BRILL

MANUSYA: JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES 25 (2022) 1–20

MANUSYA
Journal of Humanities
brill.com/mnya

The Double-Edged Sword of Mandarin: Language Shift and Cultural Maintenance among Middle-Aged Chinese-Malaysians

Teresa Wai See Ong
Research Associate, Centre of Research in Child Development, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
teresa.ong@nie.edu.sg

Robert A. Troyer
Professor in Linguistics, English Studies Department, Western Oregon University, USA
troyerr@wou.edu

Received 1 August 2020 | Revised 25 February 2021 | Accepted 19 March 2021

Abstract

Previous research has demonstrated that the increasing importance of Mandarin in education and public life has led many younger Chinese-Malaysians to regard Mandarin as their mother tongue and part of their cultural identity rather than a heritage language. Fewer studies have documented the language repertoires of middle-aged and older Chinese-Malaysians. This paper presents a qualitative study of Mandarin use conducted with six Chinese-Malaysians aged 40 and older. The participants reported extensive use of Mandarin in the domains of home, work, religion, and cultural maintenance, which were served by a heritage language in the past. This indicates that the use of Mandarin by the older generation Chinese-Malaysians to engage with the contemporary linguistic world is influenced by hegemonic local and global factors. This study therefore highlights the significance of Mandarin as both an element of cultural identity and an instrument of heritage language loss.

Keywords

Mandarin – Malaysia – language shift – multilingualism – qualitative methodology

1 Introduction

In recent years, the rise of China's economic and political power has turned Mandarin into a global language and the language-in-demand among the Chinese diasporic population of both recent immigrants and heritage language users (Everson & Shen 2010; Kecskés 2013). The choice of Mandarin is, however, a double-edged sword for many ethnic Chinese in Malaysia – while it allows families and individuals to maintain a Chinese cultural heritage, in the Malaysian context and many other ethnic Chinese communities outside of China, this maintenance often comes at the expense of a language shift away from Chinese heritage languages.[1] The choice is a difficult one and ethnic Chinese face several challenges and disappointments related to their shift to or maintenance of Mandarin in a crowded linguistic marketplace affected by global and local sociocultural and political forces.

Consequently, many scholars have turned their attention to examining policies, programs, curricula, and outcomes related to Mandarin use outside China. There is now a rich and growing body of research on this issue in diaspora communities around the world, including Canada, the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom and Singapore (e.g., see Curdt-Christiansen 2013; Duff 2014; Duff & Li 2014; Li & Duff 2008; Li & Zhu 2010; Zhu & Li 2014). Factors involved in promoting the utility and importance of acquiring Mandarin include China's recent boom in the economic markets, the affordability of high-speed technology and communication, the availability of Mandarin-medium schools, the financial means of parents, and the political will to support Chinese heritage education in environments where Mandarin or another Chinese heritage language is not dominant (Duff et al. 2015; Mu 2016). Most of these studies have employed questionnaires and surveys to determine the attitudes that ethnic

1 Though many ethnic Chinese and some scholars refer to the different languages used throughout China as Chinese "dialects," we are following the classification and nomenclature practices commonly used by linguists, so we refer to these linguistic codes as "languages." Furthermore, in this article we refer to the languages spoken by pre-20th Century immigrants from China as "Chinese heritage languages." Because Mandarin was not spoken by any of these groups and not introduced to Malaysia until the mid-20th Century, long after the initial periods of Chinese immigration, we are not regarding it as a "Chinese heritage language" in the Malaysian context.

Chinese heritage speakers hold regarding language and Chinese cultural identity as well as their past and present learning and use of Mandarin.

Similar research in the Malaysian context has revealed that Chinese-Malaysians have increasingly chosen to speak Mandarin instead of Chinese heritage languages due to the perception of Mandarin as a language of solidarity (Ting & Puah 2010) and its higher social status and wider functional value (Ting & Puah 2017). Albury (2017) and Wang (2007) reported that some Chinese-Malaysians regard Mandarin as a symbolic language and treat it as the only Chinese language representing their ethnic identity. Consequently, Mandarin is overtaking Chinese heritage languages as the main language of communication in many Chinese-Malaysian families today (Low et al. 2010; Puah & Ting 2015; Ting 2010; Wang 2005). These studies have primarily utilized quantitative methodologies and relied on participants in their 20s and 30s (Albury 2017; Low et al. 2010; Puah & Ting 2015). Given the lack of qualitative studies with a similar research focus and the attention that has been given to populations under 30 years old, this study sought to capture the perspectives of middle-aged and older Chinese-Malaysians living in Penang.

2 Background of Malaysia and its Chinese Communities

Malaysia has a pre-independence history of Dutch, British and Japanese colonisation (Asmah 1992) and is presently composed of three major ethnic groups: Malay, Chinese, and Indian. The Chinese are the second largest group, constituting 22.6% of the country's overall population of 32.7 million (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2020). They are further divided into different ethnolinguistic groups, namely, Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, Teochew, Hainanese, Taishanese, and Fuzhou. Regarding language policy, the Federal Constitution mandates Bahasa Melayu as the country's sole official and national language. However, as a contemporary linguistically diverse nation, there are no laws or sanctions against other languages being used.

Chinese immigration to the Malay Peninsula began in the 1400s when a trading post established in Malacca attracted merchants from India, South East Asia, and China (Andaya & Andaya 2017). Starting in the 1780s after the British declared Penang as a free-trading port, more Chinese came to Malaya to work in response to the need for workers in the mining industries and plantations (Andaya & Andaya 2017).

These periods of immigration from various provinces in China, mainly Fujian, Guangdong, Hainan, Guangxi, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang (C. B. Tan 2000), led to immigrant communities who spoke Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka,

Teochew, Hainanese, Taishanese, and Fuzhou. Despite the common pattern of minority language shift to the dominant language over three generations (Wardhaugh & Fuller 2015), these Chinese communities maintained their heritage languages for many generations as children and grandchildren spoke these languages in the family and community domains.

2.1 *The Development of Chinese-Medium Education in Malaysia*

According to Linton (2009, 21) "schools are a (if not *the*) primary vehicle for the transmission of culture and a sense of national identity." In order to understand the current roles that Mandarin and Chinese heritage languages play in contemporary Malaysia, it is essential to explain the development of Chinese-medium schools in the historical context of Malaysian educational policies.

During the early British colonial period (1786–1920), the colonizers were not willing to spend money on educating minority groups because these 'immigrants,' despite their long-standing communities, were regarded as "birds of passage" (Gill 2007, 111). With public education only extended to Malays (Pong 1993), Chinese-Malaysians were left to their own initiative to educate their children, so they raised funds to set-up *sishu*, small traditional Chinese schools that used Chinese heritage languages as the medium of instruction (L. E. Tan 1997, 2000).

In the early 20th century, these *sishus* gave way to the establishment of new Chinese schools that used Mandarin as the language of instruction (Mak 1985). These schools still depended on private funding and they imported their curriculum from China. Gradually, more Chinese-medium schools were established in rural areas in response to the increased number of Chinese children born after many Chinese immigrants had decided to permanently settle in Malaya (L. E. Tan 2000).

After WWII ended, the reopening of schools became a turning point for Chinese-medium education in Malaysia. The British attempted to convert Chinese-medium schools to English-medium schools but this only resulted in a social movement to save Chinese-medium education. By 1952, textbooks imported from China were replaced by new textbooks based on the Malaysian context to reflect local life and culture but the early 20th century influence of Mandarin in China leading to its adoption as the official language of the People's Republic of China in 1956, led to its hegemonic role in Malaysian Chinese-medium schools.

From 1956, the year before Malaysian independence, through the 1960s, several significant educational reports were conducted and their recommendations were subsequently enacted in policies. Ultimately, the effects were that Chinese-medium primary schools could receive government subsidies

as "national-type" schools while Chinese-medium secondary schools had to either adopt Bahasa Melayu as the medium of instruction or become independent schools (Raman & Tan 2010).

In 1972, a revival movement for Chinese independent secondary schools spread across the country resulting in the introduction of the Unified Examination for Chinese Independent Schools. However, graduation certificates from Chinese independent secondary schools were not recognised by the government because the Education Act of 1961 stated that all graduating exams of secondary schools must be in English, and later, Bahasa Melayu only. This situation again raised concerns for the Chinese community who later established private colleges for tertiary education using Mandarin as the medium of instruction (Tay 2003).

2.2 *The Current Situation*

Today government-funded schools mandate Bahasa Melayu as the medium of instruction with English and/or Mandarin available as subject languages and the option of conducting maths and science lessons in English made at the local school level (David et al. 2009). Chinese-medium educational institutions in Malaysia, all of which use Mandarin, comprise more than 1280 primary schools, 60 independent schools, and three tertiary-level colleges. In recent years, the enrolment rate at Chinese-medium primary schools has increased (Gill 2014; "Government to present Chinese schools" 2013). Extracurricular classes and private tutoring are a lucrative business, and Mandarin is available as a subject. Regarding Chinese heritage languages, some Chinese cultural associations offer classes and self-study materials; however, our interviews indicated that these are not well attended or utilized.

As Chinese-medium schools and popular extra-curricular programs offer only Mandarin and the Chinese-Malaysian community is increasingly adopting Mandarin, Chinese heritage languages remain only in limited domains and are in danger of being lost. Previous research has reported that many Chinese-Malaysian parents perceive Chinese-medium education as the only way of transmitting Chinese language, heritage, beliefs and values to their children in Malaysia (H. G. Lee 2012; Wang 2016a). They believe Chinese-medium education's incorporation of Chinese culture, literature and performing arts, such as Chinese music, in the curriculum will lead to building a stronger Chinese identity (D. P. Y. Lee & Ting 2016). Parents further believe Chinese-medium education is needed to ensure the survival of their language and culture in a Malay-dominant country (H. G. Lee 2012).

Furthermore, non-Chinese parents also send their children to Chinese-medium primary schools, with non-Chinese students accounting for

approximately 11% of their overall enrolment (J. Y. Y. Tan 2015). The growth of Chinese-medium education is linked to the importance of Mandarin resulting from China's rise as a leader in the economic world (Gill 2014). Subsequently, Mandarin was introduced as an elective subject in national primary schools in Malaysia in 2006.

For the middle-aged and older participants in this study, the Malaysian educational policies regarding language that have been enacted following independence are the essential context that influenced their language repertoire and choices. Among the younger generation of Chinese-Malaysians, the use of Mandarin as the language of instruction and the role of English as an additional language have led many to speak Mandarin or English at home (Carstens 2018; Wang 2017). Although Bahasa Melayu is also taught in Chinese-medium schools, C. B. Tan (2000) and Wang (2010) report that it is uncommon for the younger generation of ethnic Chinese to speak Bahasa Melayu among themselves or to their Chinese friends.

3 The Study

The literature reviewed in the previous sections demonstrates that Chinese-medium education has become a popular choice for children of many Chinese-Malaysian parents due to the economic value Mandarin offers, its usefulness in international settings, and its cultural value as a heritage language in a Malay-dominant country. These benefits are offset by the negative effect on Chinese language diversity in Malaysia as the various Chinese communities have shifted from speaking Chinese heritage languages to speaking Mandarin. As stated in the introduction, previous studies in Malaysia have recruited younger generation Chinese-Malaysians as participants while this study sought insights into language shift and repertoires by answering the question "What is the role of Mandarin in the language repertoire of middle-aged and older Chinese-Malaysians?" To this end, we employed semi-structured interviews with six Chinese-Malaysians living in Penang, aged 40 and above, in order to learn about:

- the domains of daily life in which they use Mandarin,
- the role that Mandarin plays in their construction of identity at home and in the community, and
- the social factors that motivate them to use Mandarin.

3.1 *Data Collection*

Recruitment of participants (part of a larger study) was done through snowball sampling in Penang, where the primary researcher was based when the study took place. The researcher, a Chinese-Malaysian in her 30s from Penang, was warmly welcomed by all six participants who were keen to discuss maintenance of their cultural heritage and willing to engage in deep conversations regarding the topic.

First, the researcher provided the participants with a simple questionnaire to gather information about their demographics and languages spoken in daily life. This was followed by a semi-structured interview of approximately one hour to gather information regarding Mandarin language use. The interview also allowed the participants to freely discuss their experiences with the researcher. The interviews were conducted in English, except for one non-English speaking participant whose interview was conducted in Mandarin. The primary researcher is highly proficient in Hokkien (her first language) as well as English and has functional use of spoken Mandarin; this flexibility and the researcher's membership of the Chinese-Malaysian community afforded in-depth dialogue during the interviews and cooperative sharing of experiences by the participants. Consent was given by all participants for their interviews to be recorded.

3.2 *Participants*

A short profile of the six participants is shown in Table 1. All participants were males who were born in Malaysia with some being educated in English-medium schools while others attended Chinese-medium schools (see individual interview results and discussion). Because they were from the generation of Chinese-Malaysians born before Mandarin became popular outside schools in Malaysia, they spoke Chinese heritage languages as their first language. These interviews were conducted as part of a larger study in which only the age range of participants was recorded, not their specific ages.

3.3 *Data Analysis*

The interviews were transcribed and, in the case of the interview conducted in Mandarin, translated into English to align with the rest of the transcripts. There were no corrections made to the morphosyntax apart from minor changes for the sake of intelligibility. All participants' names were removed and they were given pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity. Once complete, all transcripts were analysed following what Patton (1990) called an iterative process in which recurrent themes in the data were identified, a thematic coding sheet was created in line with the study's framework and the themes, codings, and

TABLE 1 Profile of participants

Participant	Gender	Age	L1	Additional languages	Occupation
Tony	Male	40 – 49	Teochew, Mandarin	Bahasa Melayu, English, Hokkien, Cantonese	Translator
Bob	Male	40 – 49	Teochew, Mandarin	Bahasa Melayu, English, Hokkien, Cantonese	Policymaker
Noel	Male	40 – 49	Hokkien	Bahasa Melayu, English, Mandarin, Cantonese	Pastor
Kok Leong	Male	50 – 59	Cantonese	Bahasa Melayu, English, Mandarin, Hokkien, Hakka	Policymaker
Chong Meng	Male	50 – 59	Hainanese	Mandarin, Hokkien, Cantonese	Chief monk
Simone	Male	60 and above	Cantonese	Bahasa Melayu, English, Mandarin, Hokkien, Hainan, Taishan	Businessman

data were subsequently triangulated and verified by the researchers. This qualitative content analysis (Stemler, 2001) aligns with approaches taken by other researchers studying language shift in Chinese diasporic communities (Li & Zhu 2010; Wang 2016b) and language use in interlingual families (Yamamoto 2005).

4 Results and Discussion

We have organized participants' responses to questions regarding the role of Mandarin relative to other languages in their daily lives into the following domains of usage that emerged as salient during the interviews with particular individuals: at home (Tony and Bob), for occupational use (Kok Leong) and during religious services (Chong Meng and Noel). A fourth section addresses the role of Mandarin in cultural transmission via naming practices (Simone). In the results, it is evident that participants' choice of Mandarin is a double-edged sword, affording interaction and cultural values on the one hand, while on the other hand it detracts from the use of Chinese heritage languages that have traditionally connected families and community members.

4.1 *Mandarin as a Home Language*

Tony, born in the 1970s (in his 40s at the time of the interview), belonged to the population of Chinese-Malaysians who were educated in a Chinese-medium school and spoke Mandarin with his friends. However, he would shift to Chinese heritage languages when speaking to his parents and grandparents because they did not know Mandarin. While his grandparents, who had emigrated from China, only spoke Teochew, his parents, born in Malaysia, were educated in English-medium schools before the change of the medium of instruction to Bahasa Melayu took place. They sent Tony to a Chinese-medium school, hoping he would not lose his Chinese identity in a Malay-dominant country. Despite speaking Teochew to his parents and grandparents, Tony spoke Mandarin to his siblings. When asked the reason, he stated:

> I speak Mandarin to my siblings. So I feel closer with Mandarin. It depends on what language you grew up with. You grow an emotional connection to that. Language maintenance can only be done, the rhetoric of maintaining a language because you are emotionally connected.

Tony's switching between languages is a common practice in Malaysia. Carstens (2018) found in her survey with 314 Chinese-Malaysian families, the middle generation tended to switch between Chinese heritage languages and Mandarin.

Issues of agency, "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahern 2001, 112), are central to power relations and language choice. Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate's (2015) conception of *reactive* and *proactive* agency provides an insightful explanation of Tony's agentive code choice. Reactive agency describes an individual's choices that, while personally chosen, are influenced by others who are perceived to have more control. Proactive agency, in contrast, suggests "a knowing and active individual, whose activity is oriented towards one's own goals instead of being driven from the outside" (Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate 2015, 55). Tony's use of Teochew with his elders demonstrates reactive agency as he defers his choice to the preferences of his parents and accommodates his Teochew-speaking grandparents. However, his use of Mandarin with his siblings reflects proactive agency allowing Tony to interact using a language that he feels a stronger emotional connection to. In Tony's case, these two aspects of his identity (bending to the will or needs of others vs. exerting his own preferences) are enacted by using either a heritage language or Mandarin and his proactive choice is for the language that was the medium of instruction in school, not his heritage language.

Like Tony, Bob (in the same age group) went to a Chinese-medium school; however, Bob would speak Teochew among both his parents and other family members. He then switched to Mandarin when speaking to his wife, giving the reason below:

> Even I am Teochew, my wife is Teochew but I cannot understand her slang because she comes from Nibong Tebal [an area in Penang]. Her slang is totally different. So, I cannot converse in Teochew with my wife. We can only converse in Mandarin, so when we speak Mandarin, our children will communicate in Mandarin too. If parents cannot converse with them using heritage languages, they can only converse in Mandarin. Mandarin is like the language of communication between different sub-ethnic groups.

In contrast to Tony, Bob's proactive agentive choice would be to speak his variety of Teochew at home; however, Bob and his wife choose to speak their shared language, Mandarin, as a reaction to their lack of a mutually intelligible heritage language. Thus, regardless of the form of agency, the result for both Tony and Bob is a shift away from Teochew to Mandarin. The difference in agency between Tony's proactive choice of Mandarin and Bob's reactive choice demonstrates the kinds of personal conflict that middle-aged Chinese-Malaysians face regarding which languages they use.

Bob claimed that many families faced similar issues: Mandarin had replaced Chinese heritage languages as the medium of communication in the home domain due to intermarriages among different ethnolinguistic groups. The role of the educational system in this shift was highlighted by Bob as he explained that Chinese-Malaysian parents today focus on speaking Mandarin at home with their children to improve their children's language proficiency so they can achieve high grades in the exam-orientated education system of Malaysia. Wang's (2017) study, likewise, found that Hakka parents in Penang switched to speaking Mandarin with their children to ensure a smooth linguistic transition from the home domain to the school environment.

4.2 *Mandarin as an Occupational Language*

Being able to speak several languages is an important skill for a policymaker in multilingual Malaysia. Kok Leong, in his 50s at the time of the study and originally from Kuala Lumpur, had been educated in an English-medium school.

Although he was of Hakka origin and able to speak Hakka, he had better fluency in Cantonese because he grew up in Kuala Lumpur, where Cantonese was the lingua franca among Chinese ethnic groups. Since entering politics, Kok Leong has picked up other Chinese heritage languages and Mandarin to engage with constituents. Several years ago, he moved to Penang, where Hokkien is the most widely spoken Chinese heritage language (Ong 2020). Because Kok Leong was unable to speak Hokkien fluently enough to deliver a speech in Hokkien, he often switched to Mandarin. He claimed that Mandarin is a useful language for meetings, festivals and cultural events, which is evident in the excerpt below:

> Mandarin has evolved as a dominant language for Chinese-Malaysians in the past 30 or 40 years. Chinese-medium schools are also one of the very important factors in our politics. Mandarin has now been entrenched in the education system and as a language for communication, business and association activities. I usually use some dialect in my speech and then revert to Mandarin, although some associations may-hope that I will give the speech in my dialect but the lack of command forces me to shift to Mandarin halfway or even immediately after I have started.

The distinction between proactive and reactive agency here demonstrates that while Kok Leong would prefer to speak in a heritage language ("dialect"), he must resort to using Mandarin, a language that, unlike many younger generation Chinese-Malaysians, he had to learn as an adult. When asked how he had learned Mandarin, Kok Leong replied:

> It is in particular in the nature of my work, community engagement, and my lack of Hokkien because I am not native here, so I have to speak Mandarin more often.... It is a challenge, so in my work, I have the necessity to use Mandarin very often, so it builds up over the years.

Kok Leong's impetus to learn Mandarin is similar to that of many adult learners in contemporary multilingual societies. Tasker's (2012) doctoral study investigated this issue in Australia, where seven individuals from a large data sample were interviewed regarding their learning activity of Mandarin as an additional language. She found that the learning and use of Mandarin among the individuals in her study reflected the principles of complex dynamic systems that operate across the entire life-span. As Kok Leong's account testifies, changes to an individual's language choices are not limited to certain life stages (i.e., childhood, adolescence, young adulthood), but continually evolve throughout

the lifespan as the social and linguistic environment changes requiring the individual to make agentive choices. In this case, Kok Leong's instrumental motivation for learning Mandarin is a reaction to the ubiquity of the language in the public sphere of contemporary Chinese-Malaysian communities.

4.3 *Mandarin as a Religious Language*

According to Carstens (2018), most of the religions practised by Chinese-Malaysians, such as Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, and Catholicism, have connections with overseas organisations. This section discusses the use of Mandarin in two common religious practices of the Chinese community. Chong Meng, in his 50s during the study, grew up in a Hainanese family and speaks Hainanese as his first language. He was educated in a Chinese-medium school and had a great passion for Buddhism from a young age. After secondary school, he went to Taiwan to pursue Buddhism studies and completed his diploma in Mandarin because it was the medium of instruction in the college in Taiwan. He then returned to Malaysia to serve as a chief monk in a temple in Penang. When asked about his use of Mandarin in Buddhist temples in Malaysia, Chong Meng claimed that Mandarin was becoming the "public language" in these temples:

> We use Mandarin for chanting, this is for similarity purposes. If people use Hokkien and Mandarin together, the chant will be in a mix of all languages. It may end up very confusing to people…. When we chant, we use Mandarin as a public language and the main language of communication for everyone. Mandarin is seen as a common language for most people.

Similarly, Noel, in the 40s age group, was also educated in a Chinese-medium school and studied theology courses using Mandarin and, at the church where Noel worked, he preached in Mandarin. When asked the reasons for his language choice, Noel explained that because Mandarin had been his language of education from a young age, he was comfortable using it for studying and working purposes. Being a fluent Mandarin speaker, Noel spoke the language to his children because he wanted them to master it for better academic and job opportunities and he ensured that his children perform their prayers and read the Bible in Mandarin. Thus, the language of religion in both public and his household was not the Hokkien and Mandarin of Noel's youth experiences but solely Mandarin for his children.

Chong Meng's and Noel's use of Mandarin for religious purposes is becoming a common trend among the Chinese community in Malaysia. Wang (2016b) observed similar phenomena when studying language use in the Church of

the Holy Name of Jesus in Balik Pulau, Penang. She stated that prior to 1963 the Sunday mass was conducted in Latin but after reformation in 1963, it was replaced with Mandarin as the language of the mass. Today, Mandarin is used for the homily, Bible reading and hymns; as the language of administration in the church; and the language of communication between priests and the congregation Wang (2016b).

As Vollmann and Soon (2018) observe, Chinese heritage languages survive in Malaysia through a spoken rather than written mode. It is, thus, significant that in the predominantly oral domain of religious services, Mandarin has become the default language. As highlighted throughout this article, both Chong Meng and Noel attribute their choice of Mandarin not to their family heritage but to a combination of educational background and as a reaction to the need for a lingua franca in public religious services. The hegemonic forces of institutionalized education and religion at the local level which are responses to the global hegemonic force of Mandarin are manifested in the individual shift away from heritage languages.

4.4 *Mandarin as a Language for Cultural Transmission*

According to Zhang (2008), heritage language maintenance is inseparable from heritage culture participation, which includes customs and values embraced by an ethnic group including naming practices. In Malaysia's neighbouring country of Indonesia, Chinese-Indonesians had to adopt Indonesian-sounding names but to maintain their Chinese identity and they incorporated elements of their Chinese family names into their Indonesian adaptations (Irzanti 2004).

The case was different in Malaysia where, Chinese-Malaysians were resilient in maintaining their Chinese heritage, cultures, and traditions and the Malaysian Constitution has allowed them to retain their traditional family names. However, because Chinese written characters have never had official use in Malaysia, Chinese-Malaysians names needed to be written using Roman letters. Before the 1960s, ethnic Chinese names in Malaysia were spelled according to their respective heritage language groups' pronunciation allowing one to maintain and convey to others their particular identities. While these spellings could potentially lead to ambiguous pronunciations by speakers of other Chinese heritage languages, among the larger Chinese-Malaysian community, these spelling practices allowed heritage users to convey their group identity. However, with the rise of Mandarin and the Hanyu pinyin (Roman letter) writing system that is taught in schools, many Chinese-Malaysian have begun spelling their family names using standardized Hanyu pinyin which reflects the pronunciation of Mandarin.

To Simone, the oldest of the participants, in his 60s, this standardization is seen as beneficial:

> When we use Hanyu pinyin, it's pinyin for Mandarin pronunciation. Pinyin is actually more accurate, such as *Li* instead of *Lee*.... Last time [during the olden days], we used Hokkien or Teochew pronunciation and it was very confusing. If someone had a very strong Teochew accent, his surname would be written according to his Teochew pronunciation.... Nowadays, most parents use Hanyu pinyin when naming their children. Just like my nephew; we renamed his *Lee* into *Li* and wrote it according to pinyin pronunciation.... Therefore, I feel that the best is to go according to Hanyu pinyin pronunciation so that we won't be confused whether the name is written in Hakka, Teochew or Hokkien pronunciation.... Last time, when naming the children, the Malay officers at the registration office would write according to what they hear. Now, parents are allowed to fill in the forms at home before submitting. Most important is we have to preserve our Chinese surnames and culture. We are supposed to encourage parents to let their children know about their origin through their ancestors' history.

Indeed, this situation is, as Simone put it during the interview, "very complicated." On the one hand Chinese-Malaysians now have proactive agency to choose how to spell their surnames. However, Simone's embrace of Mandarin, which is standardized by educational institutions, comes at the expense of a name spelling that reflects one's heritage language. At work, there is an ideological shift away from linguistic plurality that in the past allowed Chinese-Malaysians to signal membership in both the local diasporic community and the macro Chinese culture. In place of this dual indexicality, Simone believes that Chinese-Malaysians should use standard Mandarin as their conduit to Chinese culture.

5 Conclusion

The interviews with six middle-aged and older Chinese-Malaysians in Penang with the goal of understanding how they use Mandarin relative to Chinese heritage languages in their daily lives, their constructions of identity, and their motivations revealed the double-edged sword of Mandarin in this context. What is gained in a language of mass communication is offset by a reduction

in the use of traditional heritage languages. What is found in the connections to Chinese culture of the mainland is a loss of connection to local diasporic histories. What is communicated via standardized orthography and pronunciation is not what is indexed by a name that is written according to local norms. These are not trade-offs that the participants lamented – certainly not when their choices demonstrated proactive agency but also not when their agency was a reaction to larger hegemonic forces.

We see in these cases that a complex set of global and local influences shaped the participants' decisions about their use of Mandarin relative to Chinese languages in various domains. As Blommaert (2010, 17) contends, global processes are "not one process but a complex of processes, evolving and developing at different scale-levels, with differences in scope, speed and intensity." At the global level, the impact of China as a world economic power likely encourages ethnic Chinese in other countries to maintain pride of heritage even after many generations have lived in diasporic communities outside of the mainland. The adoption of Mandarin as the official language of the People's Republic of China solidified the language's status and led to its exclusive use in local Chinese-Malaysian schools which, for several of the participants, resulted in their adoption of Mandarin in their homes and religions because the language had become more familiar to them and those around them. Following this shift from heritage languages to Mandarin by middle-aged members of the households and communities, many younger generation Chinese-Malaysians speak Mandarin in many settings because they regard it as their mother tongue and the language that represents their Chinese identity in multilingual Malaysia.

The middle-aged and older generation of Chinese-Malaysians maintain their traditional ideology of valuing their Chinese identity in multilingual Malaysia. They also continue to ensure that the younger generation receives Chinese-medium education as a way of maintaining their "Chineseness" in a non-Chinese environment, though the schools' use of Mandarin leads to loss of distinct language communities that used to be held together by the use of Chinese heritage languages.

In conclusion, the middle-aged and older generation of Chinese-Malaysians' use of Mandarin to engage with the contemporary linguistic world is influenced by hegemonic local and global factors. Within this context their language choices are strategic and intentional and Mandarin competes with Chinese heritage languages in different domains. As scholars call for further investigation into the influence and impact of acquiring and using Mandarin, it is essential that we include qualitative sociolinguistic studies that document the effects of language maintenance and shift on users at all ages of the lifespan

in order to ensure a holistic understanding of the significance of Chinese languages in diasporic environments.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their comments on the earlier draft.

Funding

Data collection of this study, which was part of a larger project, was supported by the Griffith University International Postgraduate Research Scholarship (GUIPRS) and the Griffith University Postgraduate Research Scholarship (GUPRS), under project number GU 2016/409.

References

Ahearn, Laura M. 2001. "Language and Agency." *Annual Reviews Anthropology* 30: 109–137. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.30.1.109.

Albury, Nathan John. 2017. "Mother Tongues and Languaging in Malaysia: Critical Linguistics under Critical Examination." *Language in Society* 46 (4): 567–589. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404517000239.

Andaya, Barbara Watson, and Leonard Y. Andaya. 2017. *A History of Malaysia* (3rd ed.). London: Red Globe Press.

Asmah, Haji Omar. 1992. *The Linguistic Scenery in Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

Blommaert, Jan. 2010. *The Sociolinguistics of Globalisation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Carstens, Sharon. 2018. "Multilingual Chinese-Malaysians: The Global Dimensions of Language Choice." *Grazer Linguistische Studien* 89: 7–34.

Curdt-Christiansen, Xiao Lan. 2013. "Implicit Learning and Imperceptible Influence: Syncretic Literacy of Multilingual Chinese Children." *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy* 13(3): 345–367. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468798412455819.

David, Maya Khemlani, Francesco Cavallaro, and Paolo Coluzzi. 2009. "Language Policies – Impact on Language Maintenance and Teaching: Focus on Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and the Philippines." *The Linguistic Journal: Special Edition on Language, Culture and Identity in Asia* September: 155–191.

Department of Statistics Malaysia. 2020. "Current Population Estimates, Malaysia, 2020." Accessed March 15, 2021. https://www.dosm.gov.my/.

Duff, Patricia. 2014. "Language Socialization into Chinese Language and 'Chineseness' in Diaspora Communities. In *Learning Chinese in Diasporic Communities: Many Pathways to Becoming Chinese*, edited by Xiao Lan Curdt-Christiansen and Andy Hancock, 13–33. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. https://doi.org/10.1075/aals.12.

Duff, Patricia, and Duanduan Li. 2014. "Rethinking Heritage Languages: Ideologies, Practices, and Priorities in Canada and China." In *Rethinking Heritage Language Education*, *edited by* Peter P. Trifonas and Themistoklis Aravossitas, 45–65. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Duff, Patricia, Tim Anderson, Liam Doherty, and Rachel Wang. 2015. "Representations of Chinese Language Learning in Contemporary English-Language News Media: Hope, Hype, and Fear." *Global Chinese* 1(1): 139–168. https://doi.org/10.1515/glochi-2015-1006.

Everson, Michael, and Helen Shen, eds. 2010. *Research among Learners of Chinese as a Foreign Language*. Hawaii: National Foreign Language Resource Centre, The University of Hawai'i at Manoa.

Gill, Saran Kaur. 2007. "Shift in Language Policy in Malaysia: Unravelling Reasons for Change, Conflict and Compromise in Mother-Tongue Education." *AILA Review* 20(1): 106–122. https://doi.org/10.1075/aila.20.09gil.

Gill, Saran Kaur. 2014. *Language Policy Challenges in Multi-Ethnic Malaysia*. Dordrecht: Springer.

"Government to Present Chinese Schools a Fixed Allocation from Next Year." *The Star Online*, February 1, 2013. https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2013/02/01/chua-government-to-present-chinese-schools-a-fixed-allocation-from-next-year/ on 10 November 2019.

Irzanti, Sutanto. 2004. "Ganti Nama di Kalangan Keturunan Tionghoa: Peraturan dan Kebebasan [Replacement of Names among Chinese Indonesians: Regulation and Freedom]." Accessed November 16, 2019. https://web.archive.org/web/20080130133021/http://www.fib.ui.ac.id/index1.php?id=view_news&ct_news=75.

Kecskés, Ivstán, ed. 2013. *Research in Chinese as a Second Language*. De Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781614512554.

Li, Duanduan, and Patricia Duff. 2008. Issues in Chinese heritage language education and research at the postsecondary level. In *Chinese as a Heritage Language: Fostering Rooted World Citizenry*, edited by Agnes Weiyun He and Yun Xiao, 13–33. Hawaii: National Foreign Language Resource Center, University of Hawai'i at Manoa.

Linton, April. 2009. "Language Politics and Policy in the United States: Implications for the Immigration Debate." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 199: 9–37. https://doi.org/10.1515/IJSL.2009.033.

Li, Wei, and Hua Zhu. 2010. "Voices from the Diaspora: Changing Hierarchies and Dynamics of Chinese Multilingualism." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 205: 155–171. https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl.2010.043.

Lee, Hock Guan. 2012. Education of the Chinese in Malaysia. In *Malaysian Chinese: Recent Developments and Prospects*, edited by Hock Guan Lee and Leo Suryadinata, 166–192. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Lee, Diana Phooi-Yan, and Su-Hie Ting. 2016. "Tracing Ethnic Socialisation of Chinese in Malaysia to Chinese-Medium School." *Global Chinese* 2(2): 163–187. https://doi.org/10.1515/glochi-2016-0016.

Low, Hui Min, Howards Nicholas, and Roger Wales. 2010. "A Sociolinguistic Profile of 100 Mothers from Middle to Upper-Middle Socio-Economic Backgrounds in Penang-Chinese Community: What Languages Do They Speak at Home with Their Children?" *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 31(6): 569–584. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2010.527342.

Mak, Lau-Fong. 1985. *Dialect Group Identity: A Study of Chinese Sub-Ethnic Group in Early Malaya*. Taipei: Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica.

Mu, Michael Guanglun. 2016. *Learning Chinese as a Heritage Language: An Australian Perspective*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Ong, Teresa Wai See. 2020. "Safeguarding Penang Hokkien in Malaysia: Attitudes and Community-Driven Efforts." *Linguistics Journal* 14(1): 122–153.

Patton, Michael Quinn. 1990. *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park: Sage.

Pong, Suet Ling. 1993. "Preferential Policies and Secondary School Attainment in Peninsular Malaysia." *Sociology of Education* 66: 245–261. https://doi.org/10.2307/2112755.

Puah, Yann Yann, and Su-Hie Ting. 2015. "Malaysian Chinese Speakers' Attitudes towards Foochow, Hokkien and Mandarin." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 36(5): 451–467. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2014.936875.

Raman, Santhiram Raman, and Yao Sua Tan. 2010. "Ethnic Segregation in Malaysia's Education System: Enrolment Choices, Preferential Policies and Desegregation." *International Journal of the History of Education* 46(1–2): 117–131. https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230903528496.

Ruohotie-Lyhty, Maria, and Josephine Moate. 2015. "Proactive and Reactive Dimensions of Life-Course Agency: Mapping Student Teachers' Language Learning Experiences." *Language and Education* 29(1): 46–61. https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2014.927884.

Stemler, Steven E. 2001. "An Overview of Content Analysis." *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation* 7(17): 1–6. https://doi.org/10.7275/z6fm-2e34.

Tan, Liok Ee. 1997. *The Politics of Chinese Education in Malaya, 1945–1961*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tan, Chee Beng. (2000). Socio-Cultural Diversities and Identities. In *The Chinese in Malaysia*, edited by Kam Hing Lee and Chee Beng Tan, 37–70. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tan, Liok Ee. 2000. Chinese schools in Malaysia: A case of cultural resilience. In *The Chinese in Malaysia*, edited by Kam Hing Lee & Chee Beng Tan, 228–254. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tay, Lian Soo. 2003. *Malaixiya huawen jiaoyu fazhan shi* [The History of Chinese Education in Malaysia], Vol. 4. Kuala Lumpur: The United Chinese School Teachers' Association of Malaysia.

Tasker, Isabel. 2012. "*The Dynamics of Chinese Learning Journeys: A Longitudinal Study of Adult Learners of Mandarin in Australia."* PhD diss., University of New England, Australia.

Tan, Julia Yin Yin. 2015. "Malay Parents' Perspective on Admission of Their Children to Chinese Primary Schools in Kelantan, Malaysia.' *Researchers World* 6(1): 26.

Ting, Su-Hie. 2010. "Intercultural Communication in Sarawak: Language Use of the Chinese-Speaking Communities." In *Speaking in Many Tongues: Language Shift in Malaysian Minority Communities and the Effects of National Language Planning*, edited by Dipika Mukherjee and Maya Khemlani David, 151–162. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press.

Ting, Su-Hie, and Yann Yann Puah. 2010. Language Attitudes of Hokkien Speakers towards Hokkien and Mandarin. In *Proceedings of the Borneo International Conference on Language and Literature: Unity in Diversity*. Sarawak: University Publication Centre.

Ting, Su-Hie, and Yann Yann Puah. 2017. Influence of Gender on Language Attitudes of Hokkien Speakers in Sarawak. In *Linguistic Minorities: Their Existence and Identity within Larger Communities*, edited by Asmah Haji Omar and Norahim Norazuna, 209–245. Sarawak: University Malaysia Sarawak.

Vollmann, Ralf, and & Tek Wooi Soon. 2018. "Chinese Identities in Multilingual Malaysia." *Grazer Linguistische Studien* 89: 35–61.

Wang, Xiao Mei. 2005. "Mandarin Spread and Mass Media: Focusing on Muar and Batu Pahat in the State of Johor, Malaysia." *The Journal of Chinese Sociolinguistics* 2: 185–195.

Wang, Xiao Mei. 2007. "The Interaction of Ethnic Identification and Language Spread in the Context of Malaysian Chinese Community." *The Journal of Chinese Sociolinguistics* 1: 40–53.

Wang, Xiao Mei. 2010. "The Sociolinguistic Realignment in the Chinese Community in Kuala Lumpur: Past, Present and Future." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 31(5): 479–489. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2010.505656.

Wardhaugh, Ronald and Janet M. Fuller. 2015. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (7th ed.). USA: Wiley Blackwell.

Wang, Xiao Mei. 2016a. "The Chinese Language in the Asian Diaspora: A Malaysian Experience." In *Communicating with Asia: The Future of English as a Global Language*, edited by Gerhard Leiner, Azirah Hashim, and Hans-Georg Wolf, 205–215. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107477186.

Wang, Xiao Mei. 2016b. "Language Maintenance or Language Shift? The Role of Religion in a Hakka Catholic Community in Malaysia." *International Multilingual Research Journal* 10(4): 273–288. https://doi.org/10.1080/19313152.2016.1192850.

Wang, Xiao Mei. 2017. "Family Language Policy by Hakkas in Balik Pulau, Penang." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language: Special Issue on Language Planning and Multilingual Malaysia* 224: 87–118. https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2016-0058.

Yamamoto, Masayo. 2005. "What Makes Who Choose What Languages to Whom?: Language Use in Japanese–Filipino Interlingual Families in Japan." *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 8(6): 588–606. https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050508669070.

Zhang, Donghui. 2008. *Between Two Generations: Language Maintenance and Acculturation among Chinese Immigrant Families*. Texas: LFB Scholarly Publishing.

Zhu, Hua, and Wei Li. 2014. "Geopolitics and the Changing Hierarchies of the Chinese Language: Implications for Policy and Practice of Chinese Language Teaching in Britain. *The Modern Language Journal* 98 (1): 326–339. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2014.12064.x.