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## Being Chinese in a global context: Linguistic constructions of Chinese ethnicity

### 作为全球语境中的华人：汉语与种族的关系

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**Abstract:** To date, there has not been a large corpus of research looking at how different Chinese populations perceive language to be a part of their Chinese ethnicity. Even where this has been done, no attempts have been made to compare these perceptions across Chinese populations of different polities, to see if and how they differ. To fill this gap, this paper examines and compares the relationship between Mandarin-Chinese, “dialects”, and English, and the construction of Chinese ethnicity amongst Chinese Malaysians, Chinese Singaporeans, and Mainland Chinese. It does this through a questionnaire study employing 100 participants from each group, taking into account beliefs about the importance of these languages to the everyday experience of being Chinese, self-declared language proficiency, and self-declared language use. The results of the study suggest that “dialects” are becoming less important to Chinese ethnicity amongst all three groups, particularly amongst Chinese Singaporeans. Meanwhile, English is becoming more important amongst Chinese Malaysians and Chinese Singaporeans, once again particularly amongst the latter. While Chinese Malaysians continue to perceive Mandarin-Chinese as being the language most important to Chinese ethnicity, Chinese Singaporeans’ beliefs reflect English’s dominance over Mandarin-Chinese in nearly every aspect of everyday social life. These findings underscore how Chinese ethnicities in different parts of the world need to be understood on their own terms, and how language can be a vital clue as to how different Chinese ethnicities are constructed in the global context.

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**摘要:** 到目前为止, 还没大量研究论证华人如何运用汉语为他们种族的条件。至今也没有研究尝试比较在不同国家的华族人口对于汉语与种族的关系的看法。本文考察和比较马来西亚华人, 新加坡华人和中国大陆华人如何运用汉语, “方言”和英语建立汉族意识。本研究通过问卷调查访问自每组的100位参与者, 讯问参与者的语言能力, 在日常生活中对中文的接触, 以及他们对语言使用的重要性的信念。研究结果显示, “方言”对所有三个群体, 尤其是新加坡华人, 不是一个建立汉族重要条件。反而, 英语在马来西亚华人和新加坡华人占了重要的地位。虽然马来西亚华人继续认为汉语是做为华人最重要的语言, 但新加坡华人反映了英语在日常生活的主导地位。本文研究结果强调了世界不同地区的华人需要按自己的条件和语言去理解以及建立各自的“汉族”。

**关键词:** 种族, 汉语, 华侨, 语言信念, 新加坡

## 1 The language of ‘Chinese’ ethnicity

Ethnicity is a social construct, neither primal nor intrinsic, but comprised of beliefs, underpinned by everyday experience. Ethnicity is usually defined in terms of factors such as ancestry, historical memory, geographical origin, cultural tradition, and social experience (Nagel 1994: 152–153; Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 6; Peoples and Bailey 2010: 389). None of these factors is strictly essential. Instead, social processes and discourses embedded in everyday experience “naturalise” or “reify” certain factors, making them intuitive markers of similarity and difference, and thereby allowing them to serve as important ethnic boundaries, separating members of an ethnic group from non-members (Nagel 1994: 152–153, Karner 2007: 17). One important implication of this is that people in different parts of the world ostensibly belonging to the same ethnic group might nevertheless perceive their ethnicity differently, depending on the social processes and discourses present in their environment. In different contexts, different sets of factors may be rendered available or unavailable, important or unimportant, as bases for ethnic categorization.

One important factor that is often involved in defining ethnicity is language, and when it comes to Chinese ethnicity, this is particularly the case given the existence of diasporic Chinese populations worldwide. The Chinese have had a long history of migration, with the Chinese first migrating into other parts of Asia, and particularly into Southeast Asia, as early as two to three thousand years ago (Poston Jr. and Yu 1990: 480–481). Today, significant

Chinese populations also exist in countries such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and Australia. These so-called “overseas Chinese” would not only have been exposed to a variety of different languages, they would also have incentive to use these different languages in everyday life. Language, being a very prominent part of the everyday experience, permeating many aspects of social life, becomes highly accessible as a marker of similarity and difference, and social processes and discourses readily “naturalise” or “reify” it as an important ethnic boundary. How this situation affects the construction of Chinese ethnicity is thus a question that deserves to be asked. Understanding the construction of Chinese ethnicity can be said to be an even more pressing issue in today’s context, as the modernized China sees an unprecedented number of Chinese people taking root in places all over the world, forming perhaps a new wave of Chinese diaspora. To date however, there has not been a large corpus of research looking at how different Chinese populations perceive language to be a part of their Chinese ethnicity. Questions pertaining to the relationship between the Chinese ethnicity and language have been largely unanswered. For instance, what are the roles languages play in creating the sense of being ‘Chinese’? How do Chinese populations use language to negotiate their ‘Chinese’ identities? Even where research has examined the relationship between language and Chinese ethnicity or identity (e. g. Chan 2015; Chan 2002; Francis et al. 2009; Lausent-Herrera 2015), there has not been any attempt to compare beliefs about this relationship across Chinese populations of different polities, to see if and how they change or differ.

This paper seeks to answer the above questions by focusing on Chinese populations in three countries, namely Malaysia, Singapore, and Mainland China. This study compares the experiences and beliefs held by Chinese Malaysians, Chinese Singaporeans, and Mainland Chinese about the importance of different languages to their being “Chinese”, or their sense of “Chinese” ethnicity. The comparison between these three groups of Chinese is motivated by historical as well as socio-political contexts. Historically, the Chinese populations in all three of these countries spoke a variety of Chinese languages. Chinese languages are commonly divided into seven or eight language groups: Beifang, Wu, Xiang, Northern and Southern Min, Kejia, and Yue (Liang 2015: 14–17; Norman 1988: 181). Beginning at the start of the twentieth century, however, a standard began to develop in Mainland China, based on *Guanhua*, or Mandarin, a Beifang “dialect” already used as an informal lingua franca amongst Chinese officials. By the 1950s, this had come to be known as *Putonghua*, and was made the official language of the People’s Republic of China (Chen 1999: 14–20, 24; Ramsey 1987: 4–11). During

this time, this variety also spread to many overseas Chinese populations, including those in Malaysia and Singapore, where it came to be accepted as a standard as well<sup>1</sup> (Yen 1986: 303–304; PuruShotam 2000: 42–44).

One important difference between the Chinese in Mainland China and the Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore lies in the fact that, while the former are widely considered an indigenous population, the latter are immigrant populations, inhabiting territories that are also former British colonies. They would thus have been exposed to a variety of different ethnic languages, such as Malay, as well as English, the language of the colonizers. Between Malaysia and Singapore, there are important differences as well, particularly pertaining to language planning and policy. In Malaysia, Chinese languages are minority languages, and are given little official protection or recognition. Mandarin-Chinese is offered as a school subject and a medium of instruction, but only in some government-funded primary schools, and even this has been obstructed (Lee 2007: 123–137; Yang 1998: 55). In Singapore, the Chinese form an ethnic majority. Mandarin-Chinese is recognized as an official language alongside English and two other ethnic languages, Malay and Tamil. It is also an important, compulsory school subject at the primary and secondary levels (Pakir 2004: 120; Tan 2007: 75–76, 79). That said, however, “dialects”<sup>2</sup> are actively suppressed, with an official Speak Mandarin Campaign even set up to discourage their use (Bokhorst-Heng 1999). The different attitudes that the Malaysian and Singaporean states take towards Chinese languages likely affects the role that these languages play in the lives of the Chinese, particularly in relation to other languages spoken in society, and this could in turn have important implications for how these languages are perceived in relation to Chinese ethnicity.

As mentioned earlier, there has been hardly any existing literature examining the relationship between language and Chinese ethnicity in each of the three countries. Most published studies instead focus on the use or perceived importance of these languages more generally. Existing studies on “dialects” in each of the three countries, for example, suggest that in all three countries, these languages are becoming less important, especially when compared to Mandarin-Chinese. Studies on Chinese languages in Malaysia find that Chinese Malaysians may be shifting away from “dialects” towards Mandarin-Chinese. David et al. (2009) interview and observe 18 Chinese Malaysians from Tangkak, a city of

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<sup>1</sup> To avoid confusion, throughout the rest of this paper, the term “Mandarin-Chinese” will be used to refer to both *Putonghua* and this standard variety.

<sup>2</sup> We used the term “dialects” to refer to all non-Mandarin Chinese languages, as how it is also used in Singapore, Malaysia, and Mainland China.

52,000 in the state of Johor, and find that although many of their youngest participants do claim to understand “dialects”, the majority only use these languages when speaking with their parents and grandparents. None say they use them when speaking with their Chinese friends (David et al. 2009: 55). Similarly, Low et al. (2010) examine language use and language attitudes amongst 100 young Chinese Malaysian mothers in Penang. Once again, although these mothers do understand “dialects” and often speak them themselves, they tend to reserve the use of these “dialects” to informal and private domains, rather than formal and public ones. They also avoid using them when speaking to their children, in order to pass on Mandarin-Chinese, a far more economically useful language, instead (Low et al. 2010: 578–581).

In Singapore, the shift away from “dialects” towards Mandarin-Chinese appears to have progressed even further, with studies taking place in the 1990s already finding evidence of such shift. Gupta and Yeok (1995), for example, conduct an ethnographic study of a Chinese Singaporean family belonging to the Cantonese “dialect” group. They find that the younger a member of the family is, the less likely it is for them to be able to speak Cantonese. Members of the youngest generation speak little to no Cantonese, with only one conversant in it, and the rest using Mandarin-Chinese or resorting to gestures when communicating with their grandparents (Gupta and Yeok 1995: 306–310). Similarly, Li et al. (1997) investigate language use, language choice, and language attitudes amongst 72 Chinese Singaporeans belonging to the Teochew “dialect” group. They too record a shift away from Teochew across generations. In fact, none of the 16 participants aged 11–20 speak Teochew as their primary home language, or claim to prefer speaking it (Li et al. 1997: 375).

In Mainland China, certain “dialects”, such as Cantonese in Guangdong province and Suzhou and Shanghai “dialects” in Wu “dialect” areas, do remain prestigious, and serve as important markers of regional identity (Chen 1999: 28–29, 57). That said, even in the case of a prestigious local “dialect”, there is reason to believe that Mandarin-Chinese may be becoming more important. Liang (2015) observes and interviews students in schools in Cantonese-speaking Guangzhou, alongside their teachers and parents. Although “dialects” are often not strictly forbidden in schools, parents perceive them as having little value in the classroom, and are thus motivated to use Mandarin-Chinese with their children instead of “dialects”, in order to prepare their children for school. In some cases, this has been observed to result in language shift in the family (Liang 2015: 136).

The issue becomes more complex with the entrance of English in the Chinese speakers’ linguistic repertoires, especially in postcolonial states such as Singapore and Malaysia. Chinese Malaysians and Chinese Singaporeans have

been reported to be speaking more English, sometimes at the expense of Mandarin-Chinese. Tan (2000: 56–60), for example, notes that many Chinese Malaysians actually prefer to use English with each other, particularly in urban areas. For some Chinese Malaysians, English is also the only language spoken at home. Even amongst Chinese Malaysians who are not exclusively “English-speaking”, however, the use of English may be increasing. While only 38% of Low et al.’s (2010: 580–581) participants say they use English with family members in general at home, 73% say they use it with their children. What remains unclear though is how this has implications for ethnic identity.

Amongst Chinese Singaporeans, the growing importance of English is even more apparent, with evidence suggesting that the shift away from “dialects” is more a shift towards English than one towards Mandarin-Chinese. Gupta and Yeok (1995: 307), for example, note that the younger their participants are, the more likely they are to speak English, with all of their youngest group of participants using English as their primary home language, speaking only “some Mandarin”. Meanwhile, of the 44 speakers in Li et al.’s (1997: 372, 374) study classified as “children”, only 61% use any Mandarin-Chinese with other children, and none use Mandarin-Chinese exclusively. In contrast, 84% use English with other children, 21% doing so exclusively. One likely explanation for this trend is English’s highly prestigious status and its instrumental value. Studies considering interactions between household income and language dominance find that higher income families tend to be predominantly English-speaking, while lower income families tend to be predominantly Mandarin-speaking (Li et al. 1997: 377–378; Zhao and Liu 2010: 116–117). Whatever the cause of English’s rise, however, there is evidence to suggest that, at least amongst a minority of Chinese Singaporeans, its value is no longer purely economic. Three of Li et al.’s (1997: 374) participants actually identify English as their “mother tongue”, a term which, in Singapore, is usually reserved for an individual’s officially-designated ethnic language. Tan (2014), meanwhile, specifically addresses the possibility that English might be considered a “mother tongue” in Singapore, and finds that roughly 9% of Chinese Singaporean participants actually identify English as the language that defines them as a member of their ethnic group, selecting it over all other languages (Tan 2014: 335). At least some Chinese Singaporeans, therefore, appear to consider English not only to be instrumentally useful, but as playing a part in their Chinese ethnicity.

In this paper, we seek to address the implications of these developments for the construction of Chinese ethnicity in each of the three countries. Are any languages still perceived as playing an important role in the construction of Chinese ethnicity? If so, which languages, and how? Does the importance of English in Malaysia and Singapore mean Chinese Malaysians and Chinese

Singaporeans are likely to view their ethnicity very differently than Mainland Chinese do? Do Chinese Singaporeans and Chinese Malaysians themselves view the relationship between language and Chinese ethnicity differently, given differences in the ways language policy in Malaysia and Singapore each treat Chinese languages. The present study will address these questions by taking into account both conscious and less conscious beliefs the Chinese speakers in Malaysia, Singapore, and Mainland China hold about the importance of different languages.

## 2 Data collection

As noted at the start of this paper, ethnicity as a social construct is comprised of beliefs, underpinned by everyday experiences. The present study therefore employs a questionnaire tailored towards investigating (1) the beliefs held by individuals about language as a factor defining their Chinese ethnicity, and (2) how they actually experience language as part of their everyday lives as Chinese Malaysians, Chinese Singaporeans, and Mainland Chinese.

### 2.1 Participants

To investigate the construction of Chinese ethnicity in Malaysia and Singapore, 100 Chinese Malaysians and 100 Chinese Singaporeans were recruited to participate in the questionnaire. Participants were selected based on a set of criteria: they had to be citizens of either Malaysia or Singapore, to have been born, have spent the majority of their lives in, and currently located in their respective country. A third group of 100 Mainland Chinese was also recruited as participants. These participants were international undergraduate or graduate students in the researchers' university, and currently residing in Singapore. They were recruited primarily using posters and flyers placed in prominent locations around the university campus. To minimise the effects of exposure to English and of local acculturation, participants had to have been born and raised in Mainland China, and to have spent less than 5 years in Singapore.

Participants from all three groups had to be at least 21 years old, and at most 30 years old, at the time of participation. This is the age group, for the Chinese Malaysian and Chinese Singaporean participants, that most of the key language policies lately implemented in both countries would have influenced their acquisition and use of languages, as well as informed their understanding of their own Chinese ethnicity, and the involvement of languages in it. All participants also

had to identify themselves as “ethnically Chinese”, regardless of how they may have understood Chinese ethnicity, or how typically Chinese they considered themselves to be.

## 2.2 Questionnaire design

Participants were provided with a link to the questionnaire, which was set up online using SurveyGizmo. This questionnaire consisted of about 120 questions, and took participants an average of 25 min to complete. The questionnaire was divided into two main parts, each corresponding to one of the two foci identified at the beginning of this section.

The first part of the questionnaire focused on beliefs held by Chinese Malaysians, Chinese Singaporeans, and Mainland Chinese about language as a factor defining their Chinese ethnicity. Participants were presented with statements about the importance of Mandarin-Chinese, “dialects”, English, and Malay in serving different functions (Mainland Chinese were asked about *Putonghua* instead of Mandarin-Chinese, and not asked about Malay). They were then asked to rate their agreement with each of these statements on a scale from 1 to 5. Statements corresponded to three broad ways in which language is believed to play a part in being Chinese: (i) verbal communication, (ii) “Chinese culture”, and (iii) “Chinese identity”. Looking at these three broad areas is essential as the experience of ethnicity itself is not monolithic, and there is a possibility that different languages might be important to different aspects of it. One might posit, for example, a diglossic situation, where one language is more commonly used in formal contexts, and another in more informal contexts. Such a situation might be expected in societies such as Malaysia and Singapore, where multilingualism is a characteristic of everyday life. Alternatively, one might posit a society undergoing language shift, where a language is no longer spoken regularly in the course of everyday life, but the ability to speak it remains an important marker of ethnic identity. Such a situation might be expected in all three societies under investigation, given evidence of ongoing shift away from “dialects” and, in the case of Malaysia and Singapore, towards English. A proper understanding of Chinese ethnicity in all three countries would thus require that these different aspects of their linguistic experiences and beliefs to be taken into account.

The second part of the questionnaire focused on how participants *actually* experience language as part of their everyday lives as Chinese Malaysians, Chinese Singaporeans, and Mainland Chinese. Questions in this part of the questionnaire were divided into two subsections, focusing on self-declared language proficiency, and on self-declared language use. To begin with, participants were

asked to rate their own proficiency in Mandarin-Chinese, “dialects”, English. Chinese Malaysian and Chinese Singaporean participants were also asked about their proficiency in Malay. They did this on a scale of 1–5. It was expected that responses to these questions would be useful as an indirect measure of the importance of particular languages to everyday life in a multilingual community. The more important a language is, the greater the motivation to learn it. By considering language proficiency in relation to beliefs about language and the experience Chinese ethnicity, conclusions can moreover be drawn about the extent to which individuals need to be proficient in different languages, in order to share in the experience of Chinese ethnicity. In this way, language proficiency data can help to clarify the relationship between these languages and the construction of Chinese ethnicity in Malaysia, Singapore, and Mainland China.

In this second part of the questionnaire, participants were also asked about which languages they used most regularly in everyday life, both generally and with specific groups of interlocutors. Participants were asked, for example, which languages they used most often with family, with friends, in school or at work, and with service staff and other members of the public. They were also asked with languages they used most often with addressees of different generations. Participants were allowed to select more than one language per group of addressee, if they used these languages equally, or almost equally. Like the language proficiency data, participants’ responses to questions about their own language use was expected to provide an indication of their importance to the shared, everyday experience of being Chinese in Malaysia, Singapore, and Mainland China. The contextual component of the self-declared language use questions were also expected to be revealing, answering questions such as whether there might be a diglossic relationship between any of the languages concerned. The tendency for a particular language to be used mainly with older or younger addressees might also provide more evidence of language shift away from or to this language, respectively.

For the purposes of this paper, we will not elaborate and discuss all the questions asked in the questionnaire, but will instead draw on broad trends and patterns so as to provide a comparison of how the Malaysian, Singaporean, and Mainland Chinese experience and use language to construct their sense of Chineseness.

## 2.3 Statistical methods

A variety of different statistical methods were applied to the questionnaire data. For the first part of the questionnaire, a Kruskal–Wallis one-way analysis

of variance was used to test for significant differences between groups of participants, followed by a Mann–Whitney U test for post-hoc analysis. For the second part of the questionnaire, which focuses on language experience and self-reported proficiency and use of languages, chi-squared test was used to test for significant differences between the three groups of participants. The next two sections will present the results of each of the two parts of the questionnaire in turn.

### 3 Conscious beliefs about the importance of languages and Chinese ethnicity

This section describes the participants’ responses to questions on their beliefs about the importance of different languages to verbal communication, “Chinese culture”, and “Chinese identity”. Results pertaining to each language will be presented in turn. On the whole, the results show that all three groups of participants perceive Mandarin-Chinese as being the most important language to being Chinese overall, but “dialects” and English are perceived to be important to different groups of participants.

#### 3.1 Perceived importance of Mandarin-Chinese

All three groups of participants are similar insofar as they all appear to consider Mandarin-Chinese the most important language to being Chinese overall, with all three giving Mandarin-Chinese the highest overall mean ratings out of the languages considered, as can be seen in Table 1. Chinese Malaysian and Mainland Chinese participants give Mandarin-Chinese high overall mean ratings of 3.95 and 3.91 respectively. Chinese Singaporean participants, meanwhile, give Mandarin-Chinese a slightly lower overall mean rating of 3.56, although this is

**Table 1:** Perceived importance of languages to “being Chinese” overall, amongst Chinese Malaysians, Chinese Singapore, and mainland Chinese.

	Mandarin	“Dialects”	English	Malay
Malaysia (n = 100)	3.95	3.78	3.13	2.79
Singapore (n = 100)	3.56	2.65	3.41	1.57
Mainland China (n = 100)	3.91	3.71		1.94

still higher than the overall mean rating given to English, the second most highly rated language, at 3.41 ( $Z = 1.99$ ,  $p = 0.047$ ).

However, when comparing the different aspects of the experience of being Chinese, Mandarin-Chinese appears to be valued less for “Chinese identity” than for either “Chinese culture”, verbal communication, or both, as illustrated in Table 2. Indeed, with Chinese Malaysian participants and Mainland Chinese participants, mean ratings for the importance of Mandarin-Chinese to “Chinese identity” are not significantly higher than those for the importance of “dialects” (Chinese Malaysian:  $Z = 1.20$ ,  $p = 0.230$ , Mainland Chinese:  $Z = -0.41$ ,  $p = 0.685$ ). Meanwhile, Chinese Singaporean participants are different in that they do not consider Mandarin-Chinese the most important language to verbal communication, giving English a higher mean rating than Mandarin-Chinese, at 4.17, compared to 3.55 ( $Z = -4.41$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

**Table 2:** Perceived importance of languages to verbal communication, “Chinese culture”, and “Chinese identity”, amongst Chinese Malaysians, Chinese Singapore, and mainland Chinese.

	Mandarin	“Dialects”	English	Malay
<b>Verbal communication</b>				
Malaysia (n = 100)	4.02	3.82	3.71	2.92
Singapore (n = 100)	3.55	2.52	4.17	1.55
Mainland China (n = 100)	4.00	3.77	1.99	
<b>“Chinese culture”</b>				
Malaysia (n = 100)	3.98	3.79	2.89	2.57
Singapore (n = 100)	3.69	2.60	3.13	1.45
Mainland China (n = 100)	4.04	3.64	1.93	
<b>“Chinese identity”</b>				
Malaysia (n = 100)	3.85	3.73	2.78	2.86
Singapore (n = 100)	3.45	2.83	2.94	1.72
Mainland China (n = 100)	3.68	3.73	1.91	

### 3.2 Perceived importance of Chinese “dialects”

When it comes to “dialects”, Chinese Malaysians and Mainland Chinese appear to have far more in common with one another than Chinese Singaporeans do to either. Chinese Malaysian and Mainland Chinese participants both evidently consider “dialects” very important, giving these languages high overall mean ratings, recalling what was shown in Table 1. In contrast, “dialects” are clearly considered a lot less important by Chinese

Singaporean participants, who give these languages an overall mean rating of just 2.61, significantly lower than that given to either Mandarin-Chinese ( $Z = 8.23$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) or English ( $Z = -6.59$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This being said, it is worth noting that, looking at mean ratings for “dialects” between each of the three sets of experiences, seen in Table 2, Chinese Singaporean participants do at least give these languages higher mean ratings for “Chinese identity” than for either “Chinese culture” or verbal communication. Thus, despite their overall lack of importance in Singapore, there appears to remain a tendency towards seeing it as having some value to “Chinese identity. Amongst Chinese Malaysian and Mainland Chinese participants, “dialects” are either less important to “Chinese identity” than the other aspects of being Chinese, or are more important, but not significantly so.

### 3.3 Perceived importance of English

English is the language that most clearly distinguishes Chinese Malaysian and Chinese Singaporean participants from Mainland Chinese participants. Chinese Malaysian and Chinese Singaporean participants both give English overall mean ratings that are greater than the neutral rating of 3, at 3.13 and 3.41 respectively (see Table 1). This indicates that, on average, these participants do agree that English play at least a minor part in their Chinese ethnicity. In contrast, Mainland Chinese participants give English a much lower overall mean rating of just 1.94. Comparing Chinese Malaysian participants to Chinese Singaporean participants, it appears that the latter are more likely to consider English an important part of being Chinese, giving it a slightly higher overall mean rating. With both Chinese Malaysian and Chinese Singaporean participants, English is perceived to be far more important to verbal communication than to either “Chinese culture” or “Chinese identity”. However, amongst Chinese Singaporean participants, this distinction is particularly stark. Chinese Singaporean participants give English a mean rating of 4.17 for verbal communication. This is far greater than the corresponding mean rating given to English by Chinese Malaysian participants. Moreover, as noted earlier, when it comes to importance to verbal communication, Chinese Singaporeans actually give English a mean rating that is significantly greater than that which they give to Mandarin-Chinese ( $Z = -4.41$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). In contrast, Chinese Malaysian participants consider English to be less important than Mandarin-Chinese in this respect. Thus, it is clear, only with Chinese Singaporean participants is there evidence that English dominates everyday social life more than Mandarin-Chinese does.

## 4 The experience of language in everyday life

As stated earlier, it is crucial to understand if there is a congruence between the perceived importance of the languages and the actual experience of using these languages to the sense of being “Chinese”. It is apparent, from the results from this section of the questionnaire, that all three groups of Chinese participants experience different languages in their everyday life. On the whole, while Mandarin-Chinese does appear to play an important part in the everyday lives of all three groups of participants, it does seem to play a smaller role in the lives of Chinese Malaysian participants, and a smaller one still in the lives of Chinese Singaporeans, with English playing a larger part amongst both these groups of participants, and especially amongst the latter.

### 4.1 Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese

Despite the seeming similarities between the Chinese Malaysians and Chinese Singaporeans, the former live more intensely multilingual lives. To begin with, Chinese Malaysian participants are slightly more likely than their Chinese Singaporean counterparts to indicate that they are highly proficient in two or more languages, arbitrarily defining “highly proficient” as a self-declared proficiency rating of 4 or above, as can be seen in Table 3 below. 92% of Chinese Malaysian participants do so, compared to 81% of Chinese Singaporeans ( $\chi^2 = 4.28$ ,  $p = 0.039$ ). Indeed, almost 65% of Chinese Malaysian participants consider themselves highly proficient in three or more languages, while a mere 16% of Chinese Singaporean participants do the same ( $\chi^2 = 47.81$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Chinese Malaysian participants are also far more likely to use more than one language regularly in the course of their everyday lives, with 72% indicating that they speak

**Table 3:** Frequency distribution for number of languages Chinese Malaysian and Chinese Singaporean participants consider themselves to speak highly proficiently, and to speak regularly in everyday life.

	0	1	2	3	4
<b>No. of languages spoken highly proficiently</b>					
Malaysia	0%	8%	27%	32%	33%
Singapore	0%	19%	65%	15%	1%
<b>No. of languages spoken highly regularly</b>					
Malaysia	0%	28%	40%	30%	2%
Singapore	0%	53%	38%	8%	1%

two or more languages regularly, and 32% indicating that they speak three or more languages regularly. In contrast, slight over half of Chinese Singaporean participants indicate that they speak only one language regularly, with the large majority of the remainder speaking only two languages regularly.

The results of the self-declared language proficiency section of the questionnaire, as summarized in Table 4, suggest that Mandarin-Chinese is highly important to all three groups of participants, with 73% of Chinese Malaysian participants, 82% of Chinese Singaporean participants, and 88% of Mainland Chinese participants rating their proficiency in this language at 4 or above.

**Table 4:** Proportion of Chinese Malaysian, Chinese Singaporean, and mainland Chinese participants considering themselves to be highly proficient in different languages.

	Mandarin	“Dialects”	English	Malay
Malaysia (n = 100)	73 %	66 %	82 %	69 %
Singapore (n = 100)	83 %	16 %	98 %	1 %
Mainland China (n = 100)	88 %	61 %	67 %	

That said, by the same measure, English appears to be even more important amongst Chinese Malaysians and Chinese Singaporeans, with 82% of Chinese Malaysian participants and 98% of Chinese Singaporean participants giving themselves high proficiency ratings in this language, although only with the latter is this difference significant (Chinese Malaysians:  $\chi^2 = 1.84$ ,  $p = 0.176$ ; Chinese Singaporean:  $\chi^2 = 12.5$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Furthermore, as can be seen in Table 5, despite being more likely to rate themselves highly proficient in English, Chinese Malaysians are more likely to say they use Mandarin-Chinese regularly in the course of everyday life in general, although this difference is slightly, and not statistically significant, with 71% doing so, compared to 62% doing so with English ( $\chi^2 = 1.44$ ,  $p = 0.231$ ). In contrast, virtually all Chinese Singaporean participants, at 99% of the participant population, say they use English regularly in everyday life, while less than half do so with Mandarin-Chinese, at 43%.

**Table 5:** Proportion of Chinese Malaysian, Chinese Singaporean, and mainland Chinese participants indicating that they use each language regularly in the course of everyday life overall.

	Mandarin	“Dialects”	English	Malay
Malaysia (n = 100)	71 %	47 %	62 %	30 %
Singapore (n = 100)	43 %	14 %	99 %	1 %
Mainland China (n = 100)	93 %	27 %	44 %	

The dominance of English over everyday social life amongst Chinese Singaporeans becomes even more apparent taking into account language use in different domains, as can be seen in Table 6. Amongst Chinese Malaysian participants, English tends to be the language used most regularly with friends, in school or at work, and in the public domain, with 70 %, 82 %, and 86 % saying they use English regularly in these domains, compared to 63 %, 54 %, and 48 % doing the same with Mandarin-Chinese (Friends:  $\chi^2 = 0.81$ ,  $p = 0.369$ ; School/work:  $\chi^2 = 16.75$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; Public:  $\chi^2 = 30.96$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Only in the family domain is Mandarin-Chinese more likely to be used regularly, with 58 % saying they use it regularly in this domain, compared to 37 % saying they use English ( $\chi^2 = 8.02$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ). Chinese Malaysian participants' tendency to indicate that they use Mandarin-Chinese regularly more than English overall could reflect the importance of Mandarin-Chinese in this domain. Amongst Chinese Singaporeans, English dominates every domain, with nearly all Singaporeans saying they use English regularly with friends, in school or at work, and in the public domain, while only about half say they use Mandarin-Chinese. Moreover, amongst Chinese Singaporeans, English dominates the family domain as well, with 77 % indicating they use English regularly here, compared to just 53 % saying they use Mandarin-Chinese ( $\chi^2 = 11.63$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

**Table 6:** Proportion of Chinese Malaysian and Chinese Singaporean participants who indicate that they use each language regularly in different domains.

		Malaysia (n = 100)	Singapore (n = 100)
Man	Friends	63 %	48 %
	Family	58 %	53 %
	School / workplace	54 %	39 %
	Public	48 %	56 %
Dia	Friends	28 %	48 %
	Family	49 %	53 %
	School / workplace	21 %	39 %
	Public	26 %	56 %
Eng	Friends	70 %	99 %
	Family	37 %	77 %
	School / workplace	86 %	100 %
	Public	82 %	98 %
Mal	Friends	37 %	3 %
	Family	23 %	0 %
	School / workplace	35 %	3 %
	Public	44 %	1 %

Perhaps most telling is data pertaining to language use with different generations of addressees, summarized in Table 7. Amongst Chinese Malaysian

**Table 7:** Proportion of Chinese Malaysian and Chinese Singaporean participants who indicate that they use each language regularly when speaking to addressees of different generations.

		Malaysia (n = 100)	Singapore (n = 100)
Man	Grandparents' generation	39 %	66 %
	Parents' generation	62 %	65 %
	Own generation or younger	74 %	40 %
Dia	Grandparents' generation	73 %	56 %
	Parents' generation	53 %	17 %
	Own generation or younger	36 %	2 %
Eng	Grandparents' generation	13 %	19 %
	Parents' generation	45 %	70 %
	Own generation or younger	76 %	100 %
Mal	Grandparents' generation	17 %	0 %
	Parents' generation	20 %	1 %
	Own generation or younger	37 %	2 %

participants, the younger the addressee is, the more likely they are to say they speak either Mandarin-Chinese or English regularly. The use of both Mandarin-Chinese and English thus appears to be associated with the young more than with the old. Amongst Chinese Singaporean participants, English is even more strongly associated with the young. The younger addressees are, the more likely participants are to say they speak English regularly with them, with 100 % saying they use English regularly with addressees of their own generation or younger. With Mandarin-Chinese, however, there is no such association with the young. In fact, there is evidence of the opposite. Participants are less likely to say they use Mandarin-Chinese regularly when speaking with addressees of their own generation or younger than when speaking to addressees of their parents' generation or older. In Gupta and Yeok (1995) and Li et al.'s (1997) studies, the same patterns observed with "dialects" were taken as evidence of language shift away from these languages.

"Dialects" appear to be similarly unimportant to both Chinese Malaysian and Chinese Singaporean participants. Whilst nearly two-thirds of Chinese Malaysian participants, at 66 %, do claim to be highly proficient in "dialects", slightly less than half, at 47 %, say they use these languages regularly (see Tables 4 and 5). There is also not a single domain in which "dialects" are the language participants are most likely to say they use regularly (see Table 6). "Dialects" appear to play an even smaller role in the everyday lives of Chinese Singaporean participants. Only 16 % of Chinese Singaporeans claim to be highly proficient in these languages, while only 14 % say they use these languages

regularly in the course of their everyday lives. Participants are most likely to say they use “dialects” regularly in the family domain. Even here, however, only 17% do. Hardly any participants say they use “dialects” regularly in any of the other three domains. Once again, with Chinese Singaporean participants, the younger the addressee, the less likely “dialects” are to be used, with only 2% saying they use these languages with addressees of their own generation or young.

## 4.2 Mainland Chinese

When it comes to the experiences of Mainland Chinese participants, unsurprisingly, all evidence points towards Mandarin-Chinese being very important to them. As noted earlier, the vast majority say they speak it proficiently. Mainland Chinese participants are also very likely to say they use Mandarin-Chinese regularly in the course of their everyday lives, with 93% doing so. In contrast, “dialects” appear to be less important amongst Mainland Chinese participants. In the first place, only 61% rate their proficiency in these languages at 4 or above (see Table 4). Self-declared language use data provide even clearer evidence of “dialects” lack of importance relative to Mandarin-Chinese. Mainland Chinese participants are far more likely to say they use Mandarin-Chinese regularly than “dialects”.

Amongst Mainland Chinese participants, there are domains in which “dialects” are the language most likely to be spoken regularly (see Table 8). On the one hand, the use of Mandarin-Chinese does clearly dominate the school and workplace domains, as well as the public domain. On the other, “dialects” are still used, with some regularity (55% with friends, and 60% with family), together with Mandarin Chinese. What is clear though, is that the younger the addressee, the less likely participants are to use “dialects”, and the more likely they are to use Mandarin-Chinese, as can be seen in Table 9. This is not unlike what is seen in the Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese participants.

**Table 8:** Proportion of mainland Chinese participants who indicate that they use mandarin-Chinese and “Dialects” regularly in different domains.

		Mandarin-Chinese	“Dialects”
Mainland China (n = 100)	Friends	62 %	55 %
	Family	51 %	60 %
	School / workplace	82 %	29 %
	Public	77 %	29 %

**Table 9:** Proportions of mainland Chinese participants who indicate that they use mandarin-Chinese and “Dialects” regularly with addressees of different generations.

		Mandarin-Chinese	Dialects
Mainland China (n = 100)	Grandparents’ generation	41 %	76 %
	Parents’ generation	58 %	60 %
	Own generation or younger	85 %	33 %

## 5 Discussion and conclusion

Comparing the results of the two sections of the questionnaire, there appears to be a mismatch between beliefs about the importance of languages and how these languages are actually experienced in everyday life, the most obvious being the Malaysian Chinese participants. While Chinese Malaysian participants perceive Mandarin-Chinese to be the most important language to being Chinese in Malaysia, they are more likely to consider themselves highly proficient in English than in either Mandarin-Chinese or “dialects”. Moreover, in everyday life, English dominates many aspects of Chinese Malaysian social life, with more participants saying they use this language than either Mandarin-Chinese or “dialects” in many domains. Similarly, while the Chinese Singaporean believes in the importance of Mandarin to being “Chinese”, they report not only higher proficiency in English as compared to Mandarin, they also use English in almost every domain of their everyday lives.

That said, the results of the questionnaire do corroborate the findings of existing literature as far as changes in the importance of different languages in Chinese Malaysian, Chinese Singaporean, and Mainland Chinese societies are concerned. To begin with, the results in this paper support previous findings that “dialects” may be becoming less important to Chinese ethnicity amongst all three groups. Amongst all three groups there is evidence to suggest that these languages are mainly being used with the elderly, mirroring findings by David et al. (2009) in Malaysia, and Gupta and Yeok (1995) and Li et al. (1997) in Singapore. The results also support the idea, noted in the introductory section, that this decline is especially pronounced in Singapore. Amongst Chinese Singaporeans, “dialects” are clearly perceived as being unimportant, and are spoken regularly by only a small minority of participants. In contrast, while these languages are becoming less important to Chinese Malaysians and Mainland Chinese, they at least continue to have some relevance, being used regularly by many participants in the family domain, for example. The mismatch noted earlier between beliefs about the importance of “dialects” and how they

are experienced in everyday life could actually be explained by this lingering relevance. The mismatch could be interpreted as reflecting the fact that, for example, “dialects” remain important, albeit only in ways that do not demand high proficiency, and that are embodied in informal domains, especially the family domain. The mismatch could also reflect the possibility that language shift is not always recognized by speakers until it is very advanced, because shift tends to happen in multilingual societies, where different languages are spoken anyway, and where the fact that young people prefer speaking the more economically “useful” language is not remarkable enough that most people would notice. When it comes to “dialects”, the results of the questionnaire do differ from the existing literature in one way. Low et al. (2010) find that mothers in Penang often refrain from speaking “dialects” with their children, hoping to pass Mandarin-Chinese and English on to them instead. However, a good proportion of the young participants in the present study do claim to use these “dialects” regularly in the family domain. This perhaps reflects a limitation in the strategy adopted by Low et al.’s (2010) participants. Regardless of what languages Chinese Malaysian mothers choose to speak to their children, their children may still need or prefer to use “dialects” when speaking to elderly family members.

The results of the study also corroborate existing findings that English is becoming especially important amongst Chinese Malaysians and Chinese Singaporeans. Amongst both groups, Mandarin-Chinese is still perceived as being the most important language overall. However, amongst Chinese Singaporeans, English now clearly dominates everyday social life, with evidence suggesting that there might even be a tendency for Mandarin-Chinese to be reserved for communication with older addressees, again mirroring findings by both Gupta and Yeok (1995) and Li et al. (1997). Amongst Chinese Malaysians, while English is clearly important, the results show that Chinese Malaysian participants use Mandarin-Chinese in the family domain, far more than the Chinese Singaporeans.

At the start of the present study, it was noted that Chinese Malaysians and Chinese Singaporeans differ from Mainland Chinese in that they are immigrant populations inhabiting territories that were formerly British colonies. The results of the questionnaire reveal that, indeed, English distinguishes Chinese Malaysians and Chinese Singaporeans from Mainland Chinese. However, as the preceding discussion highlights, there are key differences between Chinese Malaysians and Chinese Singaporeans as well, particularly when it comes to the extent to which the importance of “dialects” and Mandarin-Chinese are in decline, if at all. These differences might result partly from language planning and policy in the two countries. In Singapore, for

example, “dialects” are activity suppressed, with an official campaign, the *Speak Mandarin Campaign*, launched in 1979 with the express aim of eliminating these languages, and replacing them with Mandarin-Chinese. As part of this campaign, government ministers regularly gave speeches characterizing “dialects” as, amongst other things, vulgar, primitive, divisive, a burden on the young, and lacking in any cultural or economic value (Bokhorst-Heng 1999: 250–252). In Malaysia, there are no specific policies against “dialects”, and indeed, most language policies treat all languages other than Malay and English in much the same way. It is thus not surprising that language shift away from “dialects” amongst Chinese Malaysians should be less advanced than that amongst Chinese Singaporeans. It is similarly not surprising that English should dominate everyday social life so much more amongst Chinese Singaporeans than amongst Chinese Malaysians. While Mandarin-Chinese is an official language in Singapore, language policy in Singapore emphasizes bilingualism and multilingualism, with English prioritized as a necessary lingua franca, essential to communication between ethnic groups, but also vital to Singapore’s economic development (Bokhorst-Heng 1998: 292; Wee 2003: 214). English is accordingly the primary medium of instruction for all core subjects in schools at the primary and secondary levels, while Mandarin-Chinese, with few exceptions, is taught only as a subject, albeit an important one. In contrast, language planning and policy in Malaysia has emphasized Malay as the sole national language. As noted at the start of this paper, Mandarin-Chinese is only minimally recognized in education policy, being made a subject and medium of instruction in some government-funded primary schools, with even this having been fiercely contested in the decades following Malaysia’s independence (Lee 2007: 123–137; Yang 1998: 55). Tan (1988: 143–145) believes that this may ironically have encouraging the development of a “defensive psychology” amongst Chinese Malaysians, prompting them cling on to Mandarin-Chinese as essential to their identity and culture (Tan 1988: 143, 145, 155) When it comes to English, language planning and policy in Malaysia is ambivalent. While English had formerly been available as a medium of instruction in schools in Malaysia, between the 1970s and 1980s, schools at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels were forced to convert to using Malay as a medium of instruction instead (Gill 2004: 142; Wong and James 2000: 216). In the 1990s and early 2000s, English was once again permitted as a medium of instruction for a limited selection of subject with the implementation of new policies emphasizing economic development (Gill 2004: 143). However, in 2006, this was “reversed” amidst fears amongst Malay politicians that Malay was being “sacrificed” (Kamal 2011; Gill 2012: 47). Further studies may want to more closely examine language planning and

policy in Malaysia, Singapore, and elsewhere, in order to better qualify the impact that these have on the relationship between language and the construction of Chinese ethnicity.

There are however some questions left unanswered that could be explored further in future studies. For one, people from different parts of Mainland China and Malaysia could well have different experiences and beliefs about language and Chinese ethnicity. This present study also placed its focus on youth as a factor behind beliefs about language and the experience of language, but did not look into socio-economic class and education level, which may be important factors in multilingual settings such as Malaysia and Singapore. Nonetheless, the findings of the present study call attention to the fact that Chinese ethnicity is not homogeneous. Despite the fact that all three groups of participants are nominally “Chinese”, all three groups have been found to differ from one another in significant ways, as far as the relationship between language and Chinese ethnicity is concerned. An article recently published by *The Economist* (2015) notes that many countries, including China, are now seeking to harness their diasporas for economic gain. Similarly, an article by Russian media network *RT* reports on, amongst other subjects, China’s efforts to project soft power through its diasporas (Sukhoparova 2014). The findings of the present study raise the question of whether these efforts are likely to be successful. Given the centrality of language to the experience of ethnicity, to what extent is it really possible to talk about a single, or even a shared Chinese ethnicity, when different populations ostensibly belonging to the same ethnic group nevertheless express different beliefs about language, and experience language differently. It is hoped that this present study has shown how Chinese ethnicities in different parts of the world need to be understood on their own terms, and how language can be a vital clue as to how different Chinese ethnicities are constructed in the global context.

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