

## **Family Language Policy in a Hakka Community in Sabah, Malaysia**

**Chih-I Liao**

chiivicky@gmail.com

### ***Abstract***

Hakka has been the lingua franca used among various Chinese groups in Sabah, Malaysia, since the 1950s. Economic development and de-emphasis on ethnic identity within Chinese communities throughout Malaysia is now forcing Sabah Hakkas to confront external pressures on their language and culture. Language shift from Hakka is in progress as young Hakkas prefer speaking Mandarin, while their parents feel responsible for maintaining Hakka. This article presents a case study of family language policies in four Hakka families in Sabah. Whether a particular language is used in the family and passed down to the next generation is one of the significant points of enquiry in studying language shift. In this study, parents' ethnic identity, children's language choices, and the factors affecting family language policy are examined. The findings show that the quintessence of Hakka culture in Sabah is the Hakka language, and this helps to keep the language alive at home. However, concern for children's education and wider social factors such as globalisation, economic changes and the media are influencing language practices in Hakka families.

Keywords: language maintenance, language shift, family language policy, Hakka, Sabah

## **1. Introduction**

Language shift and language maintenance have been explored among various immigrant communities (Li, 1994; Winter & Pauwels, 2007; Yu, 2014; Donghui Zhang, 2010), and research has shown that language use of people who have migrated from their original homeland to another country may be affected by a range of factors. In Malaysia, the Chinese comprise almost a quarter of the population (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2016), with the largest Chinese group being Hokkien (37.66%), followed by Hakka (20.36%), and Cantonese (19.90%) (Tan, 2004).

In Malaysia, maintaining any Chinese heritage language is a challenge (Coluzzi, 2017a). Mandarin is used in many domains and is preferred by many young Chinese Malaysians (Wang, 2010). In fact, in Chinese Malaysian communities, many parents choose to speak Mandarin to their children instead of their heritage language (Sim, 2012; Ting & Chang, 2008; Wang, 2010, 2017).

Recent sociolinguistic research has provided an overview of language use and multilingualism in Chinese communities in Malaysia. Being multilingual, switching between different languages is common among Chinese Malaysians (Chong, 2010). David et al. (2009), for example, found that young and older Hokkiens in Malaysia can use multiple languages and frequently switch among them. While there has been an increase in scholarly research on aspects of Hakka culture, economic activities, and language worldwide (Constable, 1996; Hsiao & Lim, 2007), little research has included the authentic voice of the Hakka people in Sabah. They have long been the largest population among the Chinese groups in Sabah (Lee, 1965), with Hakka having been commonly spoken there since the 1950s, functioning as the lingua franca among Chinese in North Borneo (Han, 1971; Lee, 1965; Wong, 2005). However, at present, English and Mandarin have become the dominant languages in Sabah, and this trend has affected the use of Chinese heritage languages, including Hakka, Cantonese, and Hokkien. This research aims to enhance our understanding of how Hakka is currently spoken in home settings.

### **1.1 The Hakkas in Sabah**

Sabah is located in the north of the island of Borneo and is one of the thirteen states of Malaysia. It has a significant Hakka population. Based on the 2015 census in Malaysia (Jabatan Penerangan Malaysia, 2015), Sabah's population is 3,543,500 with 8.7% being Chinese, and more than half of them being Hakkas (Lee 1965; Voon, 2007; Delai Zhang, 2002). The term Hakka, which literally means 'guest' or 'stranger', refers to a Chinese ethnic group whose ancestors, like those of all Han

Chinese, are believed to have originated in north central China (Constable, 1996, p. 3). Lo (1933) claimed that Hakka ancestors experienced at least five massive migrations from the north to the south of China during the past two thousand years. Because of their marginalised and oppressed status (resulting in a failure to settle down permanently), and the fact that they were always on the move, they were called guest people. Gao (1992, pp. 10-11) referred to the Hakka people 'the Jews of the East' [東方的猶太人] and 'the Jews of the Chinese' [華僑中的猶太人]. The Hakka people finally settled in southeast China in Guangdong, Fujian, and Jiangxi provinces in the early Qing dynasty in the seventh century. Due to massive migrations in China and Asia, and the Taiping Rebellion civil war (1850-1864) between the Manchu-led Qing dynasty and the Hakka-led Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, the Hakka people desired social stability. Hakka people are now scattered widely in southern China, and also in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and throughout Southeast Asia.

The immigration of the first Hakka pioneers to Sabah was arranged by the British North Borneo Chartered Company in 1882. In order to increase its settler population, the North Borneo Company encouraged Chinese to enter the state by introducing a new immigration scheme in 1921, known as the 'Free Passage' or 'Free Pass', which particularly recruited Chinese immigrants (Wong, 1999, 2005). The new immigration scheme was popular among the Hakkas in the south of China and they took this opportunity to bring their families with them to Sabah. Compared with the situation of overcrowded communal land in China, the offer of agricultural land by the government was attractive. Between 1921 and 1940, the number of Hakka immigrants increased to 27,424 and comprised 54.78% of the total Chinese population (Delai Zhang, 2002). The Hakkas saw Sabah as their home, and their population steadily increased, with their male-female ratio being much more balanced than other Chinese groups (Lee, 1965). This suggested that the Hakka immigrants planned to settle down in Sabah, unlike other Chinese immigrants who came as labourers, artisans or businessmen (Wong, 2005).

## **2. Family Language Policy**

A close-knit community with frequent contact among members is likely to maintain their heritage language for social networking or as a family language (Ting & Chang, 2008). According to Fishman (1991), language shift occurs when a language fails to be passed down between generations. The research reported here seeks to explore and analyse the lived experience of language use in a Hakka community in Sabah with a focus on the family domain, which it is felt

is a crucible for ideological conflicts. Such family-based research can offer an understanding of language shift and the potential for language revitalisation (King, Fogle, & Logan-Terry, 2008).

Family language policy can be defined as the deliberate and conscious attempt at practising a particular language or languages within the home domain and among family members (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009; Spolsky 2012). In a multilingual society, the availability of multiple languages raises the problem of selecting a home language for the family. Parents may be torn between maintaining their heritage language and assisting their children to align with a dominant majority language if it is not also the heritage language. The school domain is the most noteworthy external influence, and immigrant families with children in state-controlled education may choose to ignore or discourage the heritage language at home (Spolsky, 2012).

There have been significant studies on language maintenance and language shift in Malaysia, many of them showing that language shift is slowly taking place in many communities in Malaysia (see Coluzzi in this issue). For example, many Orang Asli indigenous groups in Peninsular Malaysia have shifted to Malay. Mandarin, on the other hand, is enjoying a prestigious status among the Chinese in Malaysia, while English is used in many domains, including the mass media (Coluzzi, 2017a; 2017b).

Chinese Malaysians identify with their respective speech-group, but most of them received Mandarin Chinese education and are generally multilingual (Tan, 1997). Family and its wider ramification, the clan, represents a core value of their identity in Chinese Malaysian communities (Smolicz, 1981). Hakka settlements in Malaysia are considered to be more committed to upholding general symbols of Chinese traditions compared to other Chinese groups, including ancestor worship, and connections with the place of origin (Carstens, 1996; Tan, 2000a). The Hakkas were more engaged in agriculture or less risky self-employment, with shared labour in family enterprises showing the significant role of families in Hakka society (Constable, 1994; Han, 1971).

In Chinese communities in Malaysia, parents face the challenge to choose either maintenance of their heritage Chinese language or following the majority languages of the society. Hakka families in Penang show a clear shift from Hakka to Hokkien and Mandarin, as Penang is a Hokkien-speaking state and Hokkien is considered to pose the greatest threat to the use of Hakka (Wang, 2017). This change of language use in Hakka families reflects the interplay of social and educational factors. Although Hakka identity is emphasised by Hakka parents, it alone does not keep Hakka as a spoken language at home (Wang, 2017).

Family language policy is concerned with language in day-to-day interactions among family members. The concept of family language policy includes language planning and children's language acquisition (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009; King et al., 2008; Spolsky, 2012). When children are young, their parents' ideology determines the importance of speaking a specific language in the home domain, with the parents' decisions influenced by their attitudes towards each language, their views on which language should be used in a specific circumstance, or what each language represents to them as individuals. Thus, children's language learning and use is a function of parental ideologies and concerns about children's education, as well as the broader social and cultural contexts of family life (King & Fogle, 2013). Research in Malaysia illustrates that family language policy in minority groups is affected by a tension between the heritage languages (in the home domain) and the majority languages (in the public domain). In Sabah, it can be said that during the 1960s every second Chinese in Sabah was a native Hakka speaker (Lee, 1965). However, at present, based on personal observations and fieldwork, some Sabah Hakka parents are not willing to speak Hakka to their children, although they themselves grew up in Hakka-speaking families. Ethnic identity can shape home language practices, and a decline in speaking ethnic languages to children at home can lead to community-wide language shift (King et al., 2008). Some possible reasons for this are investigated in the following sections.

### **3. Method of Study**

This research explores family language policy in a Hakka community in Sabah, Malaysia. The purpose of this study is to explore language vitality within Hakka families in a strongly bonded Hakka community. By applying a sociolinguistic theoretical framework, this study illustrates the tension and challenges two Hakka generations face with regard to language choices, as well as providing a better understanding of languages, society, and the relationships between them. Four selected Hakka families (one parent and one child from each family) were interviewed; parents expressed their feelings about speaking Hakka and how they made their decision on their family language policy, while children shared their experiences of speaking their languages. The data from interviews provides an alternative perspective to the researcher's records, including fieldnotes and direct observations. Combined with the researcher's fieldwork, this perspective can generate new analytic angles and findings (Copland & Creese, 2015).

### 3.1 Data Collection Procedure

The data was collected during four months of fieldwork, which offered me a good opportunity to build close relationships with my participants. I speak three languages: Mandarin, Hakka, and English. As a Hakka, I am familiar with Hakka language and culture and can adopt an insider (emic) perspective. I am also an outsider (etic perspective), as I am a Hakka from Taiwan, and a researcher from Australia. Thus, I was able to combine two perspectives as part of my observations and data collection.

The fieldwork included collecting data from questionnaires and conducting semi-structured interviews. I talked to people in Hakka and Mandarin at a *kopitiam*, which is a popular coffee shop (local cafe) in Sabah where people eat and socialize. Parents often take their children to the *kopitiam* for breakfast on school holidays, or to buy snacks for their children's break in school, and for after-school classes. I recruited suitable participants in this location, where they were happy to be interviewed; I was also invited to join in their family activities. I normally let my participants start the conversations and observed their language choices. The children preferred to speak in Mandarin and English to me, while the parents spoke to me in Mandarin and a little Hakka. My ethnographic observations suggest that interview language behaviours were consistent with those of everyday conversations. The language use between parents and children depends on their choices of family language.

### 3.2 Instruments

The instruments used to collect the data were a short questionnaire, divided into four sections, and semi-structured interviews. The first section of the questionnaire elicited participants' background information and the languages they were able to speak, together with their self-perceived level of proficiency in each. Following the research model of Gal (1979) for Oberwart, Austria, participants were required to self-rate their proficiency in each language in five levels, from 1-weak to 5-excellent. The second and third sections of the questionnaire queried the language used with different interlocutors and in various domains. The last part of the questionnaire contained open-ended questions about their feelings related to language use.

After an opening conversation, the questionnaire was blended with semi-structured interviews where the Hakka parent participants were encouraged to give explanations about

choosing a specific language at home. The children's voices from the semi-structured interviews also offered a broader scope of discussion.

The interview questions covered a range of topics:

- *Background* – birthplace, education, parents' birthplace, places lived for more than one year
- *Interlocutors* – languages used with family members, friends, non-Hakka friends, colleagues, teachers, neighbours
- *Domains* – languages used at home, in religious domains, school, workplaces, traditional market, department store
- *Others* – the dominant language, feelings about specific languages, identification as a Hakka and speaking Hakka

### 3.3 Participants

The participants included two Hakka generations living in Sandakan, Sabah, Malaysia, with four pairs of parents and children, all of whom were born and educated in the town. The parents' ages ranged from 35 to 50 years, with the children either high school or primary school students. Participants from the same family were identified using paired letters: adults in upper case (e.g., YY) and children in lower case (e.g., yy). Table 1 gives the participants' background information.

Table 1. Background information of all participants

Participant	Age	Languages known					Family language	Best/Preferred Language
		Hakka	Mandarin	Cantonese	Malay	English		
YY	40	+	+	+	+	+	Hakka/ Mandarin	Hakka
yy	10	+	+		+	+	Hakka/ Mandarin	Mandarin/
FF	49	+	+	+	+	+	Mandarin	Hakka
ff	14		+		+	+	Mandarin	Mandarin
WW	35	+	+	+	+	+	Hakka	Hakka
ww	11	+	+		+	+	Hakka	English/ Hakka
HH	42	+	+	+	+	+	Hakka	Hakka
hh	16	+	+		+	+	Hakka	Hakka

### 3.4 Language Use by Participants

Table 2 shows the language use of the eight participants sorted in descending age order. The differences of language proficiency between the generations are noticeable: Hakka, Mandarin, Cantonese, English, and Malay were listed by all participants, however no children claimed proficiency in Cantonese, while one child reported no Hakka. Note that there are other languages spoken in Sandakan such as Hokkien, Teochew, and indigenous Austronesian languages, but the participants in this study had little knowledge of other languages. Their language proficiency was self-rated on a scale of 1-5 (weak to excellent).

Table 2. Language Proficiency by All Participants

Participant	Age	Hakka	Mandarin	Cantonese	English	Malay
FF	49	5	4	4	3	4
HH	42	5	3	3	2	3
YY	40	5	4	5	4	4
WW	35	5	5	5	2	5
hh	16	5	3	0	3	2
ff	14	0	5	0	5	3
ww	11	5	1	0	5	4
yy	10	5	5	0	4	3

## 4. Results and Discussion

As shown in Table 1 and Table 2, Mandarin, English, and Malay were common to the eight participants. Mandarin has great influence in Southeast Asia and is becoming the lingua franca across various dialect groups in Chinese Malaysian communities (Wang, 2012). Malay is the national and official language and is used in public and formal domains, while English as the former official language is used for education. There is a stark contrast in the use of Cantonese: young participants were indifferent about Cantonese while their parents expressed great proficiency and passion in speaking it. The parents claimed that Cantonese was needed for its social functions, as an important language at work and in some public functions in the Chinese community. The young generation are school-focussed, where Mandarin (in Chinese schools) or Malay (in government-funded primary schools) are the mediums of instruction, and there is no role for other languages, apart from English.

In terms of Hakka, the sole exception is participant ff, a 14-year old girl studying at a Chinese high school where Mandarin is the main language. Her parents also speak Mandarin to her, therefore her Hakka is poor. The Tables also show that while seven out of eight participants



claimed to be native Hakka speakers, that language was not always spoken in their families. Three of four parents selected Hakka as the family language before their children were born or when their children were small, providing a Hakka-speaking environment until they started going to school. Mandarin is the medium in Chinese schools which three of the young participants attended, resulting in a partial switch away from Hakka at home: two parents opted to continue with Hakka, one shifted to Mandarin, while YY, a Hakka father, practised bilingualism in the family.

#### 4.1 Parents' Language Choices

One Hakka mother, participant FF, spoke Mandarin to her daughter (participant ff). She claimed that she was proud of being Hakka, but she refused to pass the language down to her daughter, believing that speaking Mandarin is a global trend, therefore speaking Mandarin at home is beneficial to her children's education and the future careers. Consider the following excerpts from her interviews:

Excerpt 1. 我喜歡講客家，因為我是客家人嘛！ (Participant FF, Mandarin)

I like to speak Hakka because I am a Hakka

Excerpt 2. 我到哪裡都講客家(話)除了跟我女兒。 (Participant FF, Mandarin)

I speak Hakka everywhere except to my daughter

Participant YY claimed excellent language proficiency in Hakka, Mandarin, Cantonese, English, and Malay. He switched between Mandarin and Hakka with his son, selecting Mandarin to prepare his child for school. He spoke Mandarin to his son until he was sure the child had acquired adequate Mandarin skills, then he changed the family language to Hakka. As both the children's education and heritage languages were equally important to YY's family, he adopted a bilingual interaction strategy.

Excerpt 3. 我以前和他們講華語，我想讓他們學好華語才去學校，現在改講客家話，以後他們要講華語還是客家都隨便他們，反正我已經教會他們了。 (Participant YY, Mandarin)

I used to speak Mandarin to my children to assist them in getting ready before going to school. I have switched to Hakka now. In the future, it is up to them to speak either in Mandarin or Hakka. After all, I have taught them both languages.

Families W and H maintain Hakka at home, however the parents expressed worries about their decisions. They seem to be convinced that speaking Mandarin to children helps them get ready for school, but participants WW and HH found it hard to replace Hakka with Mandarin within their families, as the former had been their dominant language before the children were born.

The issue of home language choice is a major concern among Chinese families in Sabah, and the shift to Mandarin, ostensibly for the children's education, puts pressure on Hakka language and cultural maintenance, as illustrated in the following interview extract:

Excerpt 4. 我的小孩有問過我為什麼我們家講客家，我跟她說我們是客家人，這叫做傳統。可是我老公還是覺得孩子要送去華小才好，我們都很擔心他不會華語。

(Participant WW, Mandarin)

My child asked me why we speak Hakka, I told her because we are Hakka and this is a tradition. My husband said it would be better if we sent her to a Chinese primary school to learn Mandarin. We are worried she doesn't understand Mandarin.

Excerpt 5. 以前我是想跟小孩講華語，等孩子出生以後就自然講客家話了。

(Participant HH, Mandarin)

I planned to speak Mandarin to my children. After they were born, Hakka just came up naturally.

## **4.2 Children's Language Choices**

The data shows differences in language choice between generations, with parents having different views about home language that lead to different language behaviours within the families. Children start to prefer Mandarin once they begin school since Hakka (along with other Chinese languages) is forbidden and Mandarin is the medium of instruction in Chinese schools in Malaysia. Teenagers are influenced by peers and media and thus they prefer to speak the language which is most popular in their peer group. There is some evidence that for young males Hakka has covert prestige. Thus,

participant hh favoured Hakka due to its perceived friendliness and cheekiness. He asserted that speaking Hakka in any sports activity showed his *manliness*, while, on the contrary, Mandarin is seen as *soft* and *polite*. He noticed that girls in school preferred those who spoke Mandarin (see Excerpt 6), a common sociolinguistic pattern where females attend more to overt prestige.

Excerpt 6. 我跟我朋友都講客家話，我們男孩子在一起都是這樣的，很粗，但感覺比較親，像自己人。(Participant hh, Mandarin)

I hang out with my friends speaking Hakka, we boys always do. Speaking Hakka makes me feel closer to them. Yes, it may sound rough, but feels like being in a brotherhood.

Participant ff has a great passion for English. She likes American movies and fashion, and plans to study fashion design at university. Her parents also encourage her wish to study abroad. In contrast, Hakka is not considered an international language, while Mandarin, the sole language used in her family, is. There was no motivation and pressure for ff to learn Hakka, and although ff's mother is proud to claim that she is a Hakka speaker (see Excerpt 1), ff was the only participant in this research who self-reported a very low level of proficiency in Hakka.

Excerpt 7. 我不知道他們在說什麼，不過他們要找我的時候就會講華語 (Participant ff, Mandarin)

I don't understand what they are talking about; they would switch to Mandarin if they need me to.

The parents of participants ww and yy are members of the Sandakan Hakka Association, and are closely connected to Hakka language and cultural maintenance. Participant ww studies in a government-funded primary school where she is only allowed to speak Malay and English, however the family staunchly maintains Hakka at home. In contrast to participant ff, ww has little use for Mandarin in her life. The youngest participant, yy, is a fluent Mandarin and Hakka speaker. He is too young to be involved in the Hakka Association, but he respects the family language. He conforms with his parents' language policy despite the fact that his father changed the family language from Mandarin to Hakka when yy went to primary school (see Excerpt 3). Both participants ww and yy, who are primary school students, switch languages, depending on the

domain. As their parents are in the Sandakan Hakka Association and support Hakka language maintenance, speaking it is a requirement at home. Participant ww speak to her school friends and texts them in English, which is her social language. Participant yy prefers Mandarin for non-family social communication as Hakka is not commonly spoken at his school.

### **4.3 The New Chinese Malaysians from Hakka Families**

The four young participants in this research were 10, 14, 11, and 16 years old and did not pay much attention to differences among Chinese groups in Malaysia. Since Mandarin had been chosen as the medium in Chinese schools in Malaysia and their parents seemed uncertain about their family language policy, two of them (yy and ff) prefer Mandarin. The use of Mandarin unites Chinese groups in Malaysia (Wang, 2010, 2012), and these young Hakkas identify themselves as Chinese without much concern for their ethnic language (Tan, 2004), as Excerpts 8 and 9 suggest.

Excerpt 8: 反正我都講華語，跟朋友也是講華語。看電視玩手機都是華語，我覺得客家人什麼人都一樣，都是華人。(Participant ff, Mandarin)

I always speak Mandarin anyway. I speak Mandarin to friends. I watch Mandarin speaking TV programmes and use those mobile social media in Mandarin. Hakka is just like other groups, they are all Chinese.

Excerpt 9: 我們家是講客家，可是客家人就是華人。所以我是華人，我的朋友也都是華人，我不會去問他們是不是客家人？(Participant hh, Mandarin)

I am in a Hakka speaking family, I think Hakka is Chinese. So I am a Chinese and my friends are also Chinese. I wouldn't ask them if they are Hakka.

The label “Chinese Malaysians” has been identified by Tan (2000a) as stressing local identity and Malaysian identity. The term “supra-Chinese” refers to Chinese who do not emphasise sub-groups or see differences among various Chinese languages and cultures. In Malaysia, Chinese teenagers belong to this group, often as a result of family language policies prioritising Mandarin or English (Ting & Chang, 2008). Children from minority families learn the utility and dominating power of the majority languages as they socialise in communities that do not involve or value the

use, as well as the users, of their heritage languages (Yazan & Ali, 2018). In this research, the young participants identified with the idea of being a supra-Chinese Malaysian rather than being a Hakka. The new Hakka generation is therefore more engaged with Mandarin, which is widely used in the rest of Malaysia, internationally, and in social media.

## **5. Challenges of Hakka Language Maintenance in Hakka Families**

This paper explored family language policy in a small group of Hakka families in Sabah, Malaysia to identify the factors influencing language choices in four pairs of parent-child participants. When Hakka is the family language, it is not commonly used by the children's generation outside the family, nor widely accepted by the mainstream society, so maintaining it within the home domain is a challenge. Unlike Taiwan, Hakka is not supported in Malaysia by the government. Taiwan, in contrast, has an official Hakka language department, and Hakka can be taught in schools, spoken at public events, and used in announcements on public transportation. There are Hakka TV channels, and Hakka departments in all government agencies.

The four Hakka parents interviewed in this study enjoyed speaking Hakka, and although half of them encouraged their children to maintain Hakka at home, they still felt conflicted about this choice. Speaking Hakka is an option but is no longer felt to be a duty. The findings in this research show that one of the four Hakka families has abandoned the Hakka language in the home domain, a sign of incipient language shift.

Choosing Hakka as the family language for contemporary Hakka families is not easy. On one hand, all the Hakka parents in this research have strong ethnolinguistic identities, and accept that maintenance of Hakka language and culture is their responsibility. On the other hand, they also believe that the most important parental duty is to help their children excel at school, for which Mandarin is the key. There is a risk that Mandarin will start to expand and occupy increasing domains in Chinese Malaysian communities, and that speaking Mandarin at home will spread due to external pressure, eroding Hakka identity.

### **5.1 The Decline of Hakka identity in Two Hakka generations**

In Malaysia, language shift can be found in many Chinese communities (Wang, 2010, 2017), and heritage language maintenance in the home domain is diminishing. A significant factor in family language shift is the parents' ideology, and in Malaysia this is tied to ethnic identity.

Chinese Malaysian associations have been established mainly along the lines of dialect (language), kinship, and geographical origins, and those representing ethnicity, families, and village-based clans have been formed for unity and solidarity. Chinese Malaysians show a positive orientation towards Chinese identity throughout Malaysia; it is strengthened by shared linguistic and cultural values and behaviours as non-Malays. However, globalization and transnationalism have increased the significance of international networks, resulting in ethnic groups and ethnic identifications inevitably being influenced by external sources of power (Tan, 2000b). Mandarin, as a globally employed language, has blurred linguistic distinctions within Chinese communities in Malaysia (Wang, 2010). Younger generations, such as teenagers, refer to themselves as “Chinese” rather than “Hakka” or “Hokkien”. This is usually accompanied by the use of Mandarin or English as the language at home (Ting & Chang, 2008).

The feeling of ‘Hakkaness’ for Hakka people in Sandakan seems to be uncertain and receding. In Sabah, many middle-aged Hakkas may have heard from their parents or grandparents about their hometown in China, and may have attempted to visit the place where their ancestors came from. Respecting and remembering the ancestors in this way is part of Hakka culture, and involves maintenance of traditions and language. However, rather than maintaining connections with an unfamiliar identity and imagined hometown in China, the younger Hakka generation in Malaysia focuses on the present and future. Speaking Hakka shows identity, solidarity, and respect for Hakka culture, but it seems to have little ‘benefit’ as Hakka is not allowed in education domains, official departments, nor in mainstream media. The Hakka language is losing its functions and importance, as social pressures compel the Hakkas to renegotiate their traditions and beliefs, impacting on parenting decisions and family language policies. A supportive family language policy, however, does not by itself guarantee the maintenance of heritage languages because it is flexible and can be altered, being subjected to influence from the role of the majority languages in the society (Fogle & King, 2013). The case of participant FF’s family shows that external pressure may have great influence over the expression of Hakka identity, so much so that their language behaviour changed. Learning and speaking English is believed to be essential to achieve the target of studying overseas. As a result, child ff dropped Hakka and showed no passion for learning it. If the parents allowed their children to choose the family language, the children would be more than happy to continue the conversation in their language of choice (Yu, 2014). Eventually, the parents are compelled to switch to Mandarin.

## **5.2 Mandarin is Replacing Hakka in Hakka Families**

Most Chinese schools shifted from ethnic Chinese languages to Mandarin in the 1920s (Sam & Wang, 2011; Wang, 2012, 2016). Speaking non-Mandarin Chinese languages in Chinese schools was not encouraged and the policy started to influence students so much that Cantonese, Hakka, or Hokkien were not appreciated. Hakka and Hokkien have faded out while Mandarin dominates. In Chinese communities in Malaysia, Mandarin has overt prestige and represents knowledge, intelligence, and high socioeconomic status. Thus, during my four-month fieldwork in Sabah, I had planned to interview my participants in Hakka, but they claimed that speaking Mandarin to me showed their respect to a female and a researcher. As they usually speak Mandarin to teachers in school, they avoided speaking Hakka to me.

Research has shown that the number of speakers of Hakka and Hokkien is falling, and that shift to Mandarin is under way (Hsiao & Lim, 2007: 433; Tan, 1997: 110; Wang, 2012; Wang & Chong, 2011). In addition, Mandarin as a globally used language, has blurred the linguistic distinction within Chinese communities in Malaysia (Wang, 2010). In its emerging role as a supra-Chinese identity marker, aided by language policy and school curriculums, the overwhelming use of Mandarin has created pressure on Hakka parents when they plan their family language policies.

Beyond language and identity, there are advantages in supporting Mandarin in Malaysia as China's political and economic strength is growing rapidly (López, 2014) and speaking Mandarin, is seen as a key for access to the Chinese market. Promoting Mandarin offers many benefits to connect with economic capital. The ability to speak Mandarin with Chinese business people is considered a tremendous advantage (Silver, 2005).

The media also plays a significant role in preserving culture and language. Language choices in the media are based on the targeted audiences (Bell, 1984; Manns, 2014), and can be seen as a reflection of ethnic identity and self-esteem, enhancing the value of being a member of a particular group. There are no Hakka mass media in Sabah. The rise of Mandarin and English in television programs and movies has caused more and more Chinese families in Malaysia to adopt them as their family languages. The advance of satellite television and the internet might enrich people's lives, but it erodes the chances of survival for various non-Mandarin Chinese languages in Malaysia (Sim, 2012).

When China's economy expanded in the 1990s, Chinese authorities stepped up their efforts in broadcasting Chinese pop cultures to spur interest in Mandarin overseas (Chua, 2001).

Increasingly, in China and elsewhere, Mandarin is replacing Cantonese in the media and popular culture such as movies and music, and technological developments such as social media have sped up the use of Mandarin.

## **6. Conclusion**

The findings of this article are that Hakka families in Sabah seem to have maintained their culture and language while facing many challenges to do so. They have generally supportive family language policies, but are under external pressure to move towards more use of Mandarin at the expense of Hakka. Family language policy is not about language alone, but relates to ideologies and beliefs about the educational needs of children, and desires for intercultural identity and competence to adjust to the wider society.

This study is limited in its scope as it is based on interviews with four pairs of Hakka parents and children, thus no claim is made that it represents the situation of the whole Hakka community. Further research is needed to compare patterns of family language policy in a larger population and across more generations in terms of the variables identified here, as well as others such as level of education, gender, and language ideologies.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions. I am also grateful to Professor Peter K. Austin and Professor Stefanie Pillai for their detailed comments and extensive editing that helped to substantially improve the paper.

## **References**

- Bell, A. (1984). Language style as audience design. *Language in Society*, 13(2), 145-204.
- Carstens, S. A. (1996). Form and content in Hakka Malaysian culture. In N. Constable (Ed.), *Guest people: Hakka identity in China and abroad*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Chong, S. (2010). Code-mixing behavior and attitude among Chinese undergraduates in Malaysia. *The Journal of Chinese Sociolinguistics*, 1(1), 78-88.
- Chua, B.-H. (2001). Pop culture China. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography Lecture Series*, 22(2), 113-121.



- Coluzzi, P. (2017a). The vitality of minority languages in Malaysia. *Oceanic Linguistics*, 56(1), 210-225.
- Coluzzi, P. (2017b). Language planning for Malay in Malaysia: A case of failure or success? *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 2017(244), 17-38.
- Constable, N. (1994). *Christian souls and Chinese spirits: A Hakka community in Hong Kong*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Constable, N. (1996). *Guest people: Hakka identity in China and abroad*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Copland, F., & Creese, A. (2015). *Linguistic ethnography: Collecting, analysing and presenting data*. London: SAGE.
- Curdt-Christiansen, X. L. (2009). Invisible and visible language planning: Ideological factors in the family language policy of Chinese immigrant families in Quebec. *Language Policy*, 8(4), 351-375.
- David, M. K., Tien, W. Y. M., Ngeow, Y. M., & Gan, K. H. (2009). Language choice and code switching of the elderly and the youth. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 2009(200), 49-74.
- Department of Statistics Malaysia (2016). *Current Population Estimates, Malaysia, 2014-2016*. Retrieved from [https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthem&menu\\_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVSZklWdzQ4TlhUUT09&bul\\_id=OWlxdEVoYlJCS0hUZzJyRUcvZEYxZz09](https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthem&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVSZklWdzQ4TlhUUT09&bul_id=OWlxdEVoYlJCS0hUZzJyRUcvZEYxZz09)
- Fishman, J. A. (1991). *Reversing language shift: Theoretical and empirical foundations of assistance to threatened languages*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Fogle, L. W., & King, K. A. (2013). Child agency and language policy in transnational families. *Issues in Applied Linguistics*, 19, 1-25.
- Gal, S. (1979). *Language shift: Social determinants of linguistic change in bilingual Austria*. New York: Academic Press.
- Gao, Z. (1992). *Kejia ren: Dong fang de Youtai ren [The Hakka: The Jews of the East]*. Taipei City, Taiwan: Wooling Publishing.
- Han, S. F. (1971). *A study of the occupational patterns and social interaction of overseas Chinese in Sabah, Malaysia* (Unpublished doctoral thesis). University of Michigan.

- Hsiao, H.-H. M., & Lim, K. T. (2007). The formation and limitation of Hakka identity in Southeast Asia. *Taiwan Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 4(1), 3-28.
- Jabatan Penerangan Malaysia (2015). Population by States and Ethnic Group, 2015. Retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20160212125740/http://pmr.penerangan.gov.my/index.php/info-terkini/19463-unjuran-populasi-penduduk-2015.html>
- King, K. A., Fogle, L., & Logan-Terry, A. (2008). Family language policy. *Language and Linguistics Compass*, 2(5), 907-922.
- King, K., & Fogle, L. (2013). Family language policy and bilingual parenting. *Language Teaching*, 46(2), 172-194.
- Lee, Y. L. (1965). The Chinese in Sabah (North Borneo). *Erdkunde*, 19(4), 306-318.
- Li, W. (1994). *Three generations, two languages, one family: Language choice and language shift in a Chinese community in Britain*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Lo, H.-L. (1933). *Kejia yanjiu daolun [An introduction to the study of the Hakka]*. Xingning, China: Xishan Library.
- López, C. C. (2014). Language is the soul of the nation: Language, education, identity, and national unity in Malaysia. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 13(3), 217-223.
- Manns, H. (2014). Scripting radio language amidst language shift in Indonesia. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, 24(1), 22-40.
- Sam, M. L., & Wang, X. (2011). Ethnolinguistic vitality of minority communities in a multilingual society: A comparative study of the Chinese and Indians in Malaysia. *Journal of Chinese Sociolinguistics*, 2, 11-29.
- Silver, R. E. (2005). The discourse of linguistic capital: Language and economic policy planning in Singapore. *Language Policy*, 4(1), 47-66.
- Sim, T. W. (2012). Why are native language of the Chinese Malaysians in decline? *Journal of Taiwanese Vernacular*, 4(1), 62-94.
- Smolicz, J. (1981). Core values and cultural identity. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 4(1), 75-90.
- Spolsky, B. (2012). Family language policy: The critical domain. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 33(1), 3-11.
- Tan, C.-B. (1997). Chinese identity in Malaysia. *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, 25(2), 103-116.

- Tan, C.-B. (2000a). Socio-cultural diversities and identities. In K. H. Lee & C. B. Tan (Eds.), *The Chinese in Malaysia* (pp. 37-70). Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.
- Tan, C.-B. (2000b). Ethnic identities and national identities: Some examples from Malaysia. *Identities*, 6(4), 441-480.
- Tan, C. B. (2004). Chinese in Malaysia. In M. Ember, C. R. Ember & I. Skoggard (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of diasporas: Immigrant and refugee cultures around the world* (Vol. 2) (pp. 697-706). New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.
- Ting, S. H., & Chang, Y. S. (2008). Communication in a close-knit extended Hakka family in Kuching, Sarawak: Mandarin or Hakka? *Proceedings of 9<sup>th</sup> Borneo Research Council (BRC)*, Borneo on the move: Continuity and Change, Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia.
- Voon, P. K. (2007). Ma lai xi ya hua yi ren kou yu fang yan qun de fen bu [Population and distribution of Chinese Malaysian] *CMCS Bulletin*, 1, 27-35
- Wang, X. (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.
- Wang, X., & Chong, S. L. (2011). A hierarchical model for language maintenance and language shift: Focus on the Malaysian Chinese community. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 32(6), 577-591.
- Wang, X. (2012). *Mandarin spread in Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press.
- Wang, X. (2016). Language maintenance or language shift? The role of religion in a Hakka Catholic community in Malaysia. *International Multilingual Research Journal*, 10(4), 273-288.
- Wang, X. (2017). Family language policy by Hakkas in Balik Pulau, Penang. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 2017(244), 87-118.
- Winter, J., & Pauwels, A. (2007). Gender in the construction and transmission of ethnolinguistic identities and language maintenance in immigrant Australia. *Australian Journal of Linguistics*, 25(1), 153-168.
- Wong, D. T. K. (1999). Chinese migration to Sabah before the Second World War. *Archipel*, 58(3), 131-158.
- Wong, D. T. K. (2005). *Historical Sabah: The Chinese*. Kota Kinabalu: Natural History Publications.

- Yazan, B., & Ali, I. (2018). Family language policies in a Libyan immigrant family in the U.S.: Language and religious identity. *Heritage Language Journal*, 15(3), 369-388.
- Yu, S. (2014). The immediate effect of parental language choice on that of their children's language in Chinese migrant families. *Taiwan Journal of Linguistics*, 12(1), 81-108.
- Zhang, D. [Delai] (2002). *The Hakkas of Sabah: A survey of their impact on the modernization of the Bornean Malaysian State*. Kota Kinabalu: Sabah Theological Seminary.
- Zhang, D. [Donghui] (2010). Language maintenance and language shift among Chinese immigrant parents and their second-generation children in the U.S. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 33(1), 42-60.