

## Children deciding the family language in Chinese families in multiethnic Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

Chinese parents fail to maintain use of their heritage languages for family communication because their children seem to wield their own power in deciding the home language. Little is known about how micro-language decisions at family level are influenced by macro-societal language use patterns and sociopolitical contexts. This study examined the influence of children's family language policy on use of heritage languages by Chinese families in multiethnic Malaysia. Data on the language practices, language ideologies, and management strategies of two families were obtained using semi-structured interviews with the mother/father. The findings show that heritage languages prevailed when the children were young. The switch to dominant languages, particularly Mandarin and English, was triggered by the medium of instruction in school. Interestingly, it was the younger children in the family who actively exerted their agency to influence their family language practice in favour of the dominant languages as the means of family communication. The findings indicated that exposure to the heritage language through the media, having grandparents as carers, and parents' frequent assertions on the value of the heritage language are not sustainable for heritage language maintenance.



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## I. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multiethnic society consisting of Bumiputra (Malay and indigenous people) (69.8%), Chinese (22.4%), Indian (6.8%), and Others (1%) (Department of Statistics, 2021). The census report does not spell out the small percentages of groups making up the 1%. In Malaysia, Malay is the national and official language, and it is the medium of instruction in government schools. English is taught as a second language and often acts as the de facto

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official language in the private sector. The Chinese and Indian have schools which use their ethnic language as the medium of instruction in government-aided schools, namely, Mandarin and Tamil respectively. Mandarin is the standard Chinese language with a written orthography. On the other hand, Chinese dialects such as Cantonese, Foochow, Hakka, Hainan, Hokkien, and Teochew are spoken languages of the Chinese sub-groups, which are transmitted orally from one generation to another. In this paper, Chinese dialects are referred to as heritage languages.

Until present day, the Chinese are still identified by their dialectal origins but this identity may be phased out in the future because of the younger generation's inability to speak Chinese dialects and their mixed parentage (that is, parents are from different ethnic groups and/or Chinese sub-groups). There is already an emergence of a pan-Chinese identity among the younger Chinese, whereby they speak Mandarin, and identify themselves as Chinese rather than as Hokkien and other Chinese dialect groups (Ting & Teng, 2021). In the broader context, speaking Mandarin is advantageous because it allows individuals to claim membership in the Chinese community worldwide. In contrast, Chinese heritage languages only allows individuals to claim membership in the smaller Chinese dialect communities. In the past, membership in Chinese dialect groups in Malaysia was essential for survival and for business networks (Ting, 2018a). Sew (2020) stated that dialects give speakers access to cultural ideals, norms, mores, and ways of thinking that collectively contribute to the common good. However, heritage languages now have low instrumental value, compared to Mandarin (Ong & Ben Said, 2022). Younger Chinese may not appreciate the heritage value of Chinese dialects.

The present-day infiltration of Mandarin into Chinese homes began in the 1980s. Chinese leaders called for the community to abandon the use of heritage languages and adopt Mandarin (Sim, 2012) to avoid factions and stay united among the Chinese. The Chinese community set up Chinese-medium schools and propagated the Chinese culture among the younger generation (Ong, 2021). The use of Mandarin became a symbol of Chineseness and unity (Ong & Ben Said, 2022). In many Malaysian schools, a "no-dialect" rule was enforced to encourage students to master standard languages, that is, English, Malay, and Mandarin (Sim, 2012). Since 90% of Chinese children go to Chinese-medium schools, eventually Mandarin takes over as the home language (Lee & Ting, 2016). At present, heritage languages are still spoken in the home and social domains largely by the older generations (Ong, 2020a; Ong, 2020b). However, some parents have chosen to speak Mandarin as the home language while other parents who retain use of heritages languages seem unable to get their children to comply with parental language choices (Ting, 2018b).

In Malaysia, the issue is with the intergenerational transmission of the Chinese dialects because of the gravitation towards Mandarin, as the shared language of the Chinese community. However, in the United States (He, 2006; Kang, 2004), Canada (Chow, 2018; Mah, 2005), and Australia (Tannenbaum & Howie, 2002; Voon & Pearson, 2011), the issue is with intergenerational transmission of Mandarin. For example, Zhang and Slaughter-Defoe's (Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009) study in Philadelphia showed that the Chinese immigrant parents did not succeed despite their painstaking efforts. These findings suggest