

# 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)

- 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)

#### First steps of permanent integration

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



### Language

#### Use of linguistic resources

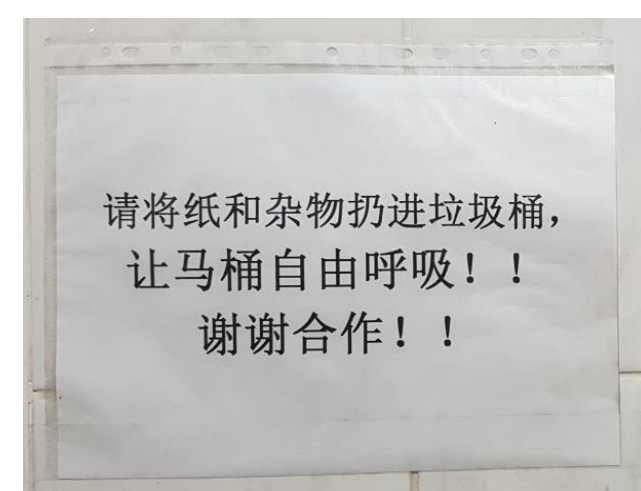
Two types of speakers: independent and dependent speakers  
(Both types of speakers speak the local language for business purposes, but the independent speaker also has proficiency outside the buying-selling-context)

#### 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?**