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“A Plus for our Students”: The Construction of Mandarin Chinese as an Elite Language in an International School in Barcelona

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Mandarin Chinese is the fastest growing foreign language by number of students in the world (Ding and Saunders 2006), but little is known about how it is taking hold in compulsory education in different countries. This paper examines the institutionalisation of Mandarin in an elite school located near Barcelona, Spain, which, due to stagnant enrolment rates, was rebranded as ‘international’ in 2008. Data on the evolution and shifting legitimisation of the Chinese programme was gathered through a two-year critical sociolinguistic ethnography. It included observations, visual materials, institutional discourses, questionnaire data and in-depth interviews with key social actors. The results show that Chinese has been highly instrumental for the process of re-elitisation of the school through multilingualisation (and internationalisation), because it allows institutional agents to mobilise both the discourse of cognitive/attitudinal benefits and forms of linguistic capitalisation *avant-la-lettre*. Yet, among most families and students, there is sharp awareness of the speculative nature of Chinese as capital whose returns in the present can only be guaranteed in the logic of accumulation and as providing an index of students’ embodiment of neoliberal subjectivities. For the school, Chinese symbolises its zeal to constantly search for new sources of (potential) distinction and academic excellence.

Keywords: elite multilingualism; global languages; Mandarin Chinese; international education; language as speculative capital.

1. Introduction

Mandarin Chinese is the fastest growing foreign language by number of students in the world (Ding and Saunders 2006). Its newly acquired status owes a great deal to the economic and political ascendancy of China, as well as to the coordinated efforts of the Chinese government to extend and reinforce the economic and cultural influence of this country globally. This nationalist project (Starr 2009) is carried out, among others, via the rapid establishment of

Confucius Institutes (CI) or *Hanban* in most major cities of the world. According to figures from the official CI webpage, there are now over 500 CIs in the world, since the first one opened in Korea in 2004. Indeed, Chinese authorities have constructed the spread of Mandarin as the cornerstone of their soft power approach to international politics and trade, and have therefore poured money into its promotion. The Hanban project includes the creation of Confucius Classrooms (CC) in primary and secondary schools, which are provided with teachers and materials, and the possibility of participating in exchange schemes. In many countries, CCs have been the driving force behind the sharp increase in the number of schools offering Mandarin. This trend is particularly visible in English-speaking countries, where the rise of Chinese has paralleled the sharp fall in the study of other (traditional) foreign languages (FL), both in secondary and higher education (Pérez-Milans 2015; Smala, Bergas Paz, and Lingard 2013).

In Barcelona, the capital of Catalonia, in the north-east of Spain, interest in the learning of Chinese predates the inauguration of the CI in 2010. Some schools were already offering Mandarin extracurricular classes around the early 2000s (Gutiérrez 2012). Most of these schools had an elite profile. Generally speaking, by elite schools we refer to private schools that charge high fees, which act as a proxy for a wealthy clientele. However, as Bourdieu (1984) observed, economic factors are not the only or most important distinction strategies. School buildings, modern facilities, curricular and extracurricular range, a body of renowned alumni and connections with elite universities and other socially relevant institutions are essential to build social prestige (Koh and Kenway, 2016; Maxwell and Aggleton 2016). All these symbolic goods are key markers of eliteness. It must be mentioned that the families attending these schools do not belong only to the upper classes; the social make-up of many of them includes the middle and the upper-middle classes.

In Barcelona, the new attention to Chinese was in many ways connected to a key shift in Catalonia's foreign policy. In the 1990s, special emphasis was placed on promoting

institutional, commercial and cultural relationships with the Asia-Pacific region (Pareja Alcaraz 2001). Initially the focus was on Japan and attention later moved to South Korea, and especially, to China. As part of the support infrastructure, in 2001 the first *Casa Asia* (Asia House) in Spain was established in Barcelona. The goal was to turn Barcelona into a hub for Chinese investment in southern Europe and the Mediterranean. In 2016, Catalonia attracted half of all direct Chinese investment in Spain, with preferred economic sectors being port logistics, sports, technology and food industries (Florio 2017).

Little is known about how the Chinese language is taking hold in compulsory education contexts around the world. Existing research (Hua and Wei 2014; Pérez-Milans 2015) has focused mostly on the UK, but other countries have not yet been explored. Additionally, in the studies available, the institutionalisation of Chinese is connected to the thrust of the CCs. By contrast, in the case study reported here, that of Forum International School (FIS), the introduction of Chinese was an independent school initiative. This article will thus contribute new data and contexts of analysis to this under researched analytical theme. It will also throw new light onto the linguistic make-up of international schools, which to date have been little explored from a socio-linguistic perspective (De Mejía 2002), and on the intertwining of multilingualism and the construction of elitism in globalised modernity. We plan to address the following questions: (a) how and why is Chinese instrumental in constructing both the elite and the international profile of FIS? What institutional discourses are mobilised to frame the role and significance of Mandarin? (b) What sense do children and families make of the learning of Chinese and what value do they attribute to the language? Are there significant differences among the social actors involved (students, families, teachers and school administrators)?

2. Foreign Language Education in Catalonia

In keeping with worldwide tendencies, English is the preferred foreign language (FL) in Catalan schools, both state-funded and private. Legally, it is possible to opt for French, Italian and German –as well as English– as first FLs, but the number of schools offering these is insignificant. French, which used to be *the* FL until the mid 1980s, has retained its status as preferred second FL. German is increasingly also becoming popular as second FL. The multilingual curriculum of most state-funded educational institutions in Catalonia consists, thus, of Catalan, Spanish and English as compulsory languages throughout primary and secondary education, and French (or in some cases German) as elective FL in secondary education. It must be noted that students are not obliged to pursue the study of a second FL in secondary education. Recent proposals (e.g. Pérez, Lorenzo, and Trenchs 2016) have suggested a diversification of the range of curricular FLs on offer to include Mandarin and Arabic. In fact, at some teachers' initiative, Mandarin is taught in a few state secondary schools as a curricular second FL, but the requirement is that teachers must be part of the school's staff. The situation is different in private institutions, most of which actually ground their elite profile on the highly multilingual programme on offer (especially those that call themselves 'international'). Additionally, private schools are not bound by the national curriculum or by requirements for access to teaching posts in mainstream education. Although immersion-type programmes in English that cover all or parts of the curriculum are what most parents look for in the first place, guaranteeing proficiency in other FLs is also an important selling point for many elite schools. Few private schools offer Mandarin as part of the compulsory language curriculum. One of them is FIS, the school studied here.

The most frequent situation in Catalonia, in both the public and the private system, is for Mandarin to be taught extra-curricularly. In the public system, after-school classes are staffed by FL assistants or volunteers subsidised by foreign governments or cultural associations. In the case of Mandarin, extracurricular classes began as early as 2005. The initial objective was to facilitate the 'integration' of students of Chinese origin and to establish

‘cultural bridges’ (sic) between families and schools. Even though the programme was devised as a heritage language programme, over the years it has increasingly attracted local students. This change in student demographics has only happened in the case of Chinese –and not in the case of other heritage languages. In the website of the Framework for Plurilingualism,¹ the current official language policy plan, the popularity of Chinese is attributed to the ‘global economic situation’ and the text states that ‘Chinese will be the language of the 21st century’. This futuristic discourse is also regularly present in the Catalan/Spanish media, where Mandarin is featured as ‘the language of the future’, and as ‘offering more opportunities’ (Gutiérrez 2012). According to the latest Eurobarometer (2012), Spain was the member state where respondents were most likely to think that Chinese was a useful language to learn. Unfortunately, official figures on the number of children and adolescents learning Chinese in Catalan schools are not available.

3. Theoretical Approach

For the purposes of this paper, we understand elite multilingualism as the kind of multilingualism that is fostered in and by elite educational institutions. *Elite* is usually defined as the power or influence of a group of people who concentrate wealth and/or privilege. Bourdieusian approaches to elitism connect it to the mechanisms of accumulation of *distinctive* material and symbolic capitals, among which are education and languages. The accumulation of unique capitals is only a way of enacting social class identity. Recent research on elites and elitism has questioned the role of economic capital in determining access or belonging to elite spheres to favour more performative approaches that recognise the importance of other forms of capital and of *doing elitism*, displaying such distinction and privilege in everyday practices (Koh and Kenway 2016; Maxwell and Aggleton 2013). An agentic approach goes beyond wealth-based definitions of elite status and allows to grasp the blurred nature of class

¹ <http://xtec.gencat.cat/ca/proiectes/plurilinguisme/accions/origen/xines/>

boundaries (Jaworski and Thurlow 2017). Thurlow and Jaworski (2009, 196) analyse elitism drawing on William's *structures of feeling* as "meanings and values that are actively lived and felt" and rearticulated through discourse in specific time/space contexts. According to these authors elitism is "talked into existence, it is semiotically achieved". Elite status, then, is constantly being negotiated and *done, enacted* through discourse and interaction.

The processes of enculturation that take place within elite institutions direct young people's trajectories towards elite spaces and networks. An elite type of education provides them with the kinds of knowledge and orientations –among which are certain cultural knowledge types and also (linguistic) skills– that will give them access, and make them feel entitled to future elite trajectories (Maxwell 2015; Gaztambide-Fernández *et al.* 2013). By making available a unique language repertoire the school contributes to their students' accumulation of resources that distinguish them. Having been educated in a specific school, or being able to speak certain languages are indices of privilege. Along the same lines, the multilingual repertoires that such schools provide to their students are valuable and exportable capital that makes them stand out beyond national boundaries.

In this article, we aim to investigate what languages get chosen at an elite institution situated in a particular time-space context and what the reasons might be. We draw on over fifteen years of research on language-in-education policy and practice from interpretivist and critically-engaged perspectives (Martin-Jones 2007); in particular, we tie in with recent educational ethnographies that have examined processes of multilingualisation of schools in globalising circumstances (see, among others, Codó and Patiño-Santos, 2014; Martín Rojo 2010; Pérez-Milans 2013; Relaño-Pastor 2015). To put it simply, our approach assumes that to understand the whys and the hows of educational practice we, as analysts, need to move back and forth (and across) situated classroom routines, particular institutional orders and ethos, and the broader political and socio-economic contexts. We therefore claim that we need to place

our study within a wider understanding of the impact on education, language, and language-in-education policies of globalisation and of the commodifying neoliberal regime.

The process of marketisation and commodification of education has been amply discussed (see, among others, Gray and Block 2012; Kumar and Hill 2009) to mean at least two things. First, education has become a product to be ‘sold’ and ‘bought’. Parents are conceptualised as consumers of educational ‘products’ that aim to maximise the cultural and social capitals of their children. Second, education systems are increasingly becoming aligned with the needs of the market (Hirrt 2009); their main goal is the production of competitive workers who can enhance the global competitiveness of the national economy. Human capital theories underlie this approach. According to Holborow (2012), not only are human beings re-conceptualised as ‘capital’ but knowledge becomes an economic category which is measurable in terms of productivity and returns of (state) investment. This has had significant effects on the content of education: a utilitarian approach to education has sedimented where what matters is the acquisition of technical skills that can easily be converted into economic productivity and business efficiency. These changes in education cannot be understood without reference to the skillification of workers, where individuals are imagined as bundles of skills that can be gained, accumulated and perfected (Urciuoli 2008) with a view to producing value (Park 2016). The neoliberal person has the moral obligation to constantly work at self-improvement (Allan 2013; Foucault 1991; Fraser 2003) in order to increase his/her value in the market. Citizens (and states) are constantly ‘interpellated by market metrics’ (Tabiola and Lorente 2017, p. 124). This requires making strategic investments in certain education capitals hoping for future returns. A number of studies have demonstrated that language is constructed as a key skill for neoliberal self-development projects (Gao and Park 2015; Park 2016).

Tabiola and Lorente (2017) take the notion of investment a step further in a way that is useful for this chapter. They discuss language investments as tied to the culture of financialisation. In their study, they describe English competence as speculative capital whose

value depends on the fluctuations of the market. English is viewed as enhancing the ‘stock value’ of a person, his/her potential (Park 2016). This means that ‘even if an investment will not lead to immediate monetary gain, one still makes the investment as long as it appreciates human capital’ (p. 133). But, as the authors discuss, there is no way of measuring that appreciation; it is based ‘on the speculator’s guesses, beliefs and perceptions about the value of that human capital’ (p. 134). For this reason, ‘the relationship of the person to his or her human capital should be considered as one of speculation rather than ownership’ (p. 134). These concepts are fundamental in our analysis of why Mandarin is offered at FIS, but also, of how its value is a disputed matter. In what follows a brief description will be presented of the school under study and our procedures for data collection.

4. The Ethnographic Case Study

Forum International School (FIS) is a private school with over 1,500 students located in a town here named *Sant Medir*, in the Barcelona metropolitan area.² It is now one of 21 schools owned by the same company in 4 different countries. Since it does not receive any kind of state subsidy, fees are fairly high compared to other schools in the area. The school offers all educational stages, from age 0 to age 21 (this includes infant, primary and secondary education; baccalaureate; and vocational training). Alongside the official Catalan curriculum, which is taught with some additions, such as Mandarin, since 2012 the school has also offered the International Baccalaureate (IB) programme. More recently, the Primary Years Programme (PYP) has also been adopted. Students who enrol combine both the Catalan and the international programme in an integrated manner. FIS, formerly called Forum School and founded in the late 1980s, was re-labelled as ‘international’ in 2008 following ownership

² This ethnography is part of the project ‘The appropriation of English as a global language in Catalan schools: A multilingual, situated and comparative approach’ funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Competitiveness (ref. FFI2014-54179-C2-1-P). We would like to thank Iris Milán and Daniel Pujol for their help with data transcription.

changes. One of the pivotal axes of the school's internationalisation was its multilingual programme.

The school is well-resourced and its facilities, with large playing fields and many open-door areas, index and construct its elitist nature. Its educational programme pivots around multilingualism, academic excellence, educational innovation, and the cultivation of culturally-valued behaviours, such as playing an instrument and certain sports.

Families come mostly from (upper)middle class backgrounds. Many are middle class professionals and small- and medium-size business owners. In the past, most were Spanish nationals (with a majority of local Catalan speakers). Since the internationalisation drive, however, the geographical extraction of families has shifted. The number of non-local families has increased to almost 12%, and the language of identification among the local population is not necessarily Catalan anymore. Parents praise the school's political neutrality regarding the politics of language in Catalonia,³ and they see it reflected in the trilingual policy. Neutrality, embodied in internationality, has been key to broaden the target market.

In shaping this new identity the school has engaged more intensively than before in distinction work (Bourdieu, 1984). As most elite institutions, FIS has striven to become a marker of academic excellence. For this reason, the school participates in the few (unofficial) rankings operating in the Spanish state. They have also institutionalised the certification of linguistic skills to the extent that they hold an annual ceremony of language certificate awards, in which members of Cambridge University, the French Institute and the Goethe Institute hand over certificates to the students. In 2017 for the first time, Mandarin exams YCT (Youth Chinese Test) certificates were handed out by the school's Chinese teacher. Apart from the actions used to legitimise their elite nature academically, there are other image-building tactics that operate at a more superficial level. Apart from the materiality of facilities, exclusivity is

³ It is impossible to summarise here the main issues in relation to language politics in Catalonia. See Woolard (2016) for a recent comprehensive review.

also displayed through other means as, for example, choosing luxury (and expensive) accommodation for student trips.

The school's atmosphere is perceived to have become more elitist as a result of internationalisation. Even though most participants engage in class disavowal, for which they might be right as FIS families neither belong to the global nor to the local 1% wealthiest elite, the type of education on offer is designed to cater for the needs of the privileged. Through the changes implemented in the last decade, the institution seeks to provide their students access to the imagined privileged communities beyond the nation.

4.1 The Mandarin Chinese Programme

The Mandarin language programme was started before the school's internationalising drive in 2008. It was initially offered as an extracurricular activity. As mentioned earlier, the shift to internationality meant that the school's multilingual programme became a priority, and Mandarin was put centre stage. The new school administrators decided to 'consolidate' the programme by, first, institutionalising it, that is, making it compulsory for all students; secondly, extending the number of years of Chinese; and thirdly, making it possible for students to continue the learning of the language until the end of compulsory secondary schooling (age 16).

At present Mandarin Chinese is a compulsory subject from infant school (age 4) until Year 4 (age 9-10). Previously they would stop at Year 2 (age 8). This means that students have 6 years of compulsory Mandarin classes once a week. In Year 5 they can choose whether to continue studying Chinese or whether to switch to another FL, either German or French. This becomes the second FL they will study until they finish compulsory secondary education. If they decide to take up either of those two languages, they can continue learning Chinese through the extracurricular classes on offer at the school (called the 'Chinese workshop').

4.2 Data Collection

The data analysed in this article comes from a two-year critical sociolinguistic ethnography (Heller, Pietikäinen and Pujolar 2018) of FIS, conducted during the academic years 2014-2015 and 2015-2016. The ethnography aimed to understand the ongoing processes of internationalisation and multilingualisation of the school, of which the institutionalisation of Chinese constituted only a small part. Numerous types of data were collected: field observation narratives from various spaces of formal and informal interaction among students and between teachers and students; audio-recordings of classes; in-depth interviews with families, students, teachers, coordinators and school administrators; institutional texts from different sources; statistics; questionnaire surveys; visual materials, etc. For this paper, we have used ethnographic observations of the Chinese classes, teaching materials, interviews with educators –including the head teacher and the primary school coordinator-, interviews with families, photographs of the school’s landscapes, web documents and opinion questionnaires that were distributed among students and families to gain wider insights into how the language curriculum was perceived by these two groups of actors.

5. Data Analysis

This section is divided into two parts. In the first one, we shall try to shed light on the institutional side, that is, on how Chinese is mobilised by the school for identity building purposes, whereas in the second one the focus will be on understanding the viewpoint of families and students and the alignments and misalignments with institutional discourses.

5.1 The Institutional Side: Instrumentalising Chinese to Construct an Elitist and International Profile

5.1.1 Languages in the Process of Internationalisation

We began fieldwork shortly after the Chinese New Year celebrations in 2015, the year of the goat. During a school tour with Roser, the primary education coordinator, one of us (Andrea) noticed the decorations made by students to honour this Chinese celebration hung on the big windows along the main corridor. Roser told her that students loved learning Chinese because they had fun in class. ‘They do it through songs and games’, she said. Andrea could see that she was happy to talk about the programme, but somehow implicit in her words was the belief that the weekly one-hour class of Mandarin was not very demanding academically. Yet whenever Andrea told the teachers that she was interested in seeing how languages contributed to the internationalisation of the school, they always suggested that she should go to a Chinese class, or talk to Ivan, the Chinese language teacher. Why was that so? Clearly, the Chinese programme was presented as something special and distinctive to the school, but this seemed somehow at odds with the playful nature of the classes most teachers described.

To comprehend the key role of Chinese, we need to go back to 2008, when the revamping of the school began due, essentially, to stagnant enrollment rates. As we can see in the extract below, the new ‘international’ identity that the school wanted to project pivoted on its increased multilingualisation. Dora, the interviewee, is the foundation stage teacher.

Extract 1. *D: Dora, foundation stage teacher; A: Andrea, researcher*

01	D: van veure que la població d'aquí\ els	01	D: they saw that the population from here\ the
02	pares d'aquí\ tenien que rebre quelcom	02	parents from here\ had to receive
03	diferent de la resta d'escoles públiques\	03	something different from the rest of state
04	(.) i van veure que per què no aprofitar	04	schools\ (.) and they saw\ why not take
05	que el nen és molt receptiu en aquestes	05	advantage of the fact that kids are very
06	edats\ perquè en comptes de tindre una	06	receptive at these ages\ so that instead of
07	mestra catalana que ajudi a la mestra	07	having a Catalan teacher helping the
08	catalana/ una figura de la mestra que	08	Catalan teacher/ having a teacher that helps
09	ajuda en anglès\ (.) no hi havia xinès\ no	09	in English\ (.) there wasn't Chinese yet\
10	hi havia tantes extraescolars:: (.) jo diria	10	there weren't so many extracurricular
11	que ha estat amb els anys que s'han anat	11	activities:: (.) I'd say that it's been over the
12	implementant coses noves\ no oferia	12	years that we've implemented new things\
13	gaires coses diferents a la resta d'escoles	13	it did not offer different things from the
14	de Sant Medir\ i mica en mica van veure\	14	rest of schools in Sant Medir\ and little by
15	perquè no oferir una mica més\	15	little they saw\ why not offer a bit more\
16	A: creus que és una manera de posicionar-se	16	A: is this a way of positioning itself in the
17	en el mercat educatiu/	17	educational market/
18	D: clar\ clar\ és evident\ es creu en el	18	D: of course\ clearly\ we believe in the project
19	projecte però és evident que una escola	19	but it's obvious that a private school has to
20	privada ha d'oferir quelcom diferent (.)	20	offer something different (.) because they
21	perquè tenen competència d'altres	21	have competition from other schools\ but
22	escoles\ però es creu en el que es fa\ (.)	22	we believe in what we do\ (.) it's not like
23	no es fa de manera inventada\	23	we invent things\

The education that FIS offered was no longer perceived to be distinctive by families in this city where state schools are well-reputed. Language (and multilingualism more specifically) was constructed as the axis articulating the school's renewed efforts at repositioning itself in the local market. We observe how the school targeted the middle-classes and not the upper classes, as it aimed to compete with the public sector offer (line 3) and not with other existing private schools in the area.

Internationalisation was most visibly 'done' through multilingualisation, which was, in Dora's words, a gradual process, and initially meant more English. In fact, in 2008 a trilingual school policy was put in place, where Spanish, Catalan and English would share equal space in the curriculum. Like Dora, most teachers identified the language programme not only as the distinctive feature of the school, but as one of its 'strengths', something that made it a 'good' school. It is interesting to notice how, in her first turn, Dora transitions from offering a 'different' type of education (line 03) to offering 'more' (line 15). Clearly, the educational changes at FIS are meant to equip the students with distinct knowledge types that will make them stand out. It is in this competition frame, both collective and individual, that 'different'

becomes ‘more’. Language skills are the raw material on which the institution’s not only international but also elite profile is built, as it constantly tries to ‘stay ahead of the game’ (Kenway and Fahey, 2014). In fact, we claim that the internationalisation of the school epitomised by its multilingualisation is a process of re-elitisation, the means whereby it tries to present itself as furnishing the added value capitals that will guarantee students’ success in the globalised economy. This is in line with developments in elite schooling around the world (Maxwell 2018).

Another of the key selling points connected to internationality (and multilingualism) is the ways in which the school works to enhance students’ cultural flexibility and open-mindedness in order to prepare them for a global context. In Extract 2, the head teacher (Ermengol) explains how accomplishing this objective meant altering the linguistic landscapes of the school.

Extract 2. *E: Ermengol, head teacher*

01	E: i l’altre tema\ en una escola com aquesta que	01	E: and the other question\ in a school like this
02	jo sempre la defineixo com una escola	02	one that I always define as a Catalan
03	catalana amb projecció internacional/	03	school with an international projection/
04	catalana espanyola amb projecció	04	Catalan Spanish with international
05	internacional/ (.) necessita fomentar la	05	projection/ (.) it needs to promote the
06	cultura internacional dins de l’escola\ i per	06	international culture inside the school\ and
07	fomentar la cultura internacional a l’escola	07	to promote the international culture in the
08	s’havia de fer molt vivencial\ i és per aquí	08	school it had to be made experiential\ and
09	com vam canviar tot el tema de la retolació/	09	that’s why we changed signage/ to make it
10	fer-la trilingüe\	10	trilingual\

Making the school international entailed not just introducing more English or widening the linguistic offer of the school, but also ‘promoting the international culture’ (line 5). This meant acting on a number of levels, including the physical space. Internationality was conceptualised as something to be experienced through and across institutional life. The first stage was to adjust signage to the official trilingual policy (i.e. Spanish, Catalan and English) to visibilise the school’s new identity-in-the-making. Soon, the other foreign languages taught (French, German and Chinese) started to gain prominence. Chinese was the most important one, and the

immersion, although more aspirational than real, is therefore another key element contributing to the process of (re)elitisation of the school.

5.1.2 *The Benefits of Chinese*

Initially, the discourse that legitimised the teaching of Mandarin was a cognitive one, as it was claimed that learning Mandarin would help students think more and differently, following ideas about its potential for enhanced cognitive development (as reported in Hua and Wei 2014). Chinese was construed as an innovative teaching formula to develop children's mental abilities and their interest in other languages in the early years. This line of argument is still prominent in the school. The learning of Mandarin is presented as a fun way of fostering the development of flexible auditory and articulatory skills and as aiding children with abstract reasoning. Teachers also spoke of Chinese helping children acquire alternative thinking and reasoning strategies.

Though the discourse of fun learning and cognitive gains might be still at play, we noticed that the school had recently broadened the discursive basis of legitimation of the Mandarin programme. This was done in order to add a new distinctive feature to its language curriculum: they are the only school in Catalonia where students can pursue Chinese until age 16. Unlike French or German, Chinese is befitting for the construal of the school's elite profile in many ways. On the one hand, it offers a unique learning experience that will allegedly help students develop parts of the brain or listening/pronunciation abilities that otherwise may remain underdeveloped. On the other hand, it is a rare type of linguistic capital that will confer distinction on students as future job-seekers in a global context, as Montse, one of the primary school coordinators, explains below.

Extract 3. *M: Montse, primary school coordinator*

01	M: per l'altre costat doncs perquè bueno\	01	M: and on the other hand because well\
02	perquè Xina és una economia emergent\	02	because China is an emerging economy\
03	i nosaltres el que procurem és preparar	03	and we want to prepare our students for
04	els alumnes pel futur/ per tant/ no i jo	04	the future/ therefore/ and I think that
05	penso que els pares quan vam fer totes	05	parents when we had meetings with
06	les reunions de cara l'any que ve per	06	them regarding the coming year and
07	escollir fer xinès o no/ doncs ho viuen	07	whether to choose taking Chinese or not/
08	com un plus/ no/ (.) llavors els pares em	08	they see it as a plus/ right/ (.) and so
09	deien/ és que si la meva filla ha	09	parents were saying/ if my daughter
10	d'aprendre francès doncs s'apuntarà a	10	wants to learn French she will sign up in
11	una acadèmia i ja aprendrà prou francès	11	a language school and will learn enough
12	com per situar-se a la vida/ aprendrà	12	French to make a living/ she will learn
13	prou alemany/ jo puc enviar la meva filla	13	enough German/ I can send my daughter
14	a París un any\ puc enviar la meva filla a	14	to Paris one year\ I can send my daughter
15	Berlin un any/ a la Xina/ tal i com és la	15	to Berlin one year/ but to China/ the way
16	Xina...	16	China is...

The commodifying discourse around Chinese is tied to an assumption of future value for this language in a constantly changing world; FIS is presented as a school that prepares children for success by anticipating what skills might be needed in the future, by foreseeing 'emerging' new capitals and acting on these predictions, and by providing unique opportunities, a typical feature of elite schooling (Ball 2003; Fahey 2014; Maxwell and Aggleton 2014).

The asset value recently given to Chinese has been paralleled by the transformation of the programme from 'play time' to a focus on achievement, proficiency and level accreditation. Andrea's notes on her first experience of a Mandarin lesson reflect that. She realised that the vision she had gained of the Chinese programme being 'soft' academically was not quite true, as Ivan's methodological approach to teaching was by no means 'relaxed'.

Extract 4.

All the class is together for the first time in the whole morning, they are excited (chatty) and some do not behave. That changes when Ivan [the teacher] enters the room. The tone becomes more strict and disciplined. While the teacher copies characters on the board, he asks two volunteering pairs to take the stage and roleplay a conversation. When they finish, the teacher asks some of them to repeat some words. He emphasizes the pronunciation of specific words. The teacher puts a lot of stress on the tones of the language; he repeats each word three times. The rhythm of the lesson is quite fast. Ivan combines the use of self-made materials with exercises from a textbook. Activities range from role plays, games, and vocabulary exercises, to character recognition and calligraphy. The dynamics

of the games are quite serious, though. Students work individually, in pairs or in bigger teams. Ivan is systematically correcting tone, pronunciation and lexical choices, and the lesson plan and learning objectives are very clear. Ivan comes across as a very organized and committed teacher. (Field narratives, 5th March 2015)

The school's new role for Mandarin has required a number of practical measures, the first of which was to change the Chinese teacher. Hiring a local teacher (Ivan) was, according to the head teacher, a way of guaranteeing teacher commitment and investing in the continuity of the programme. At the same time, the school could have greater control over methodological choices which would be culturally closer to students' FL learning experiences than those of previous native teachers of Mandarin. That way the school ensured efficiency and achievement in language learning. Given the complexity of teaching only through Chinese, classes were partly delivered in English. This was used as a way of 'increasing the English-medium instruction hours', but also as part of the strategy of bringing the language closer to the children, as Mandarin was perceived as a distant and thus difficult language that was hard to access. A further development to give the Chinese programme a more solid and attractive outlook was to promote the cultural aspect, in line with the school's attempts to create an atmosphere of immersion in the 'international culture'. For this purpose, the school has recently incorporated a native Chinese assistant as language teacher furnishing the programme with the dose of cultural authenticity it lacked.

With the consolidation of Mandarin came a new role for this language and for Ivan, the teacher. In our second fieldwork period (2015-16), we noticed that Chinese-themed decorations had become less circumstantial than previously.

Extract 5.

The monkey themed posters that welcomed parents at the school's entrance hall are kept there way beyond the Chinese New Year. Ivan also exhibits his students' work in other visible spaces. These displays create a Chinese-friendly environment that is both indicative

of the hard-work of Ivan, and also, of the school's interest in making visible its international and global profile. (Fieldnotes, 13th February 2016)

Yet there was another objective which had remained invisible to us, and which we were made aware of by following Ivan around. Ivan had been assigned a new role. As the school was receiving more Chinese families, he became a mediator between the school and these families. He was in charge of showing the school to prospective parents and also of doing the linguistic and cultural integration of newly-arrived students. He was the person of reference for those students. One day, as Andrea and Ivan were having an informal conversation at the staff room during one of his breaks, he was called to assist a Chinese student who was not feeling well; Andrea also saw WhatsApp conversations with parents on topics related to their children's education, but also inviting him to engage in activities with them outside of the school. The Chinese-friendly atmosphere created by the decorations and the poster displays mentioned above was, thus, a way of welcoming these new *clients* the school was eager to recruit both practically, as more students mean more income, but also symbolically, as their foreignness and geographically distant origins contribute to constructing an authentically international school profile.

5.2 The Discourse of Families and Students: Institutional Alignments and Challenging

Voices

Our ethnographic study sought to gather as many voices as possible, and therefore, wanted to find out to what extent the families and children aligned themselves with or contested the school's discourse about Chinese. For that purpose we carried out a survey among 55 families whose children were in Year 4 (aged 9-10) of primary education, interviewed some in depth and also observed and interviewed students who were taking optional Chinese classes in Year 5 (aged 11-12 years old).

Of the 55 families surveyed, only 5% expressed having an indifferent opinion towards the teaching of Chinese at FIS. The rest (95%) valued the programme positively or very positively. However, in the ethnographic interviews, defined as contextually-sensitive and fairly unstructured interactional events designed to obtain the viewpoint of informants (Codó 2008; Heller *et al.* 2018), positive appraisals of the Chinese programme did not correspond to perceived learning achievements or hopes of future instrumental value for the language. In the extract below we see how David, one of the parents, assesses the Chinese programme positively before he adds that he does not think that children learn anything (line 2). For him, the benefits are linked to the development of flexible listening skills, ‘educating the ear’, rather than the acquisition of specific linguistic competence. His positive opinion is grounded on the idea that ‘languages do not take up brain space’ and that when children are young ‘you can put anything in’ (but maybe not get anything out in the form of significant verbal production?). We see a continuity with the school’s arguments on the cognitive benefits of Mandarin. In turn, Josep, a parent too, questions the assumed usefulness of Chinese, and agrees with David that the benefits might be more cognitive/attitudinal than instrumental. His positive evaluation is justified on the grounds that learning Chinese will do children ‘no harm’ (line 22 in the English version).

Extract 6. *D: David, parent*

01	D: a mi- a mi el xinès em sembla super bé/ no	01	D: for me- for me the Chinese programme is
02	crec que aprenguin::: res\ (.) però em sembla	02	great/ I don't think they lea:::rn anything\ (.)
03	bé/ perquè\ (.) a aquestes edats petites/	03	but I think it's good/ because\ (.) at these
04	t'adones (.) clar/ jo crec que- jo parlo bé	04	early ages/ you realise (.) okay/ I think that-
05	anglès/ però jo he après pue::s/ em::: () com	05	I speak good English/ but I have learnt it/
06	tots nosaltres\ vosaltres segur que heu	06	erm::: () like all of us\ I'm sure you've also
07	après...		learnt ...

Extract 7. *J: Josep, parent*

01	J: =el meu cas no\ o sigui jo estic d'acord e::/ a	01	J: = in my case no\ I mean I agree that e:rm/ at
02	nivell de fonètica\ (.) i de:: d'agafar això	02	a phonetic level\ (.) and to:: to be exposed to
03	exposició a altres idiomes/ (.) em sembla	03	other languages/ (.) I think it's good/ and I
04	molt bé / i em donen la sensació/ (.) bueno jo	04	have the feeling/ (.) well I particularly
05	particularment lo del xines/ (1.0) NO HO	05	DON'T think/ (.) I don't see Chinese as a
06	veig com una llengua del futur/ (.) a	06	language of the future/ (.) unlike English\ (.)
07	diferència de l'anglès\ (.) perquè:/ el fet de	07	becau::se/ the fact that's very different/ (.)
08	ser potser mo:lt diferent/ (.) i que no sigui	08	and that it's not a second language in/ (.)
09	segona llengua de/ (.) gairebé cap país/	09	almost any country/ because English/ it's
10	perquè l'anglès/ es veritat que:/ es parla:/	10	true tha:t/ it's spo::ken/ maybe it has fewer
11	potser té menys parlants: primaris que el	11	primary spea:k:ers than Chinese\ but as a
12	xinès\ però com a segona llengua/ és mo:lt	12	second language/ it's a lot mo:re universal
13	més universal que el xinès\ (.) i em dona la	13	than Chinese\ (.) and I have the feeling that
14	sensació que el xinès/ és tan complicat per la	14	Chinese/ is so complicated for the majority
15	majoria de països/ (.) només que sigui per	15	of countries/ (.) just look at the alphabet/ it'll
16	l'alfabet/ que serà difícil que:/	16	be difficult for it/ to internationalise as much
17	s'internacionalitzi tant com l'ANGLÈS/ o	17	as ENGLISH/ or as any other similar
18	com algun altre idioma:/ semblant\ (.)	18	la:nguage\ (.) (so) I am not that convinced/
19	(doncs) jo no estic TANT convençut/ de	19	tha::t tha::t/ it will be useful in the long run\
20	que:: de que:: / li hagi de ser mo:lt útil a llarg	20	(.) but anyway I mean like I said/ exposure
21	termini\ (.) de totes maneres és això/ primer	21	will do them no harm/ pronunciation will do
22	la exposició no li fa cap mal/ la pronúncia:	22	them no harm/ (.) and when they are children
23	no li fa cap mal/ (.) i ara de petits lo important	23	the most important thing is right-/ to dare try
24	és que no-/ que s'atreveixin amb tot\	24	everything\

In the open-ended answers to the questionnaire, half of the arguments put forward by the parents in favour of Chinese related to the intellectual challenge the learning of it entails, and the assumed benefits in terms of attitude ('mental openness'), structuring of the brain and cognitive development; the other half were linked to future profit considerations attributed to China's growing economic and political power, and to the distinction it confers on students ('an added value' and a 'differential factor with respect to other schools'). So, both of the school's selling lines (cognitive and economic) were equally present among the families. As refers to the perceived importance of languages, most parents held the same view as Josep in Extract 7, that is, that English was still 'the most important' FL. In fact, English and the two local languages occupied the first three positions, although ordered differently depending on the families. It is significant, however, that Chinese (and not French or German) came 4th in the linguistic hierarchy.

As regards the students' opinions, they coincided with their parents in ranking Chinese 4th. Asked about whether they wanted to continue learning Chinese, students were divided (46% said no; 43% said yes; 11% did not know). In the in-depth interviews with those students

who were pursuing advanced Chinese classes (10 and 11-year olds), they all highlighted the future (economic) potential of the language, either because they themselves believed in it or because their parents insisted that Chinese would offer them many labour-related opportunities. Most children grounded the future key role of Chinese on the economic and demographic power of China. One student used the metaphor of a disease that ‘gets transmitted’ to refer to the spread of Chinese globally as ‘Chinese citizens move around’. However, the majority of respondents placed the significance of Chinese in a future time frame, as most of them identified English as the most important language of the present. In the extract below, Pau aligns himself with the hopeful but uncertain future value of Chinese.

Extract 8. A: *Andrea, researcher*; P: *Pau, student*

01	A: i llavors\ a tu per què creus que et servirà/	01	A: and so\ to you what do you think Chinese
02	fer\ el xinès\	02	will be useful for\
03	P: e::m\ pe::rquè::\ (.) per exemple/ ara:\ (.)	03	P: er::m\ be::cau::se\ (.) for example/ now:\ (.)
04	potser estats units/ es veu com mo::lt\	04	maybe the United States/ is seen as ve:ry\
05	anda:: què ri::c i::\ (.) el seu preside::nt/	05	wow:: how ri::ch a:nd\ (.) its president/
06	anda::/ què::\ fo::rt/ i:\ (.) tot tot mo::lt\ (.)	06	wow/ ho:w\ stro::ng/ and:\ (.) everything
07	positiu\ (.) i per això/ s’estudia tant	07	ve:ry\ (.) positive/ (.) and that’s the reason
08	anglès\ però/ (.) crec que d’aquí po::c/ (.)	08	why English is so broadly studied\ but/ (.)
09	això: farà:/ un gir\ inesperat\ i xina	09	I think soo:n/ (.) this will turn around\
10	agafarà el poder\	10	unexpectedly\ and China will seize power\
11	A: i llavors tu\	11	A: and then you\
12	P: i llavors jo/ (.) [sabré xinès i diré::/	12	P: and then I/ (.) [will know Chinese and I
13	A: [que estaràs preparat\	13	will sa:y/
		14	A: [that you are ready\

Pau envisions a future world where Chinese will replace English as the language of wider communication. However, it is interesting to see how he depicts the substitution of English by Chinese, namely as an unexpected turn. Pau’s claim reveals that, in line with Tabiola and Lorente (2017), learning Chinese means investing in capital the instrumental value of which is difficult to ascertain now, and depends largely on sudden political shifts.

To summarise, among the students who pursued Chinese to an advanced level, still a very small minority (only 6 out of over 70 students) in 2015/16, the assumption was that knowing Chinese would bring them future rewards in the form of ‘added value’ distinction in the job market. The generalised perception of the rest of parents and students, by contrast, was

that learning Chinese was positive, although the economic benefits for the future of students was not a consensual matter.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study has discussed the ways in which school language policy makers, teachers, students and families made sense of the existence of a Mandarin language programme in an international school in Barcelona. We have seen that the introduction of Mandarin was part and parcel of the internationalisation of FIS, a process that was undertaken primarily to sustain profit-making in a harsh economic context (Sunyol, 2017). Internationalisation was a necessary move to maintain the attractiveness of the FIS project, and its distinctive, elite nature, in a context where many state schools were offering a similar type of education. In fact, the process of internationalisation went hand-in-hand with a process to re-elitise the school. Internationalisation initially meant increased Englishisation, although, unlike in other private schools, Spanish and particularly Catalan have retained an important role at FIS. This is part of its distinctive identity-in-the-making, as we can see in Extract 2, where the principal describes FIS as a Catalan-Spanish school with an international projection. The compulsory Chinese language scheme has to be placed in that same institutional agenda: defining a unique educational programme that singles out FIS and makes it more exclusive. This pursuit is also apparent in and through the multiple new initiatives that are implemented every year (international exchange schemes; semester/school years abroad; on-site official language exams; International Baccalaureate programmes, etc.). Indeed, our two-year fieldwork has enabled us to observe to what extent the school seems to be on a speeding race to be the first to incorporate on its programme the newest and most exclusive forms of educational capital.

Although the introduction of Chinese was initially perceived by some families as a '*pijada*' (a nonsensical posh addition) that the school used as a selling point with no academic value, the school justified it based on the assumed cognitive rewards it brought to children,

insisting there was an educational basis to it (as Dora claims in Extract 1). Sceptical parents, like Josep (Extract 7), found it very hard to counter this argument, and in the absence of evidence against, believed learning Chinese would do children ‘no harm’. The early introduction of Chinese ran parallel to the early introduction of English, but while the latter programme aimed to produce proficient speakers, the former aimed to produce better thinkers, better learners and better citizens (through its appeal to cultural broad-mindedness).

Yet the perception was that the value of the Chinese programme stayed on the symbolic level, as students would stop at Year 4 and have no opportunities to continue. The decision to introduce the ‘Chinese workshop’ aimed to remedy the situation, but the true consolidation came with the institutionalisation of Chinese as one among the three second FLs on choice at FIS. It is undeniable that the complete institutionalisation of Chinese makes the school’s multilingual programme more attractive on the grounds that the cultural capital FIS student-clients can accumulate is bigger. In the race for augmenting one’s assets, FIS offers a unique opportunity to gain access to what is still a rare language skill in Catalonia, and in so doing enhances the school’s elite profile. By broadening the offer, the FIS curriculum can also appeal to more families and to different ones (both locally, as it is the only school in the area that offers Chinese to an academic level, and internationally, with the new market niche of Chinese middle-class families having opened recently).

Yet this is all speculation, as Tabiola and Lorente (2017) discuss. The value of Chinese, but also of many of the other educational capitals offered by FIS, cannot be ascertained. This is where the logic of contemporary elitism lies. In rapidly changing environments, only those with the capacity to intuitively figure out the direction that socio-economic shifts will take will possess the capitals needed to succeed. Pau in Extract 8 imagines a world where dramatic changes will happen soon, and where everybody’s knowledge of English will not be enough for the new circumstances. By contrast, he will be equipped not with one but with two global languages. However, the unexpected turn that Pau depicts indexes the extent to which Chinese

is still not a secure asset. Investing in it is almost like an act of faith, an intuitive move for families and students, but one that is costly in terms of money, time and effort. The economic returns of Chinese can only be guaranteed in the logic of accumulation; the more capital, the more competitive students will become in the job markets where they will circulate as adults. Chinese will certainly constitute a quantitative ‘plus’ for students, but maybe not a qualitative one. The elite practices of FIS, thus, consist in offering students unique opportunities for investment that are not mainstream, and if the value of the assets increases, opportunities for future returns will become distinctive because of their exceptional nature. In any case, which of students’ many investments (or which combinations of them) will turn out to constitute valuable capitals may be, in many cases, difficult to establish. What seems clear, however, is that by choosing Chinese (and other forms of speculative capital such as the IB programmes), students index neoliberal subjectivities that do have guaranteed future appreciation. The risk-taking, forward-looking and self-sacrificed student that undertakes the learning of a challenging and difficult language, like Chinese, not out of a genuine, general interest in the language and its culture, unlike in Hua and Wei (2014) and Pérez-Milans (2015), but to ‘stay ahead of the game’, will certainly make an attractive employee. The families, in turn, can rest assured that they have nurtured and carefully managed their kids’ potentials (Park 2016), in a visionary, hence neoliberally responsible, manner.

However, as with any speculative capital, there might be disagreement. In the questionnaires, but especially, in the ethnographic interviews, some of the parents and students cast doubts –if not explicitly challenged– the future significance of Chinese. Yet in case of doubt, it is always wise to stay cautious. In that sense, with Chinese there are always benefits to be reaped. The cognitive advantage argument is hard to refute. The children that have learned Chinese, even if they do not develop advanced language skills, will allegedly make more open-minded, flexible and creative workers. It is in that sense that the teaching of Chinese symbolises and accomplishes the educational agenda for ‘globeducation’ of the school. Mandarin projects

the school (and its students) on to the world of the future, and turns FIS into a truly international school of the 21st century. Chinese is a winning ticket no matter how you look at it. For the school, Chinese is also a ‘plus’, an index of the institutional zeal to go one step beyond and one step ahead, and to constantly search for new sources of (potential) distinction and academic excellence. In this educational race, no one stops; and they are all looking around them so as not to be caught off-guard.

Annex

Symbols used in transcripts

PART: participant name	[] turn overlapping with similarly marked turn - self interruption
(.) short pause (0.5 seconds)	= continuation of utterance after overlapping
(:) long pause (0.5 – 1.5 seconds)	\ falling intonation
() incomprehensible fragment	/ rising intonation
AA loud talking	(()) slowly
A:: lengthening of vowel or consonant sound	

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