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The Positioning and Predicaments of Chinese Language Education in an English-immersion Program: A Case Study of HFI

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Abstract: This case study examines how Chinese language education is situated within an English-immersion international school in China and what implications this positioning has for bilingual development and intercultural competence. Drawing on a three-month institutional internship, classroom observation, and information from the school's official website, the study addresses three research questions: (1) How does HFI integrate Chinese language and culture into an English-immersion programme? (2) What challenges does Chinese language education face in this bilingual context? and (3) What practical implications can be drawn to improve Chinese language education in similar settings? Findings show that HFI implements a curricular integration that retains core Chinese high-school courses alongside an AP programme. In addition, the school links Chinese cultural study to international activities to foster bilingual and bicultural competence. However, the teaching practice in international schools where English is the main medium of instruction often leads to the marginalization of Chinese in assessment and daily academic use, students negotiate contrasting classroom cultures, and L2 dominance poses risks to certain dimensions of L1 development. Building on bilingualism and translinguaging literature, this study puts forward improvement suggestions for curriculum design, teaching methods and at the school level. The study contributes to scholarship on internationalised

schooling in China, fills the gap of insufficient attention to Chinese language education in the field of international schools, and provides operational strategies for maintaining bilingual balance.

Keywords: Chinese language education; bilingual education; English-immersion programs

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标题: 英语浸入式背景下中文教育的定位与困境——基于华附国际部的个案研究

摘要: 本研究以一英语沉浸式国际学校（华附国际部 HFI）为案例，探讨中文课程在国际化学校体系中的定位及其对学生双语发展和跨文化能力的影响。研究基于在为期三个月的实习、课堂观察与该学校的官方网站信息，围绕三个研究问题展开：（1）HFI 如何在英语沉浸式环境中整合中文语言与文化，以培养学生的双语能力？（2）在双语教育环境中，中文教育面临哪些结构性与教学层面的挑战？（3）可从该案例中提炼哪些有助于改进国际学校中文教育的实践启示？研究结果表明，HFI 通过保留中国高中基础必修课程、与 AP 课程并行实施、并将中华文化学习融入国际交流活动，以促进学生的双语与双文化发展。然而，国际学校以英语为主要教学语言的教学实践导致汉语在评估和日常学术使用中经常被边缘化，第二语言的提升对母语发展的某些方面可能造成消极影响。基于此，本研究提出课程设计、教学法及学校层面的改进建议。研究的意义在于弥补国际学校领域对中文教育关注不足的缺口，并为维持双语均衡提供了可操作的策略，为中国国际化教育的研究做出了贡献。

关键词: 汉语教育；双语教育；沉浸式英语教育项目

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1. Introduction

International schools have been gaining its influence and popularity over the past century, evolving from providers of education for mobile expatriate families into institutions that increasingly serve local communities seeking globally oriented learning pathways. Asia now hosts a large share of the world's international schools, and China in particular has experienced rapid expansion of internationalized

programmes that promise enhanced English proficiency and access to overseas higher education (ISC¹ Research, 2025). This growth is fueled by parental demand for bilingual Mandarin–English education and by schools’ adoption of internationally accredited curricula (e.g. AP, IB, A-Level) that are globally applicable.

Despite the growing significance of international schools in China, current literature still pays limited attention to how these institutions position the education of Chinese language. Existing research on internationalised schooling often concentrates on bilingual models, market forces, and the enhancement of L2 proficiency (McKinley et al., 2021; Poole et al., 2022). By contrast, comparatively few studies examine how Chinese (learners’ L1) is taught, assessed, and mobilised for academic within English-dominant international programmes (Hong & Si, 2023). This study fills the gap in the literature of international education in China.

This study is an in-depth case study of Huaifu International (HFI). This international school offers an integrated programme that combines Chinese ordinary high-school courses with an Advanced Placement (AP) curriculum. According to HFI's Admissions Office, its student body is overwhelmingly native Chinese (98% native-born), making it an ideal site to study the interaction between Chinese and English teaching within an English-immersion program. The research is framed by three interrelated questions: (1) How does HFI integrate Chinese language and culture into an English-immersion programme? (2) What challenges does Chinese language education face in this bilingual context? and (3) What practical implications can be drawn to improve Chinese language education in similar settings?

Theoretically, the study draws on scholarship in bilingualism and L2-influence (Pavlenko, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 1995) and translanguaging and bilingual pedagogy. Methodologically, this qualitative case study integrates a three-month on-site internship, classroom observation notes, and information on official website. These data allow for an in-depth analysis of curriculum design, classroom practices, and co-curricular links between Chinese instruction and English teaching. Findings reveal a complex relationship between Chinese and English within the school’s bilingual framework. While HFI intentionally incorporates Chinese courses to preserve students’ cultural identity and L1 literacy, the majority of academic subjects privilege English as the primary medium of instruction and assessment. Such an English-dominant context may place pressure on students’ L1 development. Although English proficiency is indispensable for global mobility, overlooking the pedagogical and evaluative importance of Chinese risks diminishing cultural literacy, and may ultimately constraining their bilingual functioning. Consequently, this environment simultaneously facilitates L2 growth while generating challenges such as the marginalisation of Chinese academic practice, students’ difficulty in adapting to contrasting teaching styles across linguistic and cultural traditions, and the potential restructuring

1. ISC Research. (2025, January 24). *The international schools market in 2025*. Retrieved September 20, 2025, from <https://iscresearch.com/the-international-schools-market-in-2025/>

or attrition of L1 proficiency. In order to tackle these risks, this paper offers concrete strategies and implications for improving curriculum design, teaching practice, and cooperation among teachers in bilingual schools.

2. Background and Literature Review: International Schools and Bilingual Models

2.1 Research on Chinese instruction in international schools: gaps and priorities

International schools have evolved from serving mobile expatriate communities to meeting local demand for globally oriented education, particularly in non-English speaking contexts. Asia now hosts a majority of the world's international schools, and China in particular accounts for a rapidly expanding share of this sector (ISC Research, 2025). This growth is largely driven by domestic demand for bilingual Mandarin–English pathways that facilitate overseas university admission and global mobility.

Despite this rapid expansion, scholarly attention to international schools located in China remains comparatively limited and uneven. Chinese internationalised school sector are under-researched, there are only limited amount of studies investigating international schools established in China (Poole et. al, 2022). In addition, much of the existing literature on language and international education in China concentrates on English-medium instruction (EMI) and strategies for improving English proficiency in internationalised programs, with relatively fewer studies examining how Chinese (students' L1) functions pedagogically within international school settings (McKinley et. al, 2021).

Consequently, key questions remain unresolved: In what ways does L1 (Mandarin) support or interact with L2 learning, and how is Chinese teaching positioned institutionally and pedagogically? This study addresses the gap and adds to the scholarship on internationalized schooling in China by examining both Mandarin and English instruction at a single internationalised school in China, with the aim of illustrating how Chinese language education contributes to bilingual competence and what institutional and classroom-level reforms might sustain Chinese as an academic and cultural medium.

2.2 Development of international schools and the rise of English immersion models

Bilingual education takes a variety of forms, with immersion, dual-language, and heritage-language programmes being the most common (Baker, 2011; McCarty, 2012). Among these, immersion programmes, in which L2 serves as both the medium and content of instruction (Johnson & Swain, 1997) have become the predominant model adopted by Chinese international schools. Several contextual factors explain this trend. First, English-medium immersion aligns with parents' strong demand for English proficiency as a prerequisite for overseas university entry and global competitiveness (Xiong & Feng, 2020). Second, it fits the operational structure of international schools, which rely on English curricula such as AP, A-Level, and IB that are easily accredited and globally transferable (Poole et al., 2022). Finally, immersion programmes are perceived to

foster cognitive flexibility and cross-cultural competence (Chen et al., 2017; Purić, 2017), qualities that are highly valued in China's international education market.

However, the rapid spread of immersion bilingual education raises concerns. Since English serves as the primary instructional medium, Chinese as the students' first language often becomes marginalised, both in academic assessment and in classroom use (Mehmedbegovic, 2017). Despite the increase of immersion programmes in China, little research has examined how such English-dominant models affect students' L1 development or the role of Chinese language education within them (Hong & Si, 2023). Addressing this gap, the present study investigates how Chinese language teaching functions in an English-immersion international school and how it contributes to maintaining students' bilingual proficiency and cultural identity.

3. Researching HFI: A Qualitative Case Study of Bilingual Integration

Huafu International (HFI), officially the International Department of the Affiliated High School of South China Normal University, was established in 2004 as one of the earliest international divisions approved by the Guangdong Provincial Department of Education. Initially offering the International Foundation Year (IFY) in collaboration with the Northern Association of Universities in the U.K., HFI was authorized by the U.S. College Board in 2009 to launch the first Advanced Placement (AP) center in South China.

HFI adopts a bilingual curriculum integrating the Chinese National Curriculum with the American AP system. Core AP subjects are taught by both Chinese and foreign teachers, while key Chinese courses such as Mathematics, Chemistry, and Chinese Language and Literature are delivered by qualified Chinese bilingual teachers. This model enables students to retain the academic rigor of Chinese education while engaging in inquiry-based learning characteristic of Western pedagogy.

With over 98% of students being native-born Chinese, HFI provides an ideal context for exploring how Chinese language and culture are integrated within an English-immersion environment. Insights from my three-month internship at HFI offered first-hand understanding of its curriculum design and classroom practices, revealing how bilingual education functions as a platform where Chinese educational traditions intersect with global learning objectives.

4. Findings: Institutional Arrangements and Classroom Practices

4.1. Student-centered teaching approach and its classroom manifestations

Students from the traditional Confucian culture may typically exhibit reluctance to speak, heavy reliance on memory, and respect for the authority of teachers. While these behaviors are often misinterpreted as a lack of critical thinking, they in fact reflect a distinct cultural approach to learning. The opportunity for HFI's bilingual

program lies in designing a student-centered approach that not only fosters Western-style classroom participation but also intentionally incorporates and values Chinese cultural and linguistic patterns.

In order to fully understand students' needs, the international education and teaching process at HFI reflects the principles of student-based teaching strategy. Grounded in Gardner's (1993) theory of multiple intelligences, this approach recognizes individual variation as a resource for personal growth. At HFI, this philosophy is applied not only to general pedagogy but is specifically leveraged in Chinese language and culture classes. This ensures that the development of critical thinking and autonomy does not come at the expense of students' Chinese cultural identity, but rather enhances their ability to navigate and integrate both cultural frameworks.

Specifically, at HFI, stratified teaching and student grouping based on individual interests and abilities have been implemented for eight years. After a well-rounded evaluation of students' language competence, learning ability and prediction of students' potential, students in HFI will be assigned to different classes based on their ability. Crucially, this stratification is applied to both English and Chinese subjects. In the Chinese curriculum, it allows teachers to design tiered tasks that are culturally resonant—for instance, by providing more structured guidance for students who initially exhibit the observed Confucian-heritage learning styles, while challenging others to lead discussions comparing Chinese and Western literary themes. Tang (2023) emphasizes that student-centred learning fosters autonomy by encouraging learners to take active responsibility for their progress. This kind of stratification of students can maximize the opportunity for students with different learning bases and learning styles to obtain a suitable environment for their own growth, which is particularly vital for maintaining engagement and building confidence in Chinese studies amidst a dominant English-immersion environment.

4.2 Curriculum integration: interaction between national Chinese requirements and international tracks

There are similarities as well as differences between Chinese and American education systems. While the Chinese education system tends to emphasize solid foundational knowledge, exam-oriented learning, and collective discipline, the American AP system emphasizes critical inquiry, interdisciplinary connections, and applied skills. HFI's innovative approach lies in creating a deliberate integration of Chinese and AP curricula. For students who have completed their basic education entirely in Chinese, the transition to an English-immersion environment often results in challenges related to both linguistic adaptation and learning strategies (Wu, 2015). To bridge these differences, HFI strategically integrates elements of the Chinese education system into its English-based AP curriculum. This integration not only helps maintain students' academic strengths in Chinese-taught subjects such as mathematics and sciences (Cvencek et al., 2015), but also preserves their cultural identity and literacy through Chinese language and literature courses. Specifically, HFI offers 20 AP

courses alongside 5 required Chinese ordinary high school courses. These include Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Chinese Literature, and Chinese Language and Culture. The teaching content of these Chinese courses incorporates relevant knowledge points and pedagogical approaches from American high schools, thereby forming a blended teaching model that combines the depth and rigor of Chinese education with the flexibility and creativity of Western education.

Such bilingual curriculum integration allows Chinese language teaching to play a mediating role in students' academic transition. It provides cognitive and cultural continuity for learners shifting from a Chinese monolingual environment to an English-immersion system, while also enhancing their metalinguistic awareness, intercultural competence, and overall bilingual proficiency. According to the school's official website, this curriculum model has been highly recognized by universities both in China and abroad, demonstrating its success in cultivating students capable of navigating between two linguistic and cultural systems.

4.3 Chinese as cultural mediation: extracurriculars, cultural projects, and identity work

In addition to its bilingual curriculum, HFI provides students with various channels through which they can broaden their international perspectives and engage as global citizens. The school organizes international programs such as the Model United Nations (MUN), debate tournaments, cultural festivals, and overseas summer exchanges. These activities expose students to diverse linguistic and cultural contexts, providing authentic opportunities for intercultural communication and global awareness. These programs are closely connected to the school's Chinese language and culture curriculum. Before and after participating in international activities such as MUN or global forums, students are required to take preparatory and reflective modules in Chinese Language and Culture or Contemporary China Studies. In these classes, they research Chinese social, historical, and cultural issues, discuss national and global topics in Chinese, and then learn how to articulate those perspectives in English for international audiences. Through this design, Chinese education becomes the foundation upon which intercultural competence is built, enabling students to interpret the world from a bilingual and bicultural standpoint.

Such integration demonstrates that Chinese language education at HFI is not confined to maintaining L1 literacy. Rather, it functions as a medium for cultural mediation and international representation. By using Chinese as a resource for understanding and articulating China's perspectives, students transform their bilingual ability into intercultural competence. In this sense, HFI's bilingual education exemplifies a reciprocal relationship between Chinese and English. Specifically, English provides access to global discourse while Chinese ensures cultural depth, critical reflection, and identity continuity. Together, they shape students into linguistically capable and culturally self-aware global citizens.

5. Discussion: Two Core Challenges Facing Chinese Education in HFI

5.1 Dominance of English and its impact on Chinese proficiency

Although HFI's bilingual education aims to cultivate balanced proficiency in both Chinese and English, the school's English-immersion environment often creates a structural imbalance between the two languages. In daily academic and social contexts, English enjoys greater prestige and practical necessity, while Chinese tends to be confined to limited communicative and cultural domains. This imbalance not only reflects students' differential language use but also exposes a deeper challenge for Chinese language education within the bilingual curriculum. In an environment where English functions as the dominant language of instruction and global mobility, Chinese education faces the risk of marginalization, both in pedagogical focus and perceived value (Mehmedbegovic, 2017).

At the same time, the potential of Chinese to facilitate bilingual development is underestimated. Some students at HFI reported consciously avoiding their L1 for fear of slowing down their English progress, reflecting the "English-only" ideology prevalent in many international programs. Swain and Lapkin (1995) note that while immersion can improve L2 proficiency, it may also suppress the positive transfer and cognitive support that L1 provides. Consequently, Chinese language education must struggle to maintain its pedagogical and cultural significance while coexisting with a dominant English-medium curriculum.

This situation resonates with the wider body of research on L2 influence on L1. Pavlenko (2000) argues that when an L2 receives greater functional load and daily usage, the L1 may show signs of attrition, including weakened lexical access, reduced idiomaticity, and shifts in discourse preferences. Recent empirical evidence reinforces this concern. A 2024 study on Chinese teachers with heavy English exposure found slower reaction times to high-frequency Chinese words and decreased use of sophisticated vocabulary, indicating that limited L1 engagement can lead to measurable deterioration in lexical richness. Similarly, research on late bilinguals (Zingaretti et al., 2025) shows that bilingual late learners immersed in their L2 environment showed lexical retrieval interference, and even L1 prosody and syntax-pragmatics processing changes. For students in international schools, this means that the English-centered curriculum may unintentionally reduce opportunities for complex Chinese input and production. Over time, Chinese proficiency does not merely stagnate, it risks erosion in vocabulary, rhetorical flexibility, and linguistic confidence, posing a structural challenge for achieving balanced bilingualism in this educational model.

The case of HFI clarifies how English dominance may reshape Chinese language development. As English serves both as the medium of instruction and as the symbol of global competitiveness, students' engagement with Chinese tends to be reduced to informal or peripheral contexts. Pavlenko (2000) highlights that the degree of L2 impact on L1 depends crucially on the learning environment, intensity and duration of

exposure, and the relative social prestige of each language. In an international school setting, all of these are tilted toward English in international schools. Over time, such imbalance may lead to lexical borrowing or semantic extension in students' Chinese use, shifts in syntax and rhetorical style toward English norms, and weakened sensitivity to culturally appropriate expressions. These linguistic and pragmatic changes are likely to undermine students' L1 development.

5.2 Pedagogical Dissonance: cultural adaption in the bilingual classroom

As demonstrated in various previous studies, teachers from different countries differ in their self-reported use of teaching styles (Cothran, 2005). Therefore, it is essential for students in international schools to adopt to the changing of teaching styles. In the bilingual context of HFI, differences between Chinese and Western pedagogical traditions present substantial challenges to language education. While the school encourages open discussion in English-medium classrooms, such pedagogical norms often contrast sharply with the conventional Chinese learning culture that emphasizes respect for authority, accurate reproduction of knowledge, and collective harmony. For most students who have spent years in a Chinese educational system and environment, questioning teachers or challenging peer opinions in class can cause discomfort and hesitation. The deep-rooted belief that knowledge is transmitted from authoritative sources rather than constructed through discussion shapes their perception of what constitutes appropriate classroom behavior.

This contrast creates a dilemma for Chinese language education in the bilingual school setting. On the one hand, Chinese classes are expected to preserve traditional values such as accuracy, coherence, and moral cultivation. On the other hand, they are required to align with the communicative, student-centered, and exploratory approach of the international curriculum. Such tension may result in students' passive participation in Chinese classes, as they struggle to reconcile the differing expectations of the two systems.

6. Implications for Future Practice: Towards a Balanced and Integrated Bilingual Education

Both previous qualitative and quantitative evidence suggests that cultural factors, personal, psychological, and pedagogical factors are equally important in influencing students' bilingual learning process (Ramburuth & McCormick, 2001). Therefore, measures should be taken through multiple aspects.

6.1 Curriculum-level strategy

From a pedagogical standpoint, these findings call for a re-evaluation of how Chinese language education is positioned within bilingual programs. When English-centered teaching and assessment dominate, Chinese instruction risks being reduced to a symbolic representation of cultural heritage rather than an active medium of academic discourse. To counter this, Chinese education must assert its functional and intellectual value through curricular integration and cross-linguistic pedagogy. Following the suggestions of Cook (1992) and

Gass (1998) on multi-competence and bidirectional transfer, teachers can design tasks that encourage students to reflect on similarities and differences between Chinese and English discourse structures, rhetorical conventions, and thinking patterns.

Ultimately, the imbalance of bilingual development in HFI is not only a matter of unequal language proficiency but also a reflection of deeper ideological and pedagogical hierarchies between Chinese and English. Pavlenko's synthesis, along with the works she reviews, provides clear evidence that excessive focus on L2 development can lead to the restructuring or attrition of L1. For Chinese language education to thrive in a bilingual environment, schools must therefore create learning and assessment mechanisms that protect the cognitive, linguistic, and cultural integrity of Chinese. This involves positioning Chinese not as a supplementary subject but as a central means of cultivating higher-order thinking, cultural identity, and academic literacy alongside English.

6.2 School-level strategy: teacher professional development and collaboration

Previous research points to several benefits with advancing professional learning communities, among which the most impressive one is that students perform better in schools with functioning PLCs, as indicated by improved student learning (Stoll et al. 2006; Vescio et al. 2008). For sustained change in bilingual teaching contexts, teacher professional development and collaborative practices are critical. Establishing PLCs comprising both Chinese and English-medium teachers supports shared planning, reflective practice and alignment of bilingual pedagogy.

For HFI, a PLC might bring together Chinese teachers and teachers from other countries to co-design bilingual units, coordinate translanguaging strategies, and reflect on student bilingual progress. The collaboration between Chinese bilingual teachers and English-speaking teachers enables the students to better adapt to immersion classes.

This echoes the co-teaching model where bilingual teachers are usually paired with monolingual (English) teachers. Teachers might meet weekly or bi-weekly to review student portfolios, share lesson artifacts, and plan for integrated tasks that draw on both languages. In particular, cross-linguistic teacher teams can develop shared assessment rubrics, bilingual scaffolding tools, and pedagogical templates that ensure Chinese remains academically robust. Moreover, targeted PD sessions on bilingual/multilingual pedagogy, translanguaging, and contrastive rhetoric equip teachers with the conceptual and practical tools needed. In sum, teacher collaboration and professional learning communities enable the institutionalization of bilingual practices. They shift Chinese language teaching from discretionary to systemic, embed bilingual pedagogy into daily practice, and thus support the long-term maintenance of Chinese educational value in an English-dominant context.

7. Conclusion

This case study examined how Chinese language education is integrated and challenged within an English-immersion international school in China. Findings from HFI demonstrate that Chinese language and culture can be meaningfully integrated into an English-dominant curriculum through a student-centred teaching approach, a strategically designed bilingual curriculum, and the embedding of Chinese cultural learning into international activities. These practices allow Chinese to operate not only as a linguistic subject, but also as a cultural, cognitive, and intercultural resource supporting students' transition into global academic contexts.

At the same time, the study reveals potential challenges for sustaining the academic and cultural status of Chinese in an internationalised school. English holds institutional prominence as the primary medium of instruction, which may lead to marginalisation of Chinese. Students must adapt to contrasting pedagogical norms between Chinese and Western classroom cultures, often experiencing uncertainty about participation, authority, and appropriate discourse. Furthermore, consistent with research on L2 influence on L1 (Pavlenko, 2000; Zingaretti et al., 2025), English-dominant learning environments may lead to reduced opportunities for complex L1 production, lexical attrition, shifts in rhetorical style, and weakened academic registers in Chinese. These findings point to structural imbalances that challenge the goal of cultivating balanced bilinguals.

In response, the study identifies several areas for strengthening Chinese language education in bilingual schools. First, pedagogical reform is needed to balance the status of Chinese and English as instruction medium, integrating cross-linguistic comparison and translanguaging strategies that leverage the strengths of both languages. Second, teacher professional development and cross-linguistic collaboration are essential for aligning Chinese and English-medium instruction, particularly through Professional Learning Communities. Teachers can co-design bilingual tasks and develop shared assessment frameworks.

In conclusion, the case of HFI demonstrates that Chinese language education can play an active and indispensable role in students' bilingual and bicultural development. Nonetheless, the function of L1 should be supported by pedagogical changes and institutional improvements that counterbalance English dominance. By foregrounding Chinese as both an academic and cultural resource, bilingual international schools may cultivate learners who are not only proficient in two languages but also capable of maintaining linguistic identity and engaging as confident participants in globalized contexts. This study thus contributes to the emerging scholarship on Chinese language education in international schools.

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