

The Impact of the 1977 Linguistic Reform on Chinese Montrealers' Integration into Quebec's French-Language Education System

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Abstract

This article examines how Quebec's provincial education rules, especially the requirement introduced in 1977 under the Charter of the French Language (Bill 101), have shaped the integration of Chinese Canadians who settled in Montreal. It highlights two complementary dynamics. First, French-language primary and secondary schooling is presented as a driver of French acquisition and as a pathway toward broader access to school networks, higher education, and employment. Second, everyday school attendance and related extracurricular spaces are presented as contexts that foster intercommunity socialization in multilingual settings. The article also emphasizes the persistence of Chinese languages in household and inside the community life and it notes that attitudes toward Bill 101 vary within the community.

Keywords: Quebec French language education system, Quebec Bill 101, Mandatory French language schooling, Linguistic integration, Chinese community school.

1. Introduction: Historical Background

For nearly two centuries, the Chinese community has continuously accelerated its pace of expatriation toward the West and other parts of Asia, often with the aim of fleeing repeated economic and political crises associated with Chinese governments described as repressive, which, until quite recently, had never really succeeded in raising the standard of living of the population. These

situations of voluntary exile forced this community to adapt to new environments that were often hostile to its presence. Among the destinations that represented these options for settlement, late nineteenth-century America offered many opportunities for young Chinese immigrants capable of enduring work in mines, in agricultural fields, and in railway construction. Following the completion of major railway projects and a decline in demand for raw materials, a more difficult Canadian economic context emerged as early as the

1920s, described as a deflationary recession . This increasingly unfavorable context then encouraged Canadian authorities to limit the arrival of Chinese immigrants, whom they had never truly recognized except for strictly instrumental reasons .

1. Restrictive Policies and Postwar Liberalization

Within a deeply rooted conservative ideal, various Canadian and American laws then constrained and even prohibited Chinese immigration to Canada until the mid-twentieth century . The progressive relaxation of laws restricting the rights of the Chinese Canadian community and limiting immigration possibilities after the Second World War finally made it possible for Chinese immigration to Canada to resume gradually. The text presents this as the moment when the Chinese community in Canada begins to emancipate itself.

Like many Chinese immigrant communities around the world, the Chinese Canadian community had to become familiar with new cultures,

new languages, and mindsets sometimes diametrically opposed to what they had always known in Asia.

Among these Chinese migrants who came to Canada, some moved more cautiously toward the eastern part of the country in the late nineteenth century, whereas it was mainly from the 1970s onward that this part of Canada experienced the beginning of a Sino Asian migratory intensity that remains very present today.

2. Research

Within this context, this article aims to present how the rules governing Quebec's provincial education system, which have regulated immigrants school attendance since 1977, have positively influenced the integration of Chinese Canadians who chose to live in eastern Canada, more particularly in Montreal, a city with a francophone linguistic majority.

The results of this research rely primarily on interviews conducted with diverse members of the Chinese Montreal community between 2019 and 2023 and refer to the period from 1950 to 2005. The article therefore seeks to show how, after

1977, the evolution of Quebec's school framework, and more particularly the obligation of French-language schooling associated with the Charter of the French Language, contributed to strengthening the conditions of integration of the Chinese Montreal community to the community.

3. French Schooling After 1977 as a Mechanism of Integration

Although often criticized, the adoption of the Charter of the French Language in Quebec in 1977 constitutes a decisive turning point in the process of integrating the Chinese community in the province. According to this research, primary and secondary schooling in French, by becoming the norm for immigrants, results in increased mastery not only of written French but also in the acquisition of local Quebec francophone accents specific to this region of North America. Moreover, because it organizes daily participation in a francophone linguistic environment, school becomes a structuring mechanism that brings young Chinese

Montrealers closer to Quebec's dominant institutional and cultural references, formerly associated mainly with the dominant community.

The research also shows that the obligation for French-language schooling for children from immigrant backgrounds was interpreted in many Chinese Montreal families both as a necessary constraint and as a lever for integration, insofar as it prepared future generations for the reality of a Quebec that was more conscious of its francophone identity. This inclusion of the Chinese community in the francophone school environment then enabled an expansion of access to school networks and higher education, as well as increased employment opportunities, through the removal of language barriers. This new reality transformed individual trajectories and increased the community's participation in Montreal's francophone space.

4. Household Language Practices and Community-Based Chinese Schooling

The research nonetheless recalls that, in many households, Chinese languages remain a daily priority, notably because members of

the older generation do not master French or English. One witness expresses this as follows: “Because, traditionally, the older generation ... they don’t speak French and English. So that means at home they have to speak their Chinese dialect.” In this context, French-language schooling takes on particular importance, since it becomes a place where linguistic competencies and social codes are built, facilitating interactions with the majority and with francophone institutions.

However, the research qualifies the idea that the francization of the Chinese community would erase the importance of origin languages. It argues, on the contrary, that youth maintain direct contact with Chinese languages. Beyond the family environment, this reality is made possible, among other things, through confessional Chinese schools held on Saturdays and Sundays, which serve as places for linguistic maintenance, notably for learning written Chinese. An interview excerpt concretely illustrates the articulation between

schooling in Quebec and community relay institutions: “... Saturday and Sunday teaching Cantonese, Chinese and also the kung fu. ... The boys went to school and my mother-in-law, and I went shopping and, uh, before the boys, go into Chinese school, we spend about half an hour to 40 minutes with Mr. Lee, doing kung fu.” This passage describes a hybrid educational practice in which French-language schooling is linked to a still very active Chinese Montreal cultural and linguistic socialization.

5. Schooling and Intercommunity Socialization

Beyond learning French, the research highlights a second mechanism linked to the school system, namely intercommunity socialization among youth. Up to the 1980s, several testimonies show that the socialization of youth from Montreal’s Chinatown took place in a multilingual context, where the home remained strongly marked by Chinese cultural practices, while school constituted a francophone or anglophone world shared with classmates from other communities. According to the research, this school attendance was accompanied by an extension of friendship

networks beyond the school perimeter, often concentrated in meeting and leisure places bordering Montreal's Chinatown.

The research also specifies that, during this same period, children from Chinatown mixed with local francophone and anglophone youth, as well as with other nationalities, by sharing leisure activities and sports in a plurality of languages. The implication of this statement is that integration would not depend only on the language learned at school, but also on the relationships connected to schooling and made possible when a shared space, school-based or extracurricular, exists.

6. Diverging Views on Bill 101 and Linguistic Strategies

French-language schooling was nonetheless not a process that was unanimously consensual across the community. The testimonies indicate that certain reluctances existed, notably in segments close to anglophone milieus. On this point,

interviews conducted by Izumi Yamaguchi in 2003, during her doctoral research, show that a significant share of Chinese Montrealers value French-language schooling and bilingualism or even trilingualism, while others criticize Bill 101 because it did not allow them to learn English earlier. This nuance matters because it shows that the integrative role of school is also shaped by trade-offs between linguistic strategies, aspirations for social mobility, and differentiated forms of belonging within the community .

7. Conclusion

In sum, Quebec's school system after 1977 appears as an integration device mainly through two complementary pathways. On the one hand, the obligation of French-language schooling contributes to institutionalizing the learning of French and reducing linguistic isolation, which the research associates with an expansion of educational, professional, and institutional opportunities. On the other hand, attendance in a francophone school environment, combined with extracurricular and community spaces, facilitates intercommunity sociabilities in a

multilingual context. Finally, the article suggests that this integration occurs without making Chinese linguistic relay institutions disappear, since Chinese Montreal community classes on Saturdays and Sundays, social activities particularly among youth, and the family environment maintain plural cultural transmission and active multilingualism. This contributes to explaining the community's ability to combine participation in local society with continuity of Chinese Montreal identity.

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