The dynamics of Chinese learning journeys:
a longitudinal study of adult learners of Mandarin in Australia

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Abstract

The dynamics of Chinese learning journeys:  
a longitudinal study of adult learners of Mandarin in Australia

This thesis is concerned with the nature and development of adult learners’ involvement with learning and using Mandarin Chinese in the long term, in the context of other aspects of their lives. It examines their individual learning journeys for the interweaving and layering of different kinds of learning activity over time. The study looks beyond the relatively homogeneous student groups in the Chinese classrooms and lecture halls of large metropolitan universities, and instead gives a voice to the experience of people learning Chinese who are based in country areas, who choose distance learning, who are older, and who study part-time or independently for many years. The influence and effects of long-term learning Chinese learning, both on individual learners, but also through them upon the various contexts and communities which they inhabit, is considered.

Complexity theory is drawn upon as an appropriate framework for conceptualising the dynamics of the language learning journey: emphasises context, views diversity, change over time and non-linearity as central, and incorporates multiple interrelated timescales.

The enquiry is presented as a multi-layered longitudinal qualitative case study. Two surveys, 5 years apart, provide extensive reflective data from an ‘outer’ group of 26 participants. In addition, more frequent in-depth interviews and other activities conducted with an ‘inner’ group of 7 participants yield a complementary set of detailed data with a rich narrative component. The study introduces a method of multiple timeline analysis, and a concept of dynamic activity patterns, to represent and interpret learners’ engagement with learning Chinese as it evolves over time. The existence of fallow periods and their role within individual learning trajectories is also introduced, and explored from an identity perspective.

Conceptually, this thesis combines perspectives from adult and independent learning with those of applied linguistics to contribute, to developing perspectives on foreign language learning beyond the classroom and beyond the institution, a particular focus on the longitudinal view. Within the rapidly expanding disciplinary field of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL), this study offers a better understanding of the efforts, contexts and needs of individual long-term learners.
Certification

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis and all sources used have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Signature:
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Conventions, abbreviations, acronyms and Chinese terms list

Italic font is used when words from Chinese are annotated in the pinyin transliteration system.

Italics are used within the text to signal emphasis, and can highlight the introduction of new conceptual terminology.

Bold font is used in chapter 5 to highlight themes emerging from the data for discussion.

The convention of using uppercase font for conceptual metaphors is followed.

In-text quotations are within double inverted commas, unless they are indented as block quotes.

Single inverted commas are used to enclose terms introduced for the first time.

The individual learning stories in Chapter 7, and in Interludes 1 and 2 (which appear after Chapters 1 and 3 respectively) are distinguished by the use of a sans serif font.

Chinese language names and terms

(Note: tone marks are added here for reference, but when these terms are used within English text the tone marks are frequently omitted.)

*bopomofo* common name for *zhùyīn fūhào* transliteration system

*fántǐ* 繁体字 traditional or full-form characters

*guānxì* 关系 system of personalised networks of influence in Chinese society

*guóyǔ* 国语 Modern Standard Chinese or Mandarin (term used in Taiwan)

*Hànábān* 汉办 China National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (NOTCFL)

*hányǔ* 汉语 the Chinese language including its different dialect varieties (mainland Chinese term)

*hányǔ pīnỳīn* 汉语拼音, alphabetic transliteration system for Mandarin Chinese

*huáyǔ* 华语 Modern Standard Chinese or Mandarin (term used in Singapore, Philippines, Malaysia); sometimes also used as an equivalent to *hányǔ*

*jiānhuàzì, jiàntízi* 简化字 or 简体字 simplified characters

*pīnỳīn, hányǔ pīnỳīn* 拼音, 汉语拼音 alphabetic transliteration system for Mandarin Chinese

*pǔtōnhuà* 普通话 Modern Standard Chinese or Mandarin (term used in Mainland China)

*tàijíquán* 太极拳 Tai Chi (Tai Qi), or Chinese shadow boxing

*wényán* 文言 formal or literary Chinese

*zhiyīn fūhào, chu-yin* 注音符号 symbol-based transliteration system used in Taiwan
## Abbreviations and acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>Australian Capital Territory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BALLI</td>
<td>Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC</td>
<td>British Broadcasting Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAL</td>
<td>Chinese as an additional language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CALL</td>
<td>Computer-assisted language learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFL</td>
<td>Chinese as a foreign language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMC</td>
<td>Computer-mediated communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>CT</td>
<td>Complexity theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DE</td>
<td>Distance education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DL</td>
<td>Distance learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>DLL</td>
<td>Distance language learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>EFL</td>
<td>English as a foreign language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL</td>
<td>English as a second language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSI</td>
<td>Foreign Service Institute (USA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICT</td>
<td>Information and communication technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JFL</td>
<td>Japanese as a foreign language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2</td>
<td>Second language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIFE</td>
<td>Learning in Informal and Formal Environments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Master of Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSC</td>
<td>Modern Standard Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSN</td>
<td>an instant messaging service (and a collection of websites and services)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA, or N/A</td>
<td>not applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NALSAS</td>
<td>National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NALSSP</td>
<td>National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NNS</td>
<td>Non-native speaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTCFL</td>
<td>China National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, or Hanban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NS</td>
<td>Native speaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>New South Wales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QQ</td>
<td>Instant messaging service in China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RFDS</td>
<td>Royal Flying Doctor Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SILL</td>
<td>Strategy Inventory for Language Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLA</td>
<td>Second language acquisition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAFE</td>
<td>Technical and Further Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSC</td>
<td>Modern Standard Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TCFL</td>
<td>Teaching Chinese as a foreign language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TESOL</td>
<td>Teaching of English to speakers of other languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Full Form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TL</td>
<td>Target language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLRP</td>
<td>Teaching and Learning Research Programme (UK)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U3A</td>
<td>University of Third Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNE</td>
<td>University of New England, Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US, USA</td>
<td>United States, United States of America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VOIP</td>
<td>Voice over internet protocol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEA</td>
<td>Workers' Education Association</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Dedication

To my father, Tony Tasker, MD, FRCP (1915–2008)