiving State). It usually involves the permanent transfer of parental rights and responsibilities. The process is governed by international conventions that aim to protect the child's best interests and prevent exploitation. This chapter draws on the 1993 Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, which outlines the legal and ethical framework for intercountry adoption.[37]

The Convention sets out several key provisions to protect children in intercountry adoption. It prioritizes the best interests of the child, stating that adoption must ensure safety, stability, and overall well-being.[38] Consent must be informed and voluntary, and prospective adoptive parents are required to meet strict legal and ethical standards.[39] Central authorities in each country are responsible for overseeing the process, ensuring compliance, and facilitating cooperation among involved parties.[40] The Convention also mandates that adoptions finalized under its framework be legally recognized by other contracting states, unless there are significant public policy objections.[41] To prevent exploitation, accredited agencies must operate with transparency and without improper financial gain, maintaining high ethical standards through the process.[42] Overall, the Convention provides a framework that aims to uphold ethical standards, legal consistency, and child protection in transnational adoption.

[37] HCCH, *Convention on Protection*.
[38] HCCH, art. 1.
[39] HCCH, art. 4–5.
[40] HCCH, art. 15–21.
[41] HCCH, art. 23–24.
[42] HCCH, art. 32–33.

In addition, a 2021 report commissioned by the government provides a legal-administrative definition of adoption: the legal adoption of a child who is not one's own.[43] Adoption creates a new, legally recognized family bond between the adoptive parent(s) and the child. The report also introduces the term *adoptiesysteem*, which refers to the network of government and private organizations involved in intercountry adoption, along with the relevant laws and regulations.

China has played a major role as a sending country, especially in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Beginning in the 1970s, couples were allowed to have only one child under a looseet of regulations that were later consolidated into China's One-Child Policy. Those who violated the policy were subjected to steep fines, and in some cases forced sterilizations and abortions.[44] Combined with longstanding cultural preferences for sons, the policy led to the abandonment of many baby girls, who were placed for adoption abroad.

International adoption from China formally began in 1992 and continued for over three decades. During this time, more than 160,000 Chinese-born children were adopted internationally, with over half going to the United States.[45] During the COVID-19 pandemic, China paused international adoption. In the fall of 2024, facing a declining population and falling birth rates, China announced that it would stop sending children overseas "in line with the spirit of relevant international covenants", except in cases where children were adopted by family members. This policy shift marks the end of an era in which China was one of the world's most prominent sending countries. It reflects a broader turn toward domestic solutions amid changing demographic and political priorities.

The phenomenon of child abandonment and international adoption from China cannot be fully understood without considering the role of state policies under the One-Child Policy.

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[43] Commissie Onderzoek Interlandelijke Adoptie, *Rapport Interlandelijke Adoptie*, 145.
[44] Feng, "China Ends International Adoption."
[45] Feng.

In *China's Hidden Children: Abandonment, Adoption, and the Human Cost of the One-Child Policy,* Johnson argues that abandonment was not an unintended consequence but a predictable result of government intervention.[46] If not for official efforts to prevent local adoption, many healthy girls would never have been placed in state orphanages.

Strict restrictions on domestic adoption prevented many Chinese families, including those willing to adopt daughters, from legally adopting abandoned children. Johnson argues that without these barriers, nearly all healthy girls relinquished in the 1990s could have found homes within China, leaving few available for international adoption.[47] As a result, international adoption from China grew rapidly. Between the early 1990s and the late 2010s, more than 120,000 children were adopted abroad, with about 85,000 going to families in the United States. However, Johnson's research shows that these large numbers represent only a small fraction of the many children who were hidden within China. Children who were denied official residential registration, or who were hidden by their parents to avoid punishment from the government, do not "exist" in the official government statistics, since they were born "out of the plan".[48] While transnational adoption shaped the lives of thousands of children abroad, millions more remained undocumented within China's society itself, underscoring the broader human cost of the One-Child Policy.

In recent years, the Netherlands has critically re-evaluated its intercountry adoption practices. The commissie-Joustra report uncovered systemic abuses in the adoption process, including child trafficking, document forgery, and coercion in countries such as Bangladesh, Brazil, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia.[49] The report criticized both the Dutch state and mediating organizations for failing to protect children and uphold ethical standards. In its investigation

[46] Johnson, *China's Hidden Children*, 10.
[47] Johnson, *China's Hidden Children*, 14.
[48] Feng, "China's Hidden Children," 2.
[49] Commissie Onderzoek Interlandelijke Adoptie, *Rapport Interlandelijke Adoptie*.

of intercountry adoption and the role of the Dutch government, the report interviewed numerous adoptees in 2019 and 2020. The committee aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of intercountry adoptees in the Netherlands, but was unable to interview every adoptee within the available time frame. To address this, additional research from Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS) was requested to fill in the gaps.

According to the report and a 2020 CBS study, Chinese adoptees are significantly less likely to search for their origins (26 percent) compared to adoptees from other countries (48 to 56 percent).[50] Even among those who did search, nearly half found no information, often encountering missing or incorrect documentation. While many adoptees in the Netherlands feel a strong connection to Dutch society, a substantial proportion (56 percent) are interested in their heritage culture and language.[51] Overall, adoptees were more likely than non-adoptees to experience psychological challenges. The report states that 64 percent of adoptees have had contact with a psychologist, psychiatrist, or psychotherapist. For non-adoptees this number is 48 percent. Adoptees reported higher levels of loneliness and low mood, which some explicitly linked to their adoption experience.[52] Although 70 percent said they were happy to have been adopted, over 30 percent reported mixed feelings, and 25 percent sometimes felt abandoned by their birth parents. Many respondents felt that more government support was needed to trace origins. A recurring theme in their feedback was the desire for a central information point and financial support to help adoptees explore their backgrounds.[53]

Intercountry adoption is a complex process shaped by legal frameworks, international conventions, and national policies that aim to protect children's welfare while reducing the risks of exploitation. The Hague Convention and the Netherlands' adoption laws, such as the

[50] Commissie Onderzoek Interlandelijke Adoptie, 33–34.
[51] Commissie Onderzoek Interlandelijke Adoptie, 31.
[52] Commissie Onderzoek Interlandelijke Adoptie, 29.
[53] Commissie Onderzoek Interlandelijke Adoptie, 32.

Wobka, the Adoptiewet, and the Act of July 3, 2003, aim to establish ethical standards and ensure responsible adoption practices.[54] However, the findings of the commissie-Joustra report prompted a temporary suspension of intercountry adoption in February 2021. One year later, then Minister Weerwind limited adoption to eight countries.[55] In May 2024, the then Rutte IV cabinet announced that no new adoption procedures would be initiated, citing renewed concerns about systemic abuse. Intercountry adoption will be permanently phased out by 2030. The commissie-Joustra report concluded that even with increased supervision, the risk of abuse could not be fully eliminated. This decisive policy shift marks a major shift in how the Netherlands approaches child welfare, prioritizing systemic accountability over continued participation in a practice shown to be vulnerable to abuse. Yet while reforms mark a shift in institutional policy, the long-term impacts of intercountry adoption are felt most deeply in the everyday lives of adoptees. Complex identity issues, cultural dislocation, and psychological challenges highlight the importance of comprehensive support systems that extend beyond adoption itself. As the Netherlands redefines its approach to adoption, it is essential that adoptees' experiences and needs remain central to any future policies and reforms.

3.2 Representation and Racialized Stereotypes

In addition to personal and institutional challenges, Chinese adoptees in the Netherlands must navigate a broader social field shaped by public representations and racialized stereotypes. Media such as Kelly-Qian van Binsbergen's documentary series *De Afhaalchinees* have brought visibility to the complexities of adoptee identity, showing how Chinese adoptees are often perceived through racialized frames that do not align with their lived experiences. In *De Afhaalchinees*, Van Binsbergen explores her own story and those of others adopted from

[54] Commissie Onderzoek Interlandelijke Adoptie, 15–18.
[55] NOS Nieuws, "Adoptie uit het Buitenland."

China.[56] In the first season, she openly discusses her experiences with racism, trauma, and alienation, describing how she felt disconnected from her culture and language. In the second season, *Thuisbezorgd*, her return to China is marked by simultaneous belonging and alienation, she says, "the only thing I feel is sadness that I did not end up here", acknowledging that she "can never be delivered home", since she does not speak Mandarin and remains "too Dutch". These narratives highlight the tension between outward racial perception and inner cultural identity. They show how Chinese adoptees are held to external expectations while grappling with their own sense of self. Despite being raised in Dutch families, adoptees are frequently seen as "foreign" or "other", reflecting what scholars call the "perpetual foreigner" stereotype. This stereotype is central to understanding how racialized individuals, especially Asians, are often viewed as outsiders regardless of how integrated, fluent, or "native" they may be. The "perpetual foreigner" stereotype describes the tendency to view individuals of Asian descent as inherently foreign, regardless of birthplace or cultural background. Even those born and raised in a country are still viewed as outsiders, with their identities and citizenship not fully recognized as part of the dominant racial or national group.[57]

While most of the literature is based on the North American context, similar dynamics may affect Chinese adoptees in the Netherlands, where visible racial difference can override cultural integration in everyday social encounters. A lack of representation or inclusion in national narratives may contribute to feelings of being marginal or invisible, especially when histories of Asian presence are not widely recognized or taught.[58] Outside of isolated efforts like *De Afhaalchinees*, Chinese adoptees are rarely visible in Dutch media or cultural discourse, adding to a broader sense of symbolic exclusion. In the Netherlands, this

[56] Van Binsbergen, *De Afhaalchinees*.
[57] Ng, Pak, and Hernandez, "Beyond the Perpetual Foreigner," 576.
[58] Ng, Pak, and Hernandez, 580–81.

stereotype often intersects with local assumptions that Chinese individuals are quiet, diligent, and culturally distant. These stereotypes obscure both individual experiences and reinforce a generalized image of "Chineseness." As a result, adoptees are often expected to fit into this racialized image of "Chineseness," regardless of their actual cultural identification.

Moreover, education and public discourse often frame racialized individuals through lenses of cultural difference that can unintentionally reinforce their social separation. For example, educational narratives frequently present racialized individuals, such as Asians, as fundamentally culturally different, strengthening perceptions of fixed group boundaries and social separation.[59] These forms of social positioning can reinforce feelings of disconnection or motivate a search for cultural roots, not necessarily out of an intrinsic sense of Chinese identity, but in response to how identity is externally ascribed. Such dynamics are important to consider within the frameworks outlined in Chapter 2, especially in relation to belonging, memory, and the negotiation of cultural identification after adoption. Amidst these challenges and forms of external categorization, this study examines how Chinese adoptees in the Netherlands engage in heritage language learning, and how this process shapes their experiences of identity, belonging, and cultural connection.

[59] Ng, Pak, and Hernandez, 577.

4. Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological approach used in this study, including the research design, data collection process, participant sampling, ethical considerations, reflexivity, and data analysis. This section aims to provide a transparent account of the research process to ensure reliability and validity of the findings, while acknowledging the challenges and limitations of studying a relatively small and homogeneous group.

This thesis employs a qualitative research design, using semi-structured, in-depth interviews to explore how Chinese adoptees in the Netherlands experience heritage language learning. This approach focuses on participants' own meaning-making processes rather than hypothesis testing.[60] Informed by oral history methods, the research centers the lived experiences and personal voices of adoptees, revealing how they narrate their stories of heritage language learning and identity. As Thompson and Bornat note, oral history can open new areas of inquiry and return interpretive authority to those who have historically been underrepresented, particularly when discussing intimate topics such as family, identity, and belonging.[61] The aim is to place participants' lived experiences in context and to understand the meanings they ascribe to language, identity, and belonging.

Given the limited research on adoptees engaging in heritage language learning, a qualitative approach allows for the exploration of perspectives that are often overlooked. This study draws on Thompson and Bornat's view that the value of a free-flowing interview lies not in the extraction of information, but in capturing a "narrative interview"—a subjective record of how individuals reflect on their lives. In these interviews, the way participants tell their stories, the structure of their accounts, what they omit, what they emphasize, and the language they use all offer important insights and become the main material for analysis.[62]

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[60] Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*, 9–14.
[61] Thompson and Bornat, *Voice of the Past*, 1–24.
[62] Thompson and Bornat, 222–45.

Data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with eight Chinese adoptees in the Netherlands, conducted between March 2 and March 30, 2025. The interviews were guided by open-ended questions designed to explore participants' motivations, challenges, and personal reflections on heritage language learning. While the questions were structured around the main research question and sub-questions, participants were encouraged to share their experiences freely, resulting in natural and participant-led narratives. This flexible format reflects what Thompson and Bornat refer to as a shift away from "box-ticking" questionnaires toward interactive oral history that values personal narrative, emotional nuance, and the participant's own interpretive lens.[63]

Participants were recruited through personal contacts, social media groups, and adoptee networks. Given the sensitive nature of this topic, I emphasized that participation was voluntary and worked to create a supportive, respectful interview environment. All interviews were recorded with the participants' explicit consent and later transcribed for analysis. The sample includes eight adoptees, all of whom were adopted into Dutch families and have studied Mandarin as their heritage language. All participants are female, aged 21 to 27, and have varying levels of Mandarin proficiency, with everyone reaching at least HSK 3. This selection was intentional, as a basic level of Mandarin was considered necessary to engage meaningfully with the study's themes of cultural reconnection and identity. The relatively small and homogenous sample presents limitations, including potential selection bias and a narrower range of perspectives. Shared characteristics such as gender, age, and educational background may have limited the diversity of experiences captured. While this focus allows for in-depth exploration, it also reduces the generalizability of the findings.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process to ensure the privacy, comfort, and autonomy of participants. Before each interview,

[63] Thompson and Bornat, 222–45.

participants received an information letter explaining the purpose of the study, their rights as participants, and the measures put in place to protect their privacy, including anonymization and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Verbal consent was obtained at the start of each interview, and participants were reminded that they could skip questions or withdraw from the study without any consequences. These procedures align with the ethical standards in qualitative research, as outlined by Seidman, who stresses the importance of informed consent, voluntary participation, and the rights of participants.[64] To protect participant privacy, identifying details were excluded from the final analysis. In addition, participants were informed that their data would be stored securely and anonymized in the final thesis to prevent identification.

As both a researcher and an adoptee engaging in heritage language learning, my positionality inevitably influenced the research process. On the one hand, my shared background with participants likely helped build trust and openness. On the other hand, this insider position carried risk of bias or shaping responses. To address these challenges, I maintained a reflexive approach throughout the research process, continually questioning my interpretations and remaining open to perspectives that differed from my own. While my insider position offered valuable insights into the lived experiences of adoptees, I put great effort into ensuring that my analysis remained as objective and representative as possible.

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the interview data, combining deductive and inductive coding strategies. I first organized the data into broad thematic categories based on my research questions and initial observations, such as motivations for language learning, challenges in cultural reconnection, and reflections on identity. I then refined these themes through a process of coding and recoding, paying close attention to areas of agreement and difference in participants' accounts. This approach made it possible to identify both shared

[64] Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*, 57–74.

patterns and unique experiences, reflecting the diversity within the group. The final analysis integrates these themes into a cohesive narrative that situates individual voices within the broader context of heritage language learning and cultural identity among Chinese adoptees.

This chapter has outlined the methodological framework for this study, underlining the value of qualitative, participant-centered inquiry in capturing the complex, emotionally layered experiences of Chinese adoptees in the Netherlands. By foregrounding participants' voices and prioritizing ethical, reflexive research practices, and drawing on established interviewing frameworks, this methodology aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the interplay between language, identity, and belonging for Chinese adoptees in the Netherlands.

5. Analysis: Learning a Heritage Language

This chapter is based on eight in-depth interviews with Chinese adoptees in the Netherlands, all of whom have engaged in heritage language learning. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect participant anonymity. All interviews were conducted in Dutch and quotes are presented in the original language followed by my English translations. This chapter analyzes how participants' engagement with Mandarin relates to identity, cultural belonging, and personal agency.

All participants were adopted from China by Dutch parents during early childhood, typically between the ages of 1 and 2.5. Each participant has at least one sibling who was also adopted from China. While the closeness of these sibling relationships varied, this shared family structure offered a unique form of mirroring that many found meaningful, whether as a source of comfort or contrast. Despite growing up in culturally Dutch households, they were all exposed to some level of conversation around their adoption backgrounds, with varying degrees of openness and support from adoptive parents. Geographically, most participants grew up in predominantly white, rural or suburban areas in the provinces of Utrecht, Zeeland, Friesland, Noord-Holland, and Gelderland. Opportunities for cultural affirmation or racial mirroring were limited. As a result, many recalled early experiences of "feeling different", ranging from casual stereotyping to more overt forms of racism and exclusion. These childhood environments heightened their awareness of racial visibility and influenced how they later approached questions of belonging.

Family attitudes toward Chinese heritage also varied widely. Few families actively encouraged cultural connection through travel, symbolic objects, and openness toward Chinese identity. Others offered more subtle support, enabling rather than initiating cultural exploration. While some parents were encouraging, for most, Chinese culture was not a visible part of everyday life. Consequently, participants often pursued cultural engagement

and heritage language learning on their own initiative. Educational trajectories played a key role in shaping access to heritage language learning. Several participants pursued Mandarin as part of their university programs, while others engaged in structured or informal learning through Saturday schools (or: Chinese schools), tutoring, travel, or self-study. For most, meaningful engagement with the language began in adolescence or early adulthood, often followed by *rootsreizen* (heritage travel) or other periods of identity exploration. Participants now live in more diverse urban areas, such as The Hague or Rotterdam, where many reported feeling more comfortable and less conspicuous than during their childhoods. This change in environment often coincided with a deepened interest in Chinese language and culture, suggesting that social settings can play a role in supporting identity exploration.

These shared yet varied backgrounds lay the foundation for the thematic analysis that follows. I examine how adoptees describe their motivations for learning Chinese, the emotional and structural challenges they face, and the symbolic significance they attach to language. This analysis is guided by the central research question and sub-questions. Throughout, I also consider how adoptees navigate, resist, or reinterpret narratives about identity, origin, and cultural legitimacy.

5.1 Motivations for Heritage Language Learning

Across the interviews, participants described a range of motivations for learning their heritage language. These motivations were shaped by personal, emotional, and contextual factors. While their upbringings offered little direct access to the language, each adoptee eventually chose at some point to begin or deepen their learning, often during adolescence or early adulthood. Their reasons were rarely practical. Instead, motivations tended to emerge from a desire to reconnect with family, reclaim a cultural background that had long been sidelined, or access parts of themselves that felt hidden or underdeveloped.

For some participants, the hope of reuniting or communicating with their biological family was a major catalyst. Yating and Jasmijn expressed this clearly when reflecting on their initial motivation, stating: “Als ik dan Chinees spreek, dan is het nog makkelijker om ze dan te vinden” (If I can speak Chinese, then it would be even easier to find them), and “Ik had altijd als doel van dat ik gewoon goed genoeg Chinees wil spreken, zodat als ik mijn Chinese ouders vind, ik met hen kan communiceren” (My goal was always that I wanted to speak Chinese well enough so that if I find my Chinese parents, I can communicate with them). For them, language served not only as a practical skill but as a means to bridge relational distance and create a sense of belonging. Even without direct contact, the imagined possibility of connection was enough to sustain their efforts.

Others described their motivation in terms of identity exploration and self-understanding. For Eliza, learning Mandarin was a way to feel “more Chinese” and to strengthen her connection to a heritage she had little access to growing up. Similarly, Vivian viewed language learning as a form of reclaiming knowledge that had been absent in her upbringing. Her interest stemmed from a sense of cultural disconnection and a frustration that Chinese language and culture had not been more actively supported at home. In this way, her approach to heritage language learning can be interpreted as a kind of corrective—a wish to “normalize” her experience of being Chinese in a Dutch context.

Interpersonal relations also emerged as a key factor. Lan’s motivation was closely tied to her Chinese foster family, with whom she remained in contact. Learning Mandarin enabled her to communicate more directly and independently, without relying on intermediaries. She emphasized that this relationship was one of her main reasons for continuing. This suggests that without such ties, maintaining motivation might have been more difficult. Similarly, Anna described how language offered access to social connection and recognition, allowing her to feel seen by Chinese speakers and to position herself within a cultural space she had

long felt excluded from. She explained: “Als je de taal spreekt, dan krijg je toegang tot een gemeenschap" (If you speak the language, you can get access to a community). For her, speaking Mandarin led to being welcomed more openly. In addition, her Chinese appearance made it easier for the others to not view her as a stranger or foreigner. Her language skills and Chinese appearance enabled her to “fit in the picture”.

Some participants described motivations that changed over time. For Yating, the initial urge to learn Mandarin diminished after reuniting with her birth family, although she still wanted to maintain or improve her skills. She talked about how the “pressure” to learn eased once she had found her family. At the same time, she reflected on the emotional value of being able to communicate even simple phrases, suggesting that even partial fluency still held significance. However, not all participants described their motivations as emotionally urgent. Esther, for example, approached heritage language learning gradually, driven by long-standing curiosity and support from her family. She emphasized that the decision “primarily came from herself” and reflected a steady interest rather than a need for resolution or reconnection. Jiayi similarly described her engagement with Mandarin as shaped by both a general love of language and a formative *rootsreis* in 2015. Her experience shows how affective and intellectual curiosity can overlap, with language learning serving as both a cognitive pleasure and a delayed form of reconnection. In some cases, participants also envisioned using Mandarin in future parenting or professional settings, suggesting that heritage language learning is not only about the past but also a resource for building future identities.

Overall, motivations for learning Mandarin among the participants were varied, but commonly reflected a desire for greater cultural understanding, personal connection, and self-definition. For some, the language was a practical way to reconnect with birth families or strengthen existing ties. For others, it provided a way to engage more fully with their heritage

or navigate feelings of difference. In all cases, Mandarin was seen not only as a linguistic skill but also as a resource for understanding one's place between cultures and bridging the gap between outward appearance and personal experience. For many, the decision to learn the language emerged alongside pivotal experiences of return, such as a rootsreis. These journeys often deepened emotional investment and reshaped how participants situated themselves within their heritage.

5.2 The Rootsreis as Turning Point

For many participants, returning to China, often through a rootsreis, marked a turning point in their relationship to heritage. These trips were rarely described as simple or wholly affirming. Instead, they were complex moments of emotional recognition and cultural (dis)location. In some cases, they sparked or intensified the desire to learn Mandarin. In others, they complicated feelings of belonging by highlighting the gap between ethnic appearance and cultural fluency. Across the interviews, rootsreizen were not merely travel experiences but emotionally charged encounters with something that had long felt abstract: the idea of China and their place in relation to it.

Several adoptees described their rootsreis as their first embodied experience of racial and cultural mirroring. Jasmijn recalled that while walking through the streets of her birth country at age twelve, she experienced a striking sense of familiarity: "Iedereen leek op mij" (Everybody looked like me). The visibility and racial othering that many had grown up with in mostly white Dutch communities were, for a moment, replaced by a sense of belonging. Yating, who first returned to China as a child, shared a similar impression: "Voor mij ook als zevenjarige was het ook heel interessant om te zien van 'zie je nou wel, ik ben niet klein, iedereen heeft zwart haar, iedereen lijkt meer op mij'" (For me, as a seven-year-old, it was very interesting to see, 'I am not short, everybody has black hair, everybody looks more like me'). This recognition was emotionally calming. She described the experience as feeling like

"coming home." However, this sense of recognition was often disrupted by the inability to speak the language. For several participants, being surrounded by people who looked like them but being unable to communicate created a painful distance. This contradiction turned the rootsreis into a catalyst for heritage language learning—not only as a way to belong, but also as a means to feel understood in a place that was supposedly their own. Rootsreizen revealed connections but also underlined the absence of language, fluency, and access.

For others, the rootsreis did not spark immediate transformation, but quietly introduced a sense of familiarity that grew over time. Esther, for example, described her visit to China at age twelve as important but not life-changing. It did not radically alter her sense of self but laid a foundation that later influenced her educational choices. Similarly, Jiayi's trip at age thirteen feels more significant in retrospect than it did at the time. She did not describe a single breakthrough during her travels, but the experience planted seeds of curiosity and emotional connection that eventually led her to explore language and culture more deeply. For Lan, return visits to her foster family occurred throughout her life, creating a relationship that developed gradually rather than all at once. As she grew older and began learning Mandarin, these trips took on a new meaning. They enabled her to move beyond surface-level interaction into deeper connection. More importantly, learning the language shifted her role from passive observer to active participant during these reunions. Her experience shows how language can retroactively reframe earlier memories.

Some participants experienced their "return" outside mainland China. For Vivian and Anna, time abroad in Taiwan played a comparable role. While Vivian briefly mentioned a rootsreis at age eleven, she provided little reflection on that trip. Instead, her stay in Taiwan offered a more vibrant environment for linguistic and emotional interaction. During her stay, moments of understanding and misunderstanding brought both empowerment and vulnerability. Following group conversations created a sense of inclusion, while struggling to

keep up in fast-paced discussions exposed lingering insecurity. Anna described her travels to China and Taiwan as opportunities to test her classroom learning against real-life situations. Her trip to China in 2018 was marked by linguistic challenges. After continued study, her later visit to Taiwan in 2024 reflected greater confidence.

Only a few participants did not view their roostreis as especially formative. Vivian, for example, briefly mentioned visiting China at age eleven but offered little detail, suggesting that for some, such experiences may remain less central or emotionally charged. While other participants noted that simply returning to China did not resolve identity tensions, the rootsreis served as a significant turning point. It marked a beginning and created space for reflection, where heritage language learning could emerge as both a response to absence and a way to reconnect.

5.3 Barriers to Language Learning

While each participant chose to engage with Mandarin, their learning trajectories were shaped by a range of structural, emotional, and sociocultural barriers. These obstacles sometimes slowed their progress and introduced or reinforced feelings of inadequacy, disconnection, and ambivalence about their cultural identity. These tensions suggest that, for many participants, heritage language learning did not feel like a straightforward act of cultural reclamation.

A common structural barrier was early misplacement or poor pedagogical fit. Several participants recalled being enrolled in Chinese weekend schools as children. There, they struggled in classes designed for heritage speakers with prior exposure. Eliza described her adopted sister's experience: "Maarja het is niet echt gelukt want Chinese school is echt voor, hoe zeg je het, Chinezen met hun familie enzo. Dus die kunnen eigenlijk wel Mandarijn, maar dan gaan ze gewoon naar de school op zaterdag. Dus iedereen sprak daar gewoon en zij kon natuurlijk niks, dus toen was ze vrij snel weer teruggehaald" (But it did not really work

out because Chinese school is really for, how do you say it, Chinese people with their families and stuff. So they can actually speak Mandarin, but then they just go to school on Saturdays. So everyone there could already speak, and of course she could not, so she was pulled out again fairly quickly). Jasmijn shared a similar story:

> Toen hebben ze [adoptieouders] mijn zusje en mij een jaar lang naar Chinese school gestuurd. Ik vond het wel heel fijn dat ze die optie boden, alleen was het gewoon niet de juiste school voor ons. Het was een school voor kinderen met Chinese ouders thuis. Dus het was meer een soort van bijscholing voor dat soort kinderen om hun woordenschat te vergroten, het was geen beginnersles, dus ik heb daar eigenlijk helemaal niks geleerd.
>
> Then they [adoptive parents] sent me and my sister to Chinese school for a year. I really appreciated that they gave us that option, but it just was not the right kind of school for us. It was meant for children who have Chinese parents at home. So it was more like a supplementary education to expand their vocabulary, it was not a beginner's class, so I did not actually learn anything there.

These stories illustrate a gap between the adoptees' language level and the expectations of the curriculum, and point to the emotional strain some adoptees described when they felt expected to belong in spaces unfamiliar to them. Even when participants had access to more appropriate educational resources, other structural factors got in the way. University demands, job pressures, and financial constraints limited the time and energy available for learning Mandarin. Due to financial constraints, Jasmijn was unable to continue lessons after graduating. She argued that she really needed "some kind of lessons" or structure, reflecting a broader reliance on formal education when immersion was not possible. Several others shared similar frustrations about needing structured support, especially given how difficult it was to stay motivated alone.

The learning process was further complicated by psychological and emotional pressures. Perfectionism, fear of failure, and self-comparison to more fluent peers were recurring themes in all interviews. Many participants described facing unequal expectations based on appearance, which shaped how both others and themselves judged their Mandarin

skills. Several noted that their white Dutch peers were often praised for modest attempts at speaking Mandarin, while adoptees like themselves were met with silence, confusion, or surprise when their level did not match assumed fluency. Participants commonly expressed frustration when peers were complimented for “doing the bare minimum”, while they faced higher standards. This discrepancy created a sense of double standards, and in some cases, led to discouragement and decreased confidence.

A distinct source of anxiety came from sociocultural expectations linked to racial appearance. Many participants described how being perceived as Chinese led others to assume fluency, especially in interactions with native speakers. Yating recalled being addressed in rapid Mandarin during visits to China, only to confuse locals when she could not reply. She shared that people looked at her “as if she were an alien”. This gap between visible identity and linguistic ability created emotional friction, reminding participants that they both did and did not belong. Several participants echoed this feeling—not because of language level alone, but because of what it symbolized: a perceived failure to live up to expectations.

Embodied and emotional aspects of learning also emerged. Yating described the physical dimension of language learning, underscoring the challenge of mastering the tones of Mandarin as a reminder that speaking a language is not only a mental process, but also a bodily one, providing the example of the involvement of the coordination of the mouth and tongue. In this way, heritage language learning becomes both a cognitive and bodily effort, requiring the body to be retrained through repetition and sound. Her account reframes fluency not merely as a linguistic achievement,but as a somatic process—one that engages sensory memory and can heighten feelings of cultural dissonance for adoptees who appear Chinese but lack physical familiarity with the language. In addition, a lack of consistent exposure and community further hindered participants’ efforts. Without regular interaction with native speakers or Chinese-speaking environments, progress often stalled. Participants noted that

daily use was essential for retaining the language. Opportunities like friendships, travel, or access to Chinese-speaking social circles made a tangible difference but were not always readily available.

Barriers to heritage language learning among adoptees were multifaceted and often compounded one another. Structural limitations, emotional strain, and racialized expectations interacted in ways that shaped how participants viewed both their linguistic competence and their sense of cultural legitimacy. For many, these struggles were not just about learning Mandarin, but about navigating a deeper sense of in-betweenness. Learning the language became an ongoing negotiation of identity, worth, and the limited opportunities for cultural reconnection. As the following section explores, these barriers affected more than learning. They also shaped how adoptees understood their own cultural legitimacy and navigated identity across different social contexts.

5.4 Language and Identity Negotiation

For adoptees in this study, learning Mandarin was closely tied to questions of identity, belonging, and self-definition. Based on participants' experiences, heritage language learning frequently made identity tensions more visible instead of lessening them. This underscored the complex interplay between appearance, upbringing, cultural expectations, and self-perception. Across the interviews, identity was described as fluid, situated, and contingent. Participants rarely identified as fully Chinese or fully Dutch. Many articulated a sense of feeling "in between", occupying a hybrid space shaped by both social context and personal growth. For some, learning Mandarin offered symbolic access to a Chinese identity that previously felt distant or unavailable. Reflecting on how heritage language learning shaped her sense of self, Jasmijn said:

> Ik denk dat het me wel meer het gevoel heeft gegeven dat ik dus ook Chinees ben, mijn Chinese identiteit meer te omarmen. En ik denk dat dat ook wel te maken heeft

> met het feit dat, ik merk dan dat ik andere mensen tegenkom, zeg maar witte Nederlanders, en die hebben een bepaald beeld van mij, dat het dan ter sprake komt dat ik dus wel een beetje Chinees kan. Dan zijn ze ook zeg maar gerustgesteld: 'Oh ja, dat beeld wat ik van jou heb, dat klopt ook wel, je bent wel echt Chinees want je kan de taal ook.'
>
> I think it has given me more of a sense that I really am Chinese, that I have been able to embrace my Chinese identity more. And I think that also has to do with the fact that, I notice when I meet other people, white Dutch people, for example, they have a certain image of me, and then when it comes up that I can speak a bit of Chinese, it kind of reassures them like: 'Oh yes, the image I had of you is accurate, you really are Chinese because you can speak the language too.'

This perspective may reflect how language offered a way to internalize an identity that had previously felt more abstract or imposed by others. At the same time, identification was often described as partial or incomplete. Some participants expressed feeling "more Chinese than before", while acknowledging they actually were "still not really Chinese". In these cases, participants described a sense of cultural connection without feeling culturally fluent.

The embodied and sociocultural limits of linguistic belonging were also central. Yating reflected that being able to read and understand Mandarin made her feel "a bit more Chinese", but this feeling was complicated by knowing her speech would never match that of a native speaker. She said: "Je spreekt gewoon goed Chinees, je spreekt de tonen goed uit, maar je hoort…dat dat Nederlands er gewoon doorheen komt. Ook al doe ik mijn best, het zal nooit zijn zoals als ik daar was opgegroeid" (You speak Chinese well, your tones are correct, but you can hear…that Dutch way of speaking coming through. Even if I try my best, it will never sound as if I grew up there). Her reflection captures a sentiment that many participants shared: that heritage language learning can create access and recognition but rarely leads to full inclusion. Subsequently, she stated: "Ik spreek alleen zinnen waarvan ik zeker weet dat ze goed zijn" (I only say sentences of which I am sure are correct). Some participants noted that even near fluency did not erase embodied differences or the impact of social histories. In this way, language reveals the limits of assimilation and the persistence of in-betweenness.

For many adoptees, language seemed to function as both an internal affirmation and an external performance. Speaking Mandarin allowed them to claim a Chinese identity, both for themselves and in ways others could recognize. As mentioned earlier, this tension was especially clear in interactions with native speakers, where expectations of fluency often did not match the adoptee's actual proficiency. A common source of discomfort was being addressed first, only to receive surprised or confused reactions upon speaking. Eliza described this in detail, recalling how assumptions about her fluency created unease during her stay in Taiwan: "Als mijn vrienden dan bijvoorbeeld gewoon Mandarijn gingen spreken dan waren mensen echt zo van: 'Wow! Hoe kan je Chinees?' enzo en als ik dan begon te praten waren ze zo van: 'Wait… waarom is je Chinees zo slecht?'" (Whenever my friends started speaking Mandarin, people would be like: 'Wow! How do you know Chinese?' and when I started talking, the reaction was more like: 'Wait, why is your Chinese so bad?'). While she could sometimes laugh it off, these reactions made her increasingly aware of how differently her efforts were received compared to her white Dutch peers. While their efforts were met with praise and enthusiasm, hers often prompted confusion or critique. This reinforced a hesitation to use Mandarin in everyday settings. Beneath this reluctance was a persistent sense that her skills "were not good enough", shaped by both personal standards and the judgments of others.

Similar dynamics emerged in other narratives. One adoptee expressed discomfort during her stay in Taiwan when native speakers addressed her first, only for her white peers to take over when she struggled to understand. She recalled thinking "It should have been me". While she could appreciate her peers' skills, moments like this deepened her sense of inadequacy and underscored the gap between appearance and ability. Many described this as a "double bind": the pressure to prove their Chineseness through language while never being fully affirmed in doing so.

Despite these tensions, language learning also created moments of connection and pride. Several participants shared how understanding a conversation, ordering in a restaurant, or engaging with family and friends in Mandarin offered a meaningful sense of inclusion. One adoptee recalled feeling affirmed during a hotpot dinner with friends and their family, where her ability to follow "about 80 percent of the conversation" made her feel more connected—not only to the language, but also to the culture and the people present. Being able to participate, even passively, was a rare experience of cultural alignment. Others described studying Mandarin as a way to say "I am also Chinese" with more confidence, regardless of fluency. Several adoptees echoed this sentiment, reflecting "Ik denk dat het me wel meer het gevoel heeft gegeven dat ik dus ook Chinees ben, mijn Chinese identiteit meer te omarmen" (I think it has given me more of a sense that I really also am Chinese, that I can embrace my Chinese identity), and "Sinds ik nu ook de taal en meer over de cultuur weet…voel ik me toch echt wel meer verbonden met China en mezelf, ja mijn achtergrond en wie ik ben" (Now that I also know the language and more about the culture…I do feel more connected to China and to myself—my background and who I am).

Participants differed in how central they felt language was to their identity. For some, learning Mandarin was essential—a bridge to heritage and a way to feel recognized. Others described it as one element among many, alongside food, traditions, or travel, that helped them engage with their heritage. Several rejected the idea that fluency was a prerequisite for belonging, criticizing narrow definitions of authenticity. Yating concluded: "Je bent nooit 100 procent Nederlands en je bent nooit 100 procent Chinees, het is het allemaal net niet" (You are never going to be 100 percent Dutch and you are never going to be 100 percent Chinese, it is always just slightly off). Rather than striving for full inclusion in either category, many came to embrace in-betweenness as a position in its own right.

Overall, identity negotiation among adoptees was not a linear path toward resolution but an ongoing engagement with ambiguity. Heritage language learning offered a way to explore, contest, and reimagine what it means to be Chinese, Dutch, or both.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

6.1 Theoretical Reflections on Heritage Language Learning

This chapter revisits the findings from Chapter 5 through the theoretical perspectives introduced in Chapter 2. It aims to critically examine how heritage language learning operates as a site of identity negotiation, symbolic (dis)alignment, and emotional investment for Chinese adoptees in the Netherlands. The discussion focuses on three main conceptual lenses: Norton's theory of language learning and investment, Bourdieu's notion of linguistic capital, and poststructuralist views of identity as multiple, fluid, and negotiated. These frameworks are not applied as fixed models but as tools to highlight the lived complexity of adoptee experiences and the non-linear, emotionally charged journeys they take toward—and away from—language and belonging.

Norton's concept of investment provides an engaging framework for understanding how participants viewed heritage language learning not solely as a linguistic pursuit, but as a way to shape and express their evolving identities. As Chapter 5 showed, adoptees' motivations for learning Mandarin were often tied to a desire to access, reclaim, or simply make sense of an imagined cultural origin. For example, Jiayi described language learning as a means to achieve "innerlijke vrede" (inner peace), a way to embrace her hybrid identity rather than suppress it. This aligns with Norton's view of investment as a commitment to imagined identities and social futures. Two participants stated that heritage language learning was the most important way for them to connect with their birth family. This underscores that their commitment went beyond classroom proficiency. It was emotional, aspirational, and intertwined with the self. However, investment was not always met with acceptance.

Several participants reported that their efforts to learn Mandarin were met with skepticism, confusion, or exclusion when they failed to meet native fluency expectations. Such experiences complicate Norton's framework by highlighting emotional risks of

investing in language when recognition is withheld by the very community they hoped to join. Bourdieu's notion of linguistic capital—the value of a language variety in a specific market—helps explain the ambivalence participants expressed about fluency, accent, and perceived legitimacy. For the majority, learning Mandarin granted them access to new relationships and spaces. One adoptee emphasized that it allowed her to build closer friendships, while another noted that speaking Mandarin in public, such as at a food stall or restaurant, often led to friendlier treatment and even tangible rewards.

However, this symbolic capital remained unstable. Several adoptees described how speaking Mandarin imperfectly sometimes resulted in social gatekeeping or distancing. These moments reveal how linguistic competence, as Bourdieu theorizes, is not simply a matter of grammatical accuracy or fluency, but about being recognized as culturally "authentic". As discussed in Chapter 2, competence is judged by whether a speaker is recognized as culturally "authentic," a status that adoptees may be denied because of accent, perceived foreignness, or limited familiarity with social norms. As a result, language can fail to function as usable capital and instead reinforces adoptees' marginal position. Even when they were understood, recognition was not guaranteed. In these cases, legitimacy—rather than proficiency—determines access to inclusion. This tension between recognition and exclusion was particularly evident when linguistic performance intersected with appearance. For adoptees, being visually marked as Chinese raised expectations of fluency that were not always met. They must navigate multiple regimes of legitimacy. The symbolic weight of language is not fixed; it fluctuates depending on social setting, fluency, and how others respond to them.

The experiences shared by participants align closely with poststructuralist views of identity as fluid, socially constructed, and context-dependent. Adoptees frequently experienced a space of negotiation—between cultures, between languages, and inside

themselves. Social settings, interpersonal connections, and language classrooms became places where identity was both claimed and questioned. One participant challenged the notion that language alone could restore cultural belonging, arguing that connection requires more than linguistic competence. It also depends on shared values, mutual understanding, and openness. Her perspective resists the romanticized idea that heritage language learning can simply "repair" the severance caused by adoption. Instead, it shows how identity is constantly being shaped by social interactions, power dynamics, and personal history. Others perceived heritage language learning as a way to reclaim a part of themselves that had previously felt out of reach. Many shared that learning Mandarin gave them more confidence to say they are partially Chinese too—not as a biological fact, but as something they could actively claim. Their stories reveal how adoptees can exercise agency in shaping their identities through language.

Moreover, the concept of imagined communities, first developed by Anderson and later adapted by Norton, helps explain why many participants continued to engage in heritage language learning even when practical benefits were limited. Jasmijn shared that when she was actively engaging in learning the language, she often thought of her Chinese family. She described heritage language learning as not just a skill, but as the "main way" to feel emotionally connected to her origins: her identity, culture, and family. Although this sense of closeness was intangible, it provided continuity, emotional grounding, and a symbolic sense of belonging, even if the imagined community remained largely out of reach.

The findings suggest that heritage language learning for these participants is a socially mediated, emotionally charged, and symbolically rich practice. Investment is never neutral; it always carries the risk of rejection and the hope for recognition. Linguistic capital can both include and exclude, depending on who gets to assign its value. Identity is neither lost nor found through language, but continually rewritten through the act of engaging with it. This

study shows that heritage language learning is best understood as a complex and often fragmented process of exploring the self, shaped by power dynamics, personal memory, emotional longing, and cultural difference. The following section synthesizes core insights that emerged from the interview data and highlights the ways in which this thesis contributes to broader discussions on heritage language learning, adoptee identity, and sociolinguistic belonging.

6.2 Key Findings and Contributions

Building on the theoretical reflections discussed earlier, this study highlights several key contributions. First, it reveals how heritage language learning operates as a site of ambivalent belonging, where connection and exclusion often coexist. It underscores that linguistic legitimacy is not simply about proficiency but also about how others perceive and interpret language use. The data further demonstrate that learning a heritage language requires significant emotional labor, shaped by participants' histories of displacement, desire, and cultural negotiation. Finally, this research foregrounds adoptees' agency, positioning them as active meaning-makers who use language to reframe identity on their own terms.

While heritage language learning is often described in both academic literature and social discourse as a bridge to one's origins, this thesis complicates that narrative. For most participants, learning Mandarin generated both connection and disconnection, often simultaneously. On the one hand, language offered opportunities for cultural access, self-reflection, and emotional closeness, especially in relation to imagined families or communities in China (or in some cases Taiwan). On the other hand, it also brought feelings of inadequacy, foreignness, or even rejection when their skills fell short of expectations. The interviews reveal that adoptees do not experience heritage language learning as a return to an origin, but as a negotiation of multiple, often contradictory, positions: visible insider, audible outsider; emotionally attached, socially unrecognized.

This thesis also underscores the relational nature of linguistic legitimacy, drawing on Bourdieu's insights. Legitimacy is not determined by technical fluency alone but by how that fluency is socially received. Participants shared that they were often judged more harshly because they "looked Chinese", which set expectations they could not meet. Simultaneously, participants reported experiences of partial recognition or conditional acceptance, particularly in diaspora communities, restaurants, or interactions with native speakers abroad. These accounts for adoptees, linguistic capital is unstable: it yields access in some situations, while producing exclusion in others. This finding contributes to sociolinguistic research by showing how linguistic legitimacy is not simply acquired but continually negotiated.

Heritage language learning is not emotionally neutral. For adoptees, it often becomes a space of vulnerability, aspiration, and self-confrontation. Two adoptees suggested that language becomes a way to feel closer to imagined or lost families, even when those families remain inaccessible. One participant described heritage language learning as a tool for healing and integration, offering a way to manage the affective tensions of being "between" cultural identities. However, investing in language learning is not without risk. Participants reported feelings of shame, performance anxiety, and the weight of external expectations. These findings show that heritage language learning is not merely a cognitive or cultural activity, but is accompanied by emotional labor.

This thesis challenges the idea of transnational adoptees as passive outsiders seeking to "return" to a lost heritage. Instead, it underscores their role as active participants in shaping how they engage with language and culture over time. While many participants were wary of rigid ideas of "authentic" Chinesenesss, they described heritage language learning as a meaningful way to explore their backgrounds, articulate belonging, and define their identities in personally meaningful ways. Rather than a process of recovering something presumed to be missing, heritage language learning emerged as an ongoing effort to build a sense of

connection in the present. Through repeated practice, reflection, and personal commitment, adoptees navigated tension between cultural familiarity and estrangement, constructing new forms of belonging that were neither fixed nor complete.

6.3 Reflections, Limitations, and Future Directions

This thesis has explored how Chinese adoptees in the Netherlands engage in heritage language learning. While the findings provide important insights into the relational and affective dimensions of heritage language learning, several limitations should be noted. First, the sample was small and consisted mainly of adoptees who had pursued or completed higher education, had access to Chinese language instruction, and were already engaged with their adoption background. As such, the findings may not reflect the experiences of adoptees with less institutional support, different linguistic backgrounds, or limited interest in language learning. Additionally, the focus on Mandarin as the standard heritage language potentially obscures China's linguistic diversity and how dialects, regional identities, or other heritage languages might complicate or enrich these dynamics. A second limitation lies in the interpretive nature of the data. While semi-structured interviews allowed for depth and nuance, meaning was co-constructed between interviewer and participant. This inevitably introduced subjectivity into the analytic process.

Future research could expand on this project by using comparative or longitudinal approaches. For example, studies might examine how heritage language learning differs between adoptees and non-adopted diaspora youth or track how motivations and identity evolve over time. Research into adoptees who have disengaged from or rejected heritage language learning entirely could shed light on the structural and psychological barriers often left unspoken in more celebratory narratives of cultural return.

This thesis contributes to broader discussions in sociolinguistics, adoption studies, and heritage language research by centering adoptee voices as active participants in defining their

cultural and linguistic identities. The findings underline how adoptees use language to navigate contradiction, claim partial belonging, and create new cultural narratives. These perspectives are often overlooked in academic and policy debates, yet they offer crucial insights into how language, identity, and power intersect in the lives of those who are "in-between".

6.4 Heritage Language Learning as a Pathway to Reconnection

The central inquiry of this study was to explore how heritage language learning facilitates Chinese adoptees in the Netherlands in (re)connecting with their cultural heritage, and what motivates them to engage in this process. The findings suggest that heritage language learning supports reconnection in several ways. For many adoptees, learning Mandarin offered a tangible means to approach their origins—whether by communicating with birth or foster families, navigating travel, or participating in cultural practices that had previously felt inaccessible. Learning the language often created opportunities to feel closer to an imagined or remembered community and to claim a sense of belonging that felt otherwise out of reach.

Motivations for engaging in heritage language learning were varied and deeply personal. Some participants described curiosity or an intellectual interest in Chinese language and culture. Others were driven by a desire to reconcile feelings of in-betweenness, to reclaim a heritage shaped by both presence and absence, or to prepare for potential reunions with biological relatives. In some cases, these motivations were linked to significant milestones—such as a rootsreis or contact with birth or foster families—while for others, heritage language learning was part of a more gradual process of self-discovery.

Participants differed in how central they considered language to their identity. For some, learning Mandarin became an essential way to affirm their cultural connection and to feel more confident in claiming their Chinese identity. Others described it as just one aspect of a broader process of cultural engagement, alongside food, traditions, and relationships.

Several adoptees emphasized that while language was important, it could not fully resolve the complexities of belonging or guarantee acceptance. The process was marked by ambivalence. Many participants encountered structural barriers, such as limited access to beginner-friendly instruction, or the financial and time demands of sustained learning. Emotional challenges—like performance anxiety, feelings of inadequacy, and the burden of external expectations—were equally significant. Being visibly marked as Chinese often heightened these pressures, as participants described how their appearance led others to assume fluency that did not match their actual experience.

The data show that heritage learning did not simply restore a sense of wholeness or offer an uncomplicated return to origins. Instead, it became a process through which adoptees defined what connection meant to them individually—even if that connection was partial, shifting, or provisional. For many, learning Mandarin was both an act of self-definition and an expression of agency: a deliberate decision to reclaim aspects of cultural heritage, and find space for belonging amid contradiction. This process often required holding ambivalence and recognizing that a single language could never fully resolve the layered experiences of growing up in-between.

6.5 Concluding Thoughts: Adoptee Voices and the Meanings of Heritage Language Learning

Near the end of each interview, I asked participants what heritage language learning meant to them—practically, emotionally, and culturally. Their reflections show that heritage language learning is a deeply personal experience. For many, it became a way to reconnect with their birth country and culture, make sense of their own identities, and feel more anchored in a heritage that felt distant or fragmented in the past.

Practically, Mandarin offers a means to communicate with (potential) birth or foster families, navigate everyday life while traveling or studying abroad, and access professional and social spaces that might otherwise remain close. For some, it was also a source of pride

and empowerment—a way to feel more self-reliant and claim a skill affirming their connection to their origins. Emotionally and culturally, however, learning Mandarin often carried more complex meanings. Participants described it as a way to reclaim a heritage obstructed by adoption, to find a sense of inner peace, or to connect with an identity shaped both by presence and absence. At the same time, language learning often brought feelings of inadequacy and frustration. Several adoptees noted that their appearance led to unrealistic expectations of fluency, or that their efforts were met with confusion or skepticism rather than encouragement. Yet across all these experiences, a common theme emerges: the importance of agency. For every participant, learning their heritage language learning was a deliberate choice.. In this way, it became an act of self-definition—a way to negotiate belonging on their own terms. For some, this meant embracing in-betweenness rather than trying to resolve it, and recognizing that identity does not need to be complete or singular to be meaningful.

This thesis set out to explore how heritage language learning shapes Chinese adoptees' relationships to their cultural regions and to themselves. By centering adoptees' voices, this study shows that heritage language learning is never just an easy return to one's roots or purely a practical skill. It is a complex, ongoing process shaped by hopes, ambivalence, and resilience. Recognizing this complexity is crucial not only for researchers and educators but for adoptive families, policymakers, and broader society. In contexts where visible difference can reinforce feelings of otherness, making space for adoptees' own narratives matters. By foregrounding these perspectives, I hope to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how language, identity, and belonging are experienced—and to underscore why it is essential to hear directly from those most affected by these questions.

Lastly, writing this thesis and conducting interviews with fellow adoptees has been an enlightening and humbling process. As a researcher, I became aware of how my own

assumptions and background shaped the questions I asked and the way I interpreted stories. I am grateful to the adoptees who shared their experiences so openly, and I hope this work does justice to the complexity and significance of their lives.

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