Multilingual Chinese Malaysians: the global dimensions of language choice

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Abstract. Examining the impact of global forces on Chinese Malaysian language identities and practices illuminates the ongoing tensions between the external expectations for globally powerful languages such as English and Mandarin and the internal realities of how people respond to these and other languages in the specific contexts of their daily lives. For multilingual Chinese Malaysians, a combination of practical, strategic, symbolic, and emotional factors shape decisions about language acquisition and language use within the interconnected domains of family, education, religion, media, and occupational spheres. Although Chinese Malaysians and others connect the global spread of Mandarin to the emerging economic and political power of the PRC, there are major barriers to Mandarin becoming a globally significant language medium beyond the Chinese linguistic and cultural sphere. In the Malaysian context, Mandarin skills remain a key marker of Chinese ancestral and cultural identity, while English skills are valued primarily for their practical use.

Keywords: Chinese Malaysian; multilingual; global languages; Mandarin; Chinese dialects

1. Introduction

The Setting: An upper middle class home in the Kuala Lumpur suburbs, February 2014.

The Occasion: A Chinese New Year potluck with Christian cell group families, who usually meet in family homes on Friday evenings for Bible study and worship and attend English Sunday services at a Pentecostal church. I am an invited guest of long term Chi-
nese Malaysian friends, a husband and wife in their early 60s. I count around 30 people who arrive with spouses and children: six couples in their 60s, three couples in their 40s (two of these related to 60s couples), 5 or 6 teenaged children, and 4 or 5 younger children.

**Language Use:** People greet each other on arrival and chat in Cantonese. Three men gravitate to the big screen television in the living room showing a National Geographic program on airplane disasters in English. Women are busy setting food on the table outside in the carport, a mix of dishes that include Hakka style chicken, sour pork soup and Yong Doufu; Malay chicken curries; Thai sotong curry; Indonesian gado-gado and beef rendang, and more. When everyone has arrived, people gather in another room to sing two songs and say a prayer in English before eating. One popular Chinese New Year song (每条大街小巷) is performed with Christian English lyrics that are hand printed, copied and shared on small sheets of paper.

Afterwards people fill their plates and sit together in small groups eating and socializing. The adults speak Cantonese with each other, although one man and woman converse in Hakka. I overhear Mandarin spoken by teenagers, who keep to themselves and eventually go inside to play with their cell phones. Later, one mother complains about her teenaged children's poor Cantonese skills. I hear some English spoken to young children, but a woman sitting next to me says she also speaks to her children in Hakka. I ask if her husband is Hakka – no, he's Hokkien.

The fellowship that follows is conducted in English – mostly singing from a booklet compiled by one of the members – some 300 songs in English with three in Malay. A man playing the accordion sings two songs in Cantonese that he says mean a lot to him, and some, but not all, of the others follow along. Towards the end, teenagers are encouraged to select a song that they enjoy, and two teenage brothers volunteer to play guitar and sing, performing one song that the adults clearly know, and then two more that are apparently popular with their age group. Again, all of the songs are in English.

The multilingual language practices displayed in this opening Malaysian scenario are products of a complex mix of past and present global, national, and local forces that include: historic migration from Southeast China, British colonialism, Christian missions, Malaysian education policies, and local and transnational media, in addition to other global economic and cultural trends. In contempo-
rary Malaysia, with a population comprised of approximately 50% Malays, 23% Chinese, 7% Indians, 12% indigenous, and 8% non-citizens. Chinese Malaysians employ a variety of linguistic registers as they communicate with different segments and strata of society in a range of local, national and globally defined settings. The selective use of linguistic forms in different contexts marks social groups, social relations, and cultural identities in ways that both unite and divide. In the past, the selection of English or Chinese medium education divided Chinese Malaysians into those perceived as more western or more Chinese oriented. However, most younger generation Chinese Malaysians today receive a trilingual education, attending Mandarin medium primary school, Malay medium secondary school, and mostly English medium colleges and universities. Meanwhile, Chinese dialects such as Cantonese, Hokkien, and Hakka, although diminished in use among younger family members, remain important regional languages in places like Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Penang, Malacca, and Kota Kinabalu.

Global trends contribute significantly to how Chinese Malaysians view and use the many languages available in the Malaysian setting. The global dimensions of linguistic choice directs our attention not only to the comparative influence of globally powerful languages, such as English and Mandarin, but also to the multiple levels and domains in individual lives where global forces differentially shape language identities and choice. Global language flows via mass media and religion also go beyond English and Mandarin influences to encourage the continued use of regional Chinese dialects such as Cantonese, Hokkien, and Hakka in selective contexts. Examining the impact of global forces on Chinese Malaysian language identities and practices illuminates the ongoing tensions between the external pressures of globally powerful languages and the internal realities of

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2 Some linguists prefer the term topolect to characterize what are mutually unintelligible languages such as Cantonese and Hokkien. While I agree with this in general, using topolect makes it awkward to refer to what are usually labeled dialect groups in most of the literature. Thus, for my present purposes, I have chosen to refer to these languages as Chinese dialects.
how people respond in the specific social contexts of their daily lives. The following discussion begins with a brief overview of global language flows in the Malaysian context, followed by a more detailed discussion of global language influences in the interconnected but somewhat discrete domains of family, education, religion, mass media, and occupation. The paper's final sections examine the issue of Mandarin as an emerging global language and conclude with some brief observations on the different functions of Mandarin and English in expressing Chinese Malaysian identities.

2. Research Methodology

This paper draws on data collected during five months of ethnographic sociolinguistic research in Malaysia from January through May, 2014, as well as on data and perspectives from a range of published sources and on my own long term ethnographic research on Chinese Malaysian society and culture. My 2014 ethnographic research explored issues of Malaysian Chinese language identities and ideologies at the local, national, and global levels. The following discussion draws selectively on this data to highlight specific global issues. Residing close to the University of Malaya campus in Kuala Lumpur, my daily observations and interactions (in Mandarin and English) extended from the Chinese students and faculty in the University of Malaya Chinese Studies Department, where I was affiliated, to a diverse range of people on and off campus that included friends, strangers, and acquaintances. Mixed methods research incorporated numerous informal interviews/conversations; 8 focus groups with individuals from different age groups and educational backgrounds (4 in English, 4 in Mandarin); responses to questions posted in English and Mandarin on a Facebook research site; 87 recorded public conversations.

3 See Carstens, Histories, Cultures, and Identities.
4 The questions posted on this site mirrored the ones used with focus group participants. A total of 46 individuals posted 86 responses to questions, with 28 writing in Chinese and 18 in English. See www.facebook.com/malaysianchineselanguages
5 The conversation data was mostly collected by Chinese Malaysian students from University Malaya, University Putra Malaysia, and SEGi University, who were trained to record 15 minute conversations of people in small groups and have them fill out bio-
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and biodata on gender, age, education, occupation, and language practices collected from 314 research participants. The quantitative data reported in this paper comes from these biodata forms, split almost evenly between individuals aged 17-30 (46%) and aged 31-61 (54%). A large majority of people in this data sample grew up outside of the KL area (87%), spread across a range of cities, towns, and villages in both peninsular Malaysia as well as Sabah and Sarawak. Because most of my research assistants were Chinese Studies students at two local universities, there may be a bias in this data towards Chinese educated families and individuals. Consequently, the numbers reported in this paper should not be taken as statistically representative of Malaysian Chinese in total, but are used to illustrate broader trends.

3. Global Language Flows

Language use crosses borders in multiple ways at many different levels. Beyond the impact of global media, one important conduit of language spread is people themselves who voluntarily or involuntarily migrate beyond their homelands and pass their language skills to subsequent generations in these new settings. The survival of these "non-native" languages depend, of course, on such variables as migrant population size and density, relationships with the local population, the support of a literate tradition through schools and media, and the socioeconomic usefulness of the language in both local and transnational contexts. Decisions to sustain ancestral tongues and/or develop new language skills determine the growth and spread of differential language use in multiple domains. Such decisions are based, once again, on a combination of personal and political factors: things like familial respect; the attraction of popular media; positive or ne-
gative stereotypes of language users; as well as relative educational and occupational advantages.

Global forces are one among many that shape decisions about language acquisition and use. It is important to remember that global influences are never singular, but are rather "a complex of processes, evolving and developing at different scale-levels, with differences in scope, speed, and intensity". The region that now constitutes Malaysia has long been influenced by global processes, from the spread of Hindu and Muslim beliefs through Indian traders in the 15th centuries; to periods of Portuguese and Dutch control of Malacca, followed by British colonialism from the 18th to mid-20th centuries; to large scale migration of Chinese and Indian workers and their cultures, especially from the mid-19th to mid-20th century; to more recent influences from the Islamic Middle East, global English language and Chinese language media, and global business investments from both Asia and the west.

The rise of China in the past 30 years has created new possibilities for identification with China and Chinese language among overseas Chinese populations. In Southeast Asia, which hosts the largest populations of overseas Chinese, the linguistic response to the expanding influence of China has varied based on local histories as well as current socioeconomic and political policies. One product of China's rise (and of changing political attitudes) has been expanding opportunities for Chinese education (in Mandarin) and Chinese written media in countries such as Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand, and the Philippines where Chinese language was previously suppressed. For ethnic Chinese in these countries, where local languages such as Indonesian, Thai, Filipino, or Cambodian now serve as the main lingua franca, Mandarin is now an additional language that may be studied for heritage or business purposes, but remains a second language. By contrast, Chinese schools and Chinese media have held a continuous prominent place in Chinese Malaysian society since the early 20th century. Given that Chinese dialects and/or Mandarin remain the first language of the great majority of Chinese Malaysians, they can be expected to respond to an expanding global China in somewhat different ways.

In contemporary Malaysia, Malaysian Chinese view Chinese and English as the two most important languages for global and interna-

tional connections. Even though most younger generation Chinese have graduated from Malay medium secondary schools and thus have relatively fluent Malay skills, they assert that, unlike English and Chinese, Malay is not an international language, but only useful in certain local settings. While the status of Malay as the national language is acknowledged, they also consider it an ethnicized language rather than a neutral form of communication between people from different ethnic backgrounds. The recent attempts to ban the use of the term “Allah” for God in Malay medium Christian Bibles have further underscored these views.8

Global influences affect the ways that individuals make decisions about developing and utilizing language resources in different domains and social contexts. Although language issues in different domains are clearly interconnected and interact with each other, communication styles and protocols vary.9 For example, the typical style of code mixing used by Malaysian Chinese in casual conversations would not be considered appropriate in more formal educational or occupational settings. Conversing in a family dialect such as Hokkien in a family setting may convey respect and intimacy, whereas the use of Hokkien in public with strangers may be judged as low class. Malaysian Chinese are affected by and negotiate the global implications of Chinese and English languages in somewhat different ways within the domains of family, education, religion, media, and employment. The following sections outline the key issues in these different domains.

4. Language Patterns in the Family Domain

Although language practices in the more intimate domain of family might appear to be least likely affected by global language flows, the generational shifts in language patterns in Chinese Malaysian families are at least in part a response to broader national and international trends. The family domain is typically multilingual. In 80% (249) of the 314 families surveyed in our research, individuals reported speaking multiple languages within their two, three, or four generational families. For the 64 single language families, Chinese remained

8 Mahavera, “The Allah Controversy”.
9 See Fishman, “Language Maintenance and Language Shift” for a discussion of domain analysis in multilingual settings.
dominant with 35 (55%) reporting speaking various Chinese dialects; 25 (39%) speaking Mandarin; and 3 speaking English exclusively. However, a closer look at the languages spoken with different family members reveals a gradual shift away from dialect use and increasing use of Mandarin and English as family languages. According to previous research on language use in Malaysian Chinese families, older generation family members are the most common dialect speakers; the middle generation tends to switch between dialects and Mandarin; and the youngest generation communicates largely through Mandarin. My own data shows a similar but somewhat less linear pattern. Dialect use remains common with parents and siblings for both older (ages 31-61) and younger (ages 17-30) individuals: in the older group, 76% spoke dialects with parents and 72% with siblings, while in the younger group, 81% spoke dialects with parents and 61% with siblings. At the same time, the use of Mandarin and English increased significantly in the family setting. While Mandarin was spoken with 22% of parents and 34% of siblings in the older group, this expanded to Mandarin spoken with 73% of parents and 81% of siblings among younger individuals. English use also showed significant expansion from 2% with parents and 7% with siblings in the older group to 24% with parents and 25% with siblings among younger individuals.

Parents in Chinese families find themselves faced with the difficult choice of what language to speak with their children: whether to continue to speak only their ancestral dialect or to use a language that they believe will better prepare their children for success in the future. Concerned that their children will be required to study three languages in primary school: Mandarin, Malay, and English, many have chosen Mandarin and/or English as their child’s first language. The choice between the two is often determined by the parent’s own educational background, so that Mandarin is far more common than English. Also, given the dominance of Mandarin primary education described below, parents who speak English with their children


11 In some families, mothers may speak one language and fathers another with their children, passing on skills in both family dialect and Mandarin or English.
usually provide added support for the language through English books and media at home and by paying for private tutors.

From the parents' perspective, fluency in both Mandarin and English are highly valued in part for their usefulness in international settings. The economic rise of China is frequently cited as enhancing the attractiveness of studying Mandarin, not only for local Chinese but also for the non-Chinese students who are increasingly enrolled in Mandarin primary schools. English fluency opens other doors, including admission to highly valued western universities as well as employment opportunities outside of Malaysia, particularly in western countries that are most often the desired location for the steady out migration of well-educated Chinese Malaysians.

5. Languages and Educational Choices

In Malaysia, educational options have historically been linked to different language mediums. Major shifts in government education policy, in response to both international and national pressures, have shaped the relative linguistic skills of different generations of Malaysian Chinese. Prior to 1970, when English medium education in national schools was an option, increasing numbers of Chinese parents elected to send their children to English medium schools. The fact that relations with China were closed during this period and that local universities were English medium were both important factors in this decision. However, beginning in 1970, English medium schools were required to switch to the national language, Bahasa Malaysia, or Malay. Although national primary schools continued to offer educational options in Mandarin, Tamil, and Malay, all secondary schools gradually shifted to Malay medium, and most instructional medium in public universities also changed from English to Malay.

12 Chinese Malaysians often claim that the numbers of non-Chinese attending Chinese primary schools demonstrates the attractiveness and power of Mandarin. However, when probed further, they acknowledge that with a few notable exceptions, most non-Chinese do not continue to use Mandarin beyond their primary school experience.

With English medium education no longer an option, a large majority of Chinese students returned to Mandarin medium education at the primary level.\(^{14}\) The options for secondary school were either Malay medium national schools, where students could in some cases continue with a single class in Mandarin, or private Chinese high schools, whose diplomas were not recognized by the Malaysian government. Most, about 90% of Chinese students, continued their education in Malay medium national schools, even though the affirmative action programs of the NEP made admission into Malaysian universities increasingly difficult for non-Malays.\(^{15}\) Students from private Chinese high schools often pursued higher education in Taiwan, earning degrees that were not recognized in Malaysia. Overseas education in English medium universities in Singapore, Australia, North America, and Great Britain became a favored choice for students from upper and middle class urban families,\(^ {16}\) but this was generally not an option for children from more modest economic backgrounds. The local situation changed significantly in the late 1990s, with the passage of legislative bills that permitted the establishment, management, and development of private higher education in Malaysia.\(^ {17}\) Unlike Malaysian national universities, which were also expanding in numbers, but where Malay medium education was still mandated for most subjects, the new private tertiary institutions could offer instruction in English as long as they also included some courses in Malay.\(^ {18}\) By 2005, 11 private universities, 11 private university colleges, 5 branch campuses of foreign universities and 532 private colleges offered a range of programs to local and international students. More than 90% of the students in these institutions were non-Malay, and most of these were Chinese.\(^ {19}\)

\(^{14}\) By the late 1990s, 90% of Chinese children enrolled in Mandarin medium primary schools. Tan and Santhiram, The Education of Ethnic Minorities, 92.


\(^{16}\) Jesudason, Ethnicity and the Economy, 113.

\(^{17}\) Tan and Santhiran, The Education of Ethnic Minorities, 143.

\(^{18}\) Hong, “Changes in Malaysia Government Policy on Languages in Education.”

\(^{19}\) Tan and Santhiran, The Education of Ethnic Minorities, 143-144.
Tertiary options in Chinese medium education also expanded in the 1990s. With the rising cost of education in Taiwan, a new government policy in 1992 that allowed Malaysian students to study at universities in mainland China provided an attractive alternative for some Chinese families. In the late 1990s, the Malaysian government permitted development of the first private Chinese tertiary institutions in Malaysia, with New Era and Southern Colleges opening in 1996 and 1997. Although the number of Malaysian Chinese students choosing Chinese medium education at the tertiary level remains relatively small, the availability of this option adds another layer of complexity to linguistically defined educational choice in Malaysia.

Friends and acquaintances, who were mostly urban and middle class, repeatedly told me that attaining fluency in both Mandarin and English were important personal and professional goals, even though they acknowledged the difficulty of having equal facility with the two languages. Meanwhile, attitudes towards education in these languages were shaped by global as well as local trends. One post graduate student who had earned a history degree from Beijing University told of how the responses received from English speaking Chinese families in her Kuala Lumpur neighborhood towards her plans to study in China had shifted from negative to positive following the broadcasts of the Beijing Olympics. Even so, study in China has not always been a positive experience, as Chinese Malaysian students have complained of discriminatory treatment when they study in the PRC.

Emphasis on English skills in educational settings is underscored in numerous ways. Most of the students who I met in KL with degrees from Chinese universities were now focused on improving their English skills in order to apply to graduate schools in the west, whose credentials were viewed as superior to universities in China. Research scholars in Malaysian universities, even those who focus on

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21 Law and Lee, “The Limits of Chinese Transnationalism.” One friend with a PhD from a Tianjin university remarked that in her experience, overseas Chinese were considered the most low status of all foreigners in the PRC, even when they exhibited excellent language skills.
Chinese related topics, are encouraged to publish their findings in English language journals that have wider international recognition than those published in Chinese. The expansion of internationally connected English option education choices in Malaysia suggests a similar privileging of English language skills. Private English medium international schools which were previously restricted to international students, are now permitted to enroll local students, and the number of Malaysian students, although still small in number, has greatly increased. And at the tertiary level, reports on the establishment of the first branch of a university from China in Malaysia, Xiamen University, state that apart from programs in Chinese studies and traditional Chinese medicine, classes will be taught in English.

6. The linguistically inflected, globally connected religious domain

Most religions practiced by Chinese Malaysians have previous and/or current connections with overseas organizations from a variety of language backgrounds. Unlike Malays, who are considered Muslim at birth, Chinese Malaysians affiliate with a wide variety of religions including various forms of Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, Islam and syncretic religions. Malaysian Chinese often assume that local Chinese Christians come from English educated backgrounds. For example, when I asked a young man in a Chinese New village in Northern Selangor whether there were any local Chinese families who spoke English at home, he replied that while he didn’t know of any, he assumed that this might occur with either English teachers or with Christians. Several other acquaintances shared how attending Christian activities helped them improve their English or how they preferred reading religious materials in English even though Chinese was their stronger language. While more urban segments of the Chinese population were originally introduced to Christianity through colonial churches and religiously sponsored schools, current Christian groups are often connected with religious organizations that are global in nature, especially with evangelical groups such as the Pentecostal Church attended by my long term Chinese friends.

Chi, "What price, international school education?"

Anon., “China’s Xiamen University to open branch campus in Malaysia.”
Moreover, it is important to note that Sunday services at this church are offered in Mandarin, Cantonese, Malay, and Filipino as well as English.

In contrast to the stereotypes of English speaking Chinese Christians, who are largely products of British colonial conversion, an even larger group of Malaysian Chinese Christians are affiliated with Chinese vernacular churches. Descendants of Chinese who migrated as Christians from China, both during the colonial period and after 1949, when large numbers of Christians fled from the mainland and settled in Hong Kong and Taiwan, as well as Malaysia, many of these Chinese Malaysian Christians participate in diasporic networks centered largely in Taiwan and Hong Kong that share in the circulation of Christian publications and personnel in the Chinese language.

In at least one instance, the continued dominance of Chinese dialect speakers can be traced to western Christian missionaries who accompanied Hakka Christians in their move from China to settlement in Sabah and who translated the Bible into Hakka vernacular. According to a middle aged Hakka Chinese woman from Sabah, the Hakkas in Kota Kinabalu retain Hakka language even with the youngest generation. Describing her family as part of a Basel Christian group that is very conservative and insular, she said that preservation of Hakka language and identity was strengthened by the literacy in Hakka maintained through the church – reading the Bible and religious materials in Hakka on a regular basis. If not for the church, she says, their Hakka dialect use might be fading like it is elsewhere in the Malaysian peninsula.

Christianity is not the only set of religious practices with linguistically inflected international ties. Various types of Chinese religions coming out of Taiwan, such as Tian Dao or new forms of Buddhism disseminate their teachings through Mandarin Chinese materials and traveling teachers. In the case of Malaysian Chinese Muslims, an interesting shift in Chinese Muslim identity in Malaysia is also expressed through shifting linguistic practices and attitudes. A leader of the Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association described in an interview how prior assumptions that Islamic conversion in Malaysia meant adopting Malay language and culture have been replaced with a new emphasis on embracing Chinese culture and educating their children.

24 Wong and Ng, “The Vernacular Chinese Church in Malaysia.”
in Mandarin. Part of this response results from frustration with the continued unequal treatment of Malaysian Chinese Muslims, but it has also been bolstered by the recent influx of Hui (Chinese Muslim) migrants and students from China, who have encouraged local Chinese to identify with the longstanding Muslim tradition in China.

7. Global Media and Language Flows

In Malaysia, as elsewhere, global media flows have had a significant impact on local language practices. During the 20th century, transnational media from the broader Chinese world shaped the linguistic contours of Chinese Malaysian popular culture, including music, drama, film, and literature. In the 1980s, the increased government insistence on expanding Malay medium television programs, along with the advent of affordable VCRs and videotapes for rent and sale from Hong Kong and Taiwan, fueled the widespread viewing of films and television serials produced in Greater China in Cantonese and Mandarin, with Chinese and Malay subtitles. Chinese Malaysian audiences generally preferred the Cantonese based fast action style of Hong Kong productions to the more sedate and conservative Mandarin media from Taiwan, or what were considered more esoteric films from China. English language media in the form of western, mostly Hollywood films, accounted for an even larger share of movies shown in local cinemas as well as the majority of videos available in local rental shops. Non English speakers could use subtitles in Malay to enjoy these films, but many informants again noted that viewing English media enhanced their English skills.

In the past two decades, further technological advances, particularly satellite television, the streaming of media via the Internet, and the widespread use of social media have expanded the spread of global media and created new opportunities to access and engage with a variety of languages. Malaysia provides abundant evidence of the effects of these new forms of transnational media connections on language exposure and use. In the late 1990s, children in the rural Hak-

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25 This parallels what is argued by Wu, “The Negotiation of Chinese Muslim identity.”
26 Hew, “Universalising Islam in Malaysia.”
27 Groppe, *Sinophone Malaysian Literature*
28 Carstens, “Constructing Transnational Identities?”
ka village where I did research watched Disney cartoons dubbed in Mandarin via satellite television from Singapore. Throughout Malaysia, the Cantonese programs available from Hong Kong via satellite television have been even more popular and influential. Numerous people described to me their experiences of learning Cantonese through regular viewing of these programs. For some of the English-educated older generation, Cantonese serials and films connected them with a more sophisticated, diverse, and adult form of the dialect than what they had learned as children in their families, and some said that they used this media to consciously improve their language skills. Others who had migrated to Cantonese dominant Kuala Lumpur from families and regions where other dialects were spoken, repeatedly described how they had learned their Cantonese through Hong Kong serials, frequently adding that this was fortunate because non Cantonese speakers could be disadvantaged in the Kuala Lumpur context. More recently, Hokkien programs produced in Taiwan and available via satellite television have attracted a local audience, sometimes at the expense of Cantonese programming, and several people commented that this would make it easier to pass Hokkien on to the younger generations. One focus group participant noted that certain popular Hokkien dialect expressions learned from watching Hokkien programs were now inserted into the mixed local style of Chinese Mandarin speech, sometimes replacing earlier Cantonese expressions.

Discussions of popular media inevitably introduced descriptions of the current appeal of Korean popular music and drama. One acquaintance estimated that 40% of Malaysian Chinese young people regularly consume Korean media, while others reported that the attraction to Korean dramas was not limited to the young. Multiple people related that learning some Korean language was now a popular pastime – they claimed that vocabulary was easy to pick up by watching Korean dramas and reading subtitles, and there were Korean language classes available for those with more serious interests. Asked how people would use their Korean language skills, some described shopping trips to Korea, but most seemed to convey the sense that this type of language learning was mainly for fun. For Malaysian Chinese with some facility in multiple languages, the ability to express themselves in diverse ways was viewed as enjoyable, something that increased the pleasure of casual conversations.
Both Mandarin and English are widely used to access the Internet and to communicate with friends on social networking sites. According to Yang Guobin, transnational Chinese Internet sites provide a new type of transnational Chinese cultural sphere in which to communicate and debate on a host of issues. Of the 46 people who answered questions posed in Chinese and English about language use and attitudes on the Facebook page that I developed as part of my research project, 28 posted their replies in Chinese and 18 posted in English. Exploring further the Facebook pages of these respondents, I noticed that one individual who answered my questions in Chinese used only English on her Facebook site. When asked why, she explained that she had consciously decided to use English to communicate on Facebook because it forced her to practice her English skills and because not all of her friends could read Chinese. This is a good example of how communication options change with different formats and language domains. In face to face oral exchanges, people can choose from a range of linguistic possibilities and commonly shift languages depending on the speakers. But with written messages, individuals must choose a single medium (even though there can be a fair amount of code mixing). Those who use only Chinese on their social media sites are generally limiting their communication to an ethnic Chinese audience with Chinese education, which would include most, but not all, of the younger Chinese Malaysian generation. Using English allows one to also communicate with friends from other ethnic backgrounds, as well as the older generation of English educated Malaysian Chinese who may speak Chinese dialects but do not read Chinese. Although one might assume then that English represents a more neutral and inclusive language choice, this ignores social class divisions that also shape language choice and facility. Less educated and more rural Malaysians of all ethnic groups typically have more limited English skills, preferring to use other languages to communicate. In fact, some people told me that even though they speak better English than Mandarin, they avoid using English with fellow Chinese in public social situations because it would appear that they are trying to place themselves above others.

Yang, “The Internet and the Rise of a Transnational Chinese Cultural Sphere.”
A different factor in choosing to write in Chinese or English on Internet and social media sites may be the relative ease or difficulty of using the two languages in this medium. One interviewee with a Chinese education background and reportedly stronger Chinese language skills said that she wrote her Facebook messages in English because it was faster than having to input pinyin and then select the appropriate character. Because of the large numbers of homophones in Chinese, using pinyin to type was much more time consuming, even though she enjoyed writing characters by hand. Thus language selection on Internet sites seems to present different possibilities and different limitations for communicative choice, and is something worth exploring further.30

8. Global Impacts on Language Use in the Occupational Domain

The number of different languages that people report using at work reflects the social and linguistic complexity of Malaysian occupational settings. Of the 240 respondents who listed languages used at work on bio data forms, only 17% listed a single language and most (52%) recorded more than two. The mix of languages used varied, as expected, with the type of jobs held and the regions where people worked. People who worked in urban, professional settings were more likely to use English and Mandarin, while those working in more technical or small business occupations and those working outside of large cities tended to speak more dialects and Malay in their job settings. Overall percentages showed that the Chinese Malaysians in this data sample were most likely to use Mandarin (87%), followed by Chinese dialects (58%), English (56%), and Malay (52%). Of course, merely listing the languages used does not indicate with whom people spoke these languages; how often they were used;

30 Susan Cook notes that while Internet communication sparks "new styles, conventions, and modes of written expression," something also documented for the Malaysian Chinese case, “from an anthropological perspective ... the more interesting question lies in the ways that computer-mediated communication actually alters the way we interact as social beings.” Cook, “New Technologies and Language Change,” 105. For a Malaysian example see Anon., “Struggle with Internet Martian Language.”
whether the language was used in written or oral form; or their level of linguistic facility. It is also not clear from this type of data how the languages used in occupational settings have been influenced by transnational or global forces.

Participants in focus groups and those I interviewed provided some examples of how languages were used and valued in work settings. A number of people reported that English skills were the most important for getting a good job in the urban sector, particularly in larger companies or those associated with professional occupations. A university student who was majoring in Chinese studies worried about what he described as the inevitable job interview in English with prospective employers, who he said assumed that university graduates had good English skills. When asked if Mandarin skills were not sufficient if working in a Chinese company, the student said that because the boss did not assume that everyone could speak Mandarin, they would interview in English. Several focus group participants provided examples of speaking English with a Chinese boss who had not received a Chinese education.

English plays another role in the work setting, beyond interpersonal communication. In one focus group an insurance company employee and two accountants, all from Chinese educated backgrounds, described how most of their work documents were written in English, and how they read them very slowly and carefully to ensure accuracy. Although these documents were also translated into Malay, they said they preferred to read them in their original English, and they responded with laughter when asked if the documents were ever translated into Chinese. It is difficult to judge to what extent the dominance of English language documents is a legacy of the British system or a more recent trend in globally networked businesses, and this no doubt varies with different types of companies.

In contrast with English, I encountered no specific examples of individuals who related that Mandarin skills were essential for obtaining and retaining a job. One possible exception came with an account of an English educated Chinese boss who began to learn Mandarin to improve communication with those whom he supervised. It is very likely here that most people take their Mandarin skills for granted and worry more about their inadequacy in English. This perception is substantiated in a survey of Malaysian employers on “Problems Faced by Employers in Hiring Fresh Graduates” by JobStreet.
com. At the top of the list, ranking 55.8% is Poor Command of English. At the bottom of the list is Poor Command of Mandarin: 1.1% and Poor Command of Malay .7%.\textsuperscript{31} Mandarin skills would likely be important for companies that do business with China, but I have no data to support or deny this claim. Thus, in spite of the wide spread rhetoric of the potential economic usefulness of knowing Mandarin with the rise of China, the reality of this claim was never substantiated in the data that I collected.

9. Mandarin and English as Global Languages

Chinese and English are clearly the two most important internationally inflected languages for Malaysia Chinese, but it is also useful to consider how English and Chinese function as global languages. For linguists, the most important characteristic of a truly global language, or in Calvet's terms, a hyper-central language, is not the number of native speakers, but rather the numbers and spread of bilingual speakers across world regions.\textsuperscript{32} By this criteria, English is indisputably the world's most important global language, with more bilingual than native speakers\textsuperscript{33} who use English in a wide range of scientific, commercial, diplomatic, educational and artistic domains. Given China's recent economic and political rise and with increasing interest in studying Chinese language throughout the world, what are the prospects of Mandarin also becoming used as a global language?

To answer this question, we need to begin with an assessment of the expansion of bilingual Mandarin skills. One context where this has clearly occurred is in mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia where Mandarin has increasingly been added on to and in many instances replaced other Sinitic and local languages. However, this type of bilingualism remains within the Chinese cultural sphere, and I would argue that a truly global language is one that transcends single linguistic/cultural spheres.

Recent discussion and theorizing around the term Sinophone sheds light on this distinction. Seeking to avoid the usual China-centric interpretations of Chinese languages, literatures, and cultures,


\textsuperscript{32} Calvet, Towards an Ecology of World Languages.

Shuh-mei Shih distinguishes a separate Sinophone sphere of cultural production located primarily in Sinitic linguistic and cultural communities outside of China (but also including Chinese minority communities that have used Sinitic languages to resist Han dominance). Although this might appear to be a move toward a potentially more global vision of Chinese language and culture, the Sinophone in Shih's descriptions is largely the product of the spread of Chinese language and culture through immigration out of China and thus does not include those with no previous Chinese connections. By contrast, Edward McDonald argues for a more inclusive definition of Sinophone that encompasses Chinese language speakers throughout the world, regardless of their racial and ethnic background, including native students of Chinese language who ideally develop a Chinese speaking identity. This, however, is more a vision of future possibilities than current realities, as McDonald also acknowledges the deep seated Chinese cultural nationalism and sense of uniqueness that tends to keep foreigners separate and makes it difficult for non-Chinese, even fluent Chinese speakers, to be accepted on equal terms.

The views of Chinese Malaysians echo these findings. When queried about the global position of Chinese language, both focus group and interview participants acknowledged that for Chinese to be accepted as a global language, it would need to first be considered a central scientific and commercial language, which was not yet the case. Some stated that this situation might change if China emerged as even more economically and politically dominant in the coming decades, so that using Chinese language would offer advantages in dealing with China and Chinese throughout the world. This, however, is still a dyadic vision of language use and lacks the crucial step of non-Chinese finding Chinese language more broadly useful in communications that may involve other non-Chinese in a range of intellectual, artistic, and scientific, as well as commercial domains. I believe that this will be difficult to achieve for several reasons. The first, as described above, relates to the rather insular view of Chinese towards outsiders who speak their language. The second has to do with the difficulty of mastering the character-based Chinese written language, which for English speakers is rated among the most difficult languages in the world. Although increasing numbers of stu-

34 Shih, "The Sinophone as Places of Cultural Production."
35 McDonald, "The 中国通 or the 'Sinophone'"
students are now studying Chinese, very few obtain professional proficiency even after years of study. Third, I believe that it would be difficult for Chinese to challenge the entrenched dominance of English as the world language currently used by most bilinguals. In fact, in an interesting turnabout, a recent article on the power of English in the Asian sphere connects the growth of English in China, which now is estimated to have between 200 and 500 million speakers, to China’s growing dominance on the world stage.\textsuperscript{36}

10. Conclusion: Global Connections and Multilingual Identities

The polyglot worlds of Malaysian Chinese described in this paper have been shaped by complex and intertwining local and global developments in multiple domains of people's lives. For the most part, global influences on local language use appear much more prominent than the deliberate cultivation and use of language resources for transnational/global activities or purposes. This is not a surprising finding given that the people with whom I associated were for the most part enmeshed within the demands and pleasures of their locally defined worlds. A different focus on Malaysian Chinese whose activities drew them regularly into more internationally defined realms would no doubt produce a clearer understanding of the linguistic decisions and practices involved in this more global domain.

Acknowledging that it is often difficult to tease apart global and local factors in language choice and shifting attitudes towards language use, this paper has nevertheless provided numerous examples of how global connections have both sustained and expanded the linguistic repertoire of Chinese Malaysians in multiple settings. The language use patterns that cross international borders to connect with individuals and groups vary in both type and function in the domains discussed in this paper. Cross border language flows are especially apparent in the more personal domains of religion, with connections to multiple varieties of world religions, and mass media, where new technologies encourage consumption of a wide array of media in different languages and formats. It is notable that in both of these more personally defined domains, international language in-

\textsuperscript{36} Cheng, "The Power of English and the Power of Asia."
Influences extend beyond more dominant languages such as Mandarin and English to include varieties such as Cantonese, Hokkien, Hakka and even Korean.

Global influences on language use in the family, educational, and occupational domains are somewhat more difficult to separate from locally defined issues. Although Chinese dialects, particularly Cantonese and Hokkien, retain a presence in family, social, and workplace settings, Mandarin and English are deemed essential languages for educational and occupational endeavors. In the family domain, the increased use of Mandarin and English documented among younger individuals is typically linked to parental desires to enhance their children’s success in school and employment, two spheres that are clearly intertwined and that connect with international spheres. For example, the Malaysian government’s attempt to establish English as the language of science and math education in Malaysian public schools beginning in 2002 emphasized the necessity of English skills “for the information and communication technology that Malaysia needs to be competitive in today’s globalized world.” 37 Mandarin higher education and scholarship, both of which have expanded in the Malaysian setting, 38 are closely connected to a broader Chinese world, through Chinese researchers, visiting scholars, and international conferences that promote scholarly exchanges in Mandarin with individuals from Taiwan, the PRC, and elsewhere in Asia. Nevertheless, there are multiple indications, as noted earlier, of the superior prestige of English education and scholarship, which also parallels the greater value placed on English skills for advancement in competitive high status occupations.

In Malaysia, as elsewhere, language practices are viewed as important markers of identities that are both multiple and contextually specific. Raised in the multilingual settings of family and community, individuals become accustomed to shifting between linguistic forms that express the personal and social relationships appropriate to specific groups and settings, whether this be Mandarin, Malay, Chinese dialects or English. Common linguistic practices include not only code switching from one language to another, but also frequent code mixing, creating the localized forms of English and Mandarin that

37 Tan, “The medium-of-instruction debate in Malaysia,” 54.
were practically ubiquitous in the conversations that I recorded among family and friends, a practice that, as Duff argues, allows multi-lingual speakers the opportunity to mesh global and local language identities in creative production.39

Meanwhile, while proud of their ability to communicate in multiple tongues – and this too is a kind of language identity – Chinese Malaysians identify strongly with and value highly the retention of a literate Chinese tradition in their overseas setting. Thus, in spite of the practical advantages and prestige considerations associated with English, Chinese language, and increasingly Mandarin, remains central to the expression of personal and group identities for most Chinese Malaysians. Even though it would seem that the term ‘mother tongue’ refers most correctly to Chinese family dialects, Chinese schools teach children to view Mandarin, in both oral and written forms, as their inherited mother tongue. English educated Chinese Malaysians who may continue to speak Chinese dialects at home and in the community, often express regret in their inability to speak Mandarin or read Chinese characters, which they link to their Chinese identity. As one focus group participant explained,

And I personally, being English educated, I currently do feel a loss and I do feel the disadvantage of not knowing Mandarin, you know when you’re Chinese ... because when you go to a restaurant and you see the menu written all in Mandarin and you can’t, don’t know what you can read and they usually speak in Mandarin to you and you cannot respond so you feel like you’re not really a Chinese, you know?

In Malaysian Chinese discourse, both Mandarin and English are described as important international languages. At the same time they clearly serve quite different functions in the linguistic repertoires of Malaysian Chinese. Perspectives on this emerge clearly in discussions of choosing between English and Chinese education for young children. Comments that English education can provide better opportunities for professional advancement convey a more utilitarian attitude to the language; meanwhile most people insist that even if parents send their children to English medium international schools, some type of Chinese education and proficiency in Mandarin is essential for retaining a Chinese identity. An anecdote from a focus

A group participant about an English educated Chinese boss who lost face because he could not converse in Mandarin with a Japanese client underscores this message: English might be the language of international business, but it cannot replace the continued importance of speaking one’s own language, which is increasingly identified as Mandarin. We exit this discussion with a short excerpt from this focus group transcript. (English in bold face; Hokkien in italics; Malay in a different font; translation below)

Neh. My boss they say like this. He is a Hokkien person but speaks Cantonese at home. When at work he speaks English. When we have those Japanese people come, or Korean people come, (they) ask, what sort of people are you? You know that foreigners are very curious about us Chinese. In Malaysia firstly the impression is “You can only (speak) Ma, Malay, Malay, and that’s all.” You don’t know that actually we can speak many languages. When you say I know Mandarin, I know Cantonese, I know Hakka. So many languages you know. Then he will count, then he asks you, what languages do you speak? (If) we have received Mandarin education, of course there is no problem. It seems my boss is a banana⁴⁰, cannot speak his own mother tongue. Really lose face, each time he speaks, cannot (speak) but the Japanese person.

⁴⁰ ‘Banana’ is a common pejorative term used to critique westernized Chinese as yellow on the outside but white on the inside.
can speak Mandarin, speaks it even better than he does. How about this?

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11. References


