

Knocking on the Chinese wall

First results of linguistic fieldwork in Chinese private businesses

Introduction

- Since the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Chinese migrants have been moving through and back into the Western Balkans
- Previous research on Chinese migration was predominantly ethnographic in nature
- **Research Gap:** The migrants face a sizable gap between their native language and culture and the local language/s and cultures and thus employ different linguistic resources and methods

→ **Goal: Research these linguistic resources and methods**

What we know so far

- Very little research done in Zagreb and Belgrade (s. references handout):
 - Arrival after the Yugoslav (1994/95) war and bombing of Belgrade (1999)
 - The migrants are primarily merchants and restaurant owners
 - Their numbers are anywhere between a few to up to several ten thousands:
 - ~ 60-80 shops, ~ 240-320 Chinese in Zgb
 - ~ 600 shops in Blok 70, ~ min. 2000 Chinese in Bgd
 - The Chinese „keep to themselves“ and hardly integrate into the local society
 - Many anecdotal stories of Chinese diligence and language proficiency



Interaction with the local community

Little contact with the locals outside of work
(diverse reasons: lack of motivation due to working hours or intended impermanence of stay [Zgb, Bgd], or the Chinese community and centre cover all needs of the community [Bgd; Zgb?])

Signs of permanent integration lacking
(reportedly highly mobile, children are sent back to China, facilities that cover life needs are lacking)

First steps of permanent integration
(establishing permanent homes, children stay, adopting local names, mixed marriages, facilities that cover needs like food shopping or leisure)

- The working hours don't permit enough free time to make friends outside the family or centre
- Reportedly, the stay depended on the improvement of business during the course of the next few months
- The language skills don't reach beyond the buying-selling context (s. below)



Language

Use of linguistic resources

Two types of speakers: independent and dependent speakers
(Both types of speakers speak the local language for business purposes, but the independent speaker also has proficiency outside the buying-selling-context)

Choice of language (spoken and displayed)

Chinese with Chinese, other languages with others
(Exception: A chinese mother played in Serbian with her child)
Native dialect within the family, Mandarin with other Chinese
(even if the speakers are from the same region)
This is reflected in the linguistic landscapes of the spaces



the merchants were multilingual (e.g. Italian, English, Slovak)

the merchants spoke predominantly Serbian, even with international customers



Preliminary conclusion

- Belgrade seems to show signs of a slowly establishing community,
- while Zagreb seems to (for now) attract more mobile migrant merchants.
- The effect of these differences is to be researched:

Assumptions

1. **More dependent speakers in Zagreb**, as there is a lack of signs of integration, which is maybe due to the lack of pull factors to stay (welcoming society, better economic opportunities, facilities)
2. **More independent speakers in Belgrade**, since there are signs of integration

Open questions

- How come the Chinese went to a region so riddled with political, social and cultural distress?
- Why are so many Chinese staying in Serbia, but are leaving Croatia?
- What are the structures of the methods the Chinese employ to overcome language obstacles?
- What differences can we identify between independent and dependent speakers?
- **How is the local language they speak structured between the different types of speakers?**