

The Death of Cantonese?

Hong Kong's mother tongue is under threat. Cantonese may be centuries old but how much longer can it sustain the pressure from China to pick up Putonghua? By Arthur Tam and Anna Cummins. Additional reporting by Emily Cheng and Allen Jim

Our tongue. Our voice.

Language is the tongue that gives a nation its voice. And Hong Kong's voice has never been as intrinsically linked to its identity as it is right now. Cantonese isn't just the city's language; it's one of the many yardsticks by which Hongkongers measure their cultural and political differences from the rest of the Mainland.

We all know the abrasive political situation between the Central People's Government and the SAR is complex, contentious and set to continue into the foreseeable future. This is particularly magnified in the light of the 18th anniversary of the handover, as well as the recent rejection of the pro-Beijing electoral reform package. But it was four years ago, in 2011, that Hong Kong's voice took its first major, measurable shift in tone. According to the government's census, Putonghua overtook English as the second most spoken language in the territory for the first time in 2011, with 48 percent of people claiming to speak the official language of mainland China, and 46 percent claiming to speak English. In the 2001 census, only a third of respondents could speak Putonghua.

Could Putonghua really eclipse Cantonese as the Chinese language of choice in our city within a few generations, or is this all conjecture? It's certainly true that a healthy 96 percent of ethnically Chinese Hongkongers speak Cantonese currently. You'll hear the unmistakable nine tones of Cantonese rising and falling on every street corner here, as well as in Chinatowns around the world. Close to 60 million people the world over speak the language natively.

But it's also true there has been an uproar in recent years every time the suggestion is made that Putonghua should be a lingua franca in Hong Kong. Whether it's the 2010 protests sparked by the Chinese authorities requesting that Guangzhou Television network put out more content in Putonghua, or the indignation that flared in 2012 when a new Agnès B café printed its signage and menu in simplified Chinese and English only (a swift change and an apology quickly ensued), the strength of feeling about this issue is palpable.

"People in Hong Kong are using the language as a symbol to distinguish themselves from China," says Robert Bauer, a Cantonese expert who teaches Chinese linguistics at Polytechnic University and the University of Hong Kong. "When they played the [Chinese] national anthem at a football match in Mong Kok stadium last month, local supporters jeered the national anthem. Lots of people in Hong Kong are resisting the pressure China is trying to put on it. There are people who are very unhappy about promoting Putonghua as the primary method of instruction (PMI) [the language that schools teach the majority of their subjects in]."

Educating the masses

National education – a compulsory curriculum proposed by the Education Bureau last decade – should have been rolled out back in 2012. The introduction of the course, deemed by many parents, teachers and students to be pro-China and anti-democracy, sparked the dramatic protests that led to the birth of Scholarism and propelled a 15-year-old Joshua Wong into the political limelight. The curriculum was formally shelved for three years. Many parents and teachers came out to voice fears this was a transition into pro-Beijing 'brainwashing' of our youth. "It is impossible for students to be brainwashed by an excerpt taken from support materials," proclaimed a highly defensive 2012 article by state mouthpiece *China Daily*, in response to the huge opposition to the curriculum from the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union.

The Hong Kong government's official stance on language in the SAR is that they are 'committed to promoting trilingualism' across English, Cantonese and Putonghua. But a LegCo Panel on Education report from April states that having the subject of Chinese language taught in Putonghua 'is a long-term and developmental target'. In 2008 the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR) – a government advisory committee – launched a pilot scheme for 'all [local] schools to adopt Putonghua to teach Chinese ▶



A Canto recount

A brief history of a very historical language

- **618** Cantonese is estimated to have diverged from other Chinese dialects during the Tang Dynasty
- **1127** The Southern Song Dynasty begins. Over the next 150 years Guangzhou (Canton) becomes the commercial centre of China
- **1200** Chinese opera begins to spread to southern China from the north. This 'Southern style' opera evolves into Cantonese opera
- **1800s** The earliest written Cantonese documents are produced in the 19th century
- **1946** The number of films made in Putonghua begins to overtake those made in Cantonese in Hong Kong in the wake of WWII, as refugees flock across the border
- **1949** The Communist Party takes over in China after the revolution. Putonghua is promoted as the national language
- **1973** The Cantonese movie industry sees a resurgence after the Bruce Lee classic *Enter the Dragon* is released
- **1997** Hong Kong is handed over from Britain to China
- **2003** The MTR adds Putonghua to its public announcements across the train network
- **2010** China authorities request that Guangzhou Television increase the number of its broadcasts made in Putonghua. This is met with protests in the city. The station rejects the proposal
- **2012** An Agnès B café in the new Popcorn mall in Tseung Kwan O opens with only simplified Chinese and English on its menu. Hong Kong netizens share the images, sparking protests in the café and, ultimately, an apology
- **2014** The Education Bureau posts a statement describing Cantonese as a 'dialect' of Chinese. The outrage in HK means it's retracted a week later

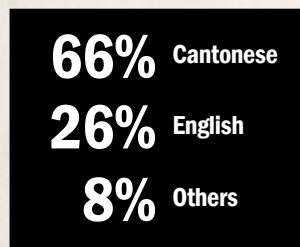


The results are in...

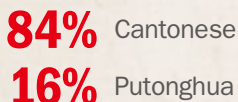
廣東話

We launched a huge online survey last issue to find out your thoughts. An overwhelming majority of you believe that Cantonese is linked to the identity of Hong Kong and within the next century it will most likely become a minority language

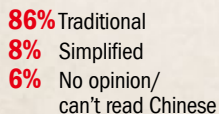
What is your first language/
mother tongue?



What should be the primary dialect taught at local schools?



Should Chinese be in traditional or simplified characters?



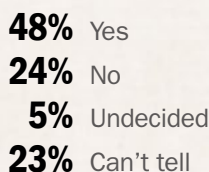
How many languages can you speak fluently?



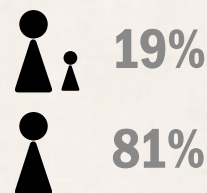
Which of these languages do you speak and read fluently?



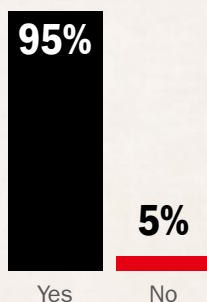
Do you think the standard of Cantonese, written and spoken, has decreased in the upcoming generation of Hong Kong compared to the previous generation?



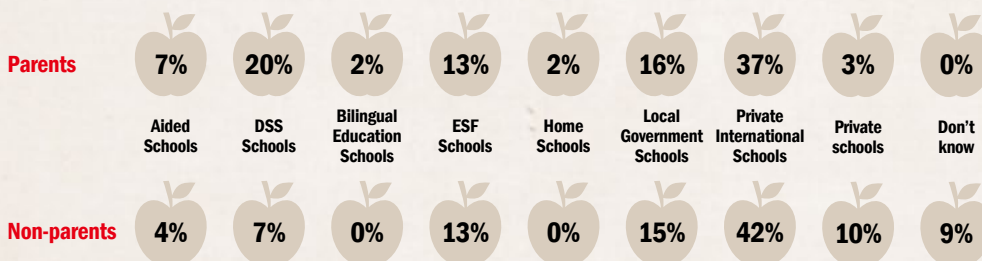
Are you a parent?



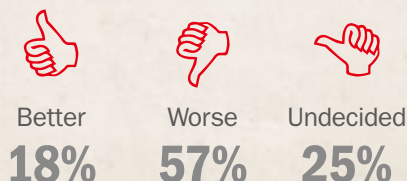
Is Hong Kong's identity tied to Cantonese being a majority language in the city?



Which education system do you feel provides the 'best' education in HK?



Would Hong Kong fare better or worse as a global power if Putonghua became the primary language of education in local government schools?



Do you think Cantonese will become a minority language in Hong Kong within the next century?





language'. The succinctly named 'Scheme to Support Schools in Using Putonghua to Teach the Chinese Language Subject' ran until 2014 and gave support for 160 schools to receive additional funding and guidance from 'Mainland teaching experts' as well as local consultants in order to help them to teach Chinese in Putonghua instead of Cantonese.

"I think it's very important that my son learns Putonghua," says Michael Lee about his eight-year-old son's education. "The trend in Hong Kong is shifting towards working in the Mainland due to its economic growth. If you don't know Putonghua, it's difficult for you to grow your business in China. If my son is able to become fluent in [Putonghua], this would be an advantage."

Although the Education Bureau tells us it 'does not possess exact figures' about the number of schools in Hong Kong (both local and international) that are currently using Putonghua to teach Chinese language and/or other subjects, many experts we speak to estimate it's at least two in three. "Around 70 percent of the city's [571] primary schools now use Putonghua as the language of instruction for Chinese class, on top of teaching Putonghua as a separate language subject," Woody Lee, convener of PMI (Putonghua as Medium of Instruction) Students Concern Group tells us. "Yes, 70 percent is about right," agrees Fiona Lee, local translator and expert in Chinese linguistics.

It's not clear, yet, how this might affect students' learning. Scholars have long disagreed over whether it is easier to understand the subject of Chinese itself through the medium of Cantonese or Putonghua. In 2011, Hong Kong ranked first for Chinese language proficiency, according to a global study carried out every five years by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. So whatever we're doing, we're doing it right – for now.

A tone apart

In January 2014, the Education Bureau released an article about the importance of tri and bilingualism. The article stated that 'nearly 97 percent of the local population learn Cantonese (a Chinese dialect that is not an official language)'. The use of the word dialect, rather than language, was met with outrage. "It caused an online uproar," recalls Lee. "Cantonese and Putonghua are two languages. Definitely. They are mutually unintelligible," says Bauer without hesitation. "Cantonese and Putonghua have travelled [apart] completely."

Chinese is one of two official languages in Hong Kong (the other being English). Cantonese

is acknowledged as the spoken vernacular, although government institutions do also accept the use of Putonghua, which has been used on the MTR since 2003.

In Hong Kong, however, Cantonese is generally celebrated as being a richer and more colloquially expressive spoken language than Putonghua. It has nine tones, as opposed to Putonghua's four. Chinese is written in traditional characters in Hong Kong, but these have been simplified on the Mainland to make the language easier to read and write. The upshot of that is, sometimes, the historic or poetic meaning of the character is lost – the quintessential example being that to simplify the traditional character for 'love' 爱 (ai4) you need to remove one major part – 心 (xin1), the character for heart.

"Even a lot of the colloquial words we say every day like 佢 (keoi5, meaning 'he' or 'she') go back to the Ming Dynasty," explains Lee. "There are poems written with that character. I guess the idea that Cantonese is colloquial is so deeply rooted that people don't realise it goes back 1,000 years."

Ng Kap-chuen is a local illustrator who shot into the public consciousness last year with his intricate cartoon *Great Canton and Hong Kong Proverbs*, which depicts 81 proverbs used only in Cantonese. One of the famous proverbs he drew is 'ghost (gwai2) hitting (paak3) the back of your neck (hau6-mei5-jam3) (鬼拍後尾枕), which is equivalent to 'spilling the beans' or 'letting the cat out of the bag'. The illustrations became widely popular and went viral on social media. "We have to make people proud of speaking Cantonese again," Ng tells us of his inspiration.

Yet expressions from the Mainland are working their way into the Hong Kong vernacular more and more. We speak to Amy Au [name changed upon request] a former translator for TVB. "I used to translate the scripts for shows bought from the Mainland for Cantonese dubbing", she says. "A separate department is responsible for subtitles after the recorded voiceovers since Cantonese conjunctions don't appear in written format. Even though it's all written in traditional Chinese, I've noticed a lot of text using Mainland adjectives and nouns now," she tells us. Examples she notes include 白富美, white (bai2), rich (fu4) and pretty (mei3), meaning an attractive woman and 小鲜肉, little (xiao3) fresh (xian1) meat (rou4), meaning an attractive young man. "These aren't phrases used in Cantonese."

One language, one nation

Putonghua (literally meaning 'common speech') has had a meteoric rise since the Central People's Government selected this variety of a northern Han dialect as the national language in 1955. At the turn of the century there were myriad dialects spoken all over China, but only 60 years later the vast majority of the country (around 70 percent of 1.3 billion people) have a common tongue.

"The national language has been a tremendous unifying force in China and it's why they promoted Putonghua as much as they have," explains Bauer. "Young people don't bother learning their parents' dialects any more. When I was teaching linguistics in China the students told me that their local dialects are useless – in terms of feeling good about your culture and home it's important [to speak your dialect], but in terms of getting ahead you need English and Putonghua."

The potential for the erosion of Cantonese is not without precedent. Shanghaiese was once the dialect for the entire Yangtze region and, despite the fact it still has around 14 million speakers, the Central Government has actively been ►

WHAT PARENTS THINK



Shirley

It's not a good idea to switch the teaching language. We need to offer more languages, but your primary teaching language should be English, because it's the language of the world.



Ms So

English, Cantonese and Mandarin are all equally important, but I don't agree with switching Cantonese to Putonghua in schools. Because at the end of the day Hong Kong needs to protect its culture.



Michael

Putonghua is important because the trend in HK is shifting towards working in the Mainland. I'm not worried about him not being able to speak Cantonese because he'll have opportunities to use it at home.



Katty

I think Cantonese education is very important. If we use our mother tongue, Cantonese, when teaching Chinese, I think it's more effective. Putonghua should be taught, but it should be taught separately. Cantonese should be taught first, then Putonghua and English.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Readers' reactions to our survey

“Cantonese keeps more syllables from ancient times than Putonghua, and it is easier to understand traditional literature with Cantonese and Traditional Chinese. One can always learn Putonghua when they need it. (If Putonghua is that important, I don't see the reason of not learning it) Cantonese is a language much harder to learn than Putonghua.”

“Hong Kong's character, culture and language are all interdependent. A switch to Putonghua will only hasten the integration with China and the death of HK.”

“Cantonese is important to HK. Putonghua is important to the world.”

“Putonghua is spoken by one country — China — whilst English is spoken by the rest of the world. Making Putonghua the primary language of education would precipitate HK's decline into irrelevance and mediocrity.”



“How many billion already speak Putonghua?! HK did not come this far speaking Putonghua. It came this far speaking Cantonese and English.”

“If that happens I presume socially and culturally HK has already become Xiang Gang and just another city, third or fourth tier, in the PRC.”

“Putonghua is not going to replace English as the lingua franca of the world no matter how much China wishes otherwise.”

“Lack of local historical and cultural understanding leads to an identity crisis.”

“I think it makes no difference, because 1) In the short run, English is still the language of business in this city, and 2) In the long run, politics will bring demise to the city, not language. I do think that HK will fare worse in the short run because the English proficiency in school continues to decline.”

“HK is part of China now. Resistance is futile. Maintain Cantonese fluency but equip Hongkongers to deal with nationwide matters (through Putonghua).”

“There are too few Cantonese speakers in this world. From a work related languages, I rank English first, Putonghua second and Cantonese third. I may add Spanish fourth, if one is smart, as Spanish is the third most spoken language. I would not be bothered to learn French or German unless I live in these areas.”

WHAT PARENTS THINK



Julie

I have four children and being trilingual and biliterate is right up there on the list of priorities. I think the local school curriculum is very rigid, the teaching methodology is conventional with not a lot of room for freedom and creativity.



Andrew

My son goes to an international school and I think Putonghua is good for my son's future, especially if he chooses to work in Hong Kong.



Ms Sun

I don't think it's okay to make a language switch. Cantonese is Hong Kong's language. Even though we are Chinese, we've been in Hong Kong for so long already. We don't need Putonghua. Going to an intentional school is just about the brand and for the wealthy.



Ms Lam

I think it's good to switch from Cantonese to Putonghua. It's necessary to learn, but we don't have the time. If we had the time I would send my son to learn it, but we just don't. Too much work from school as it is.

discouraging its use in schools since 1992. A 2012 survey by Shanghai's Academy of Social Sciences found four in 10 school students in the city couldn't speak Shanghaiese at all.

British journalist Dr Martin Jacques is the author of *When China Rules the World: the Rise of the Middle Kingdom and the End of the Western World*. "China has had a very weak conception of cultural difference and is very disrespectful to those that do not belong to the Han identity, which they believe is the cement that holds the country together," Jacques said during his 2012 TED talk *The Rise of China*. "The biggest political value in China is unity. How power is constructed in China is much different than the West. They view state power as the patriarch of the family. And this rule has not been challenged in the past 1,000 years."

Economically, the policy is clearly working. The International Monetary Fund announced that China had claimed the spot of the world's number one GDP (in terms of purchasing power parity, at least) in October last year.

Can't we just all get along?

The arguments and protests about which of Putonghua or Cantonese we should be using in various situations implies that the two are somehow competing. "There are people here in the government who hate Cantonese because it's a symbol of Hong Kong's difference from the Mainland," admits Bauer.

But, as previously mentioned, the government states its policy is to encourage trilinguism in Hong Kong. "We support learning Putonghua," says Lee. "It's a way of upgrading ourselves. But at the same time, we should maintain Cantonese culture. What we are seeing are those in the younger generation forgetting their mother tongue and using only Putonghua. What we don't understand is that since students already have a Putonghua course, why do they still have to use Putonghua to teach Chinese Language itself?"

On the other hand, Andrew Chan, spokesperson for local language concern group Societas Linguistica Hongkongensis, doesn't think the government is trying to promote a trilingual city at all. "They just want to get rid of Cantonese," he says. "You can see this by the way resources are distributed in language education. There is a real lack of formal Cantonese education in school, both in writing and pronunciation. Replacing the primary language is lowering the quality of education, as it is not our mother tongue."

The art of language

"Our soft power, in terms of movies, music and art is based on our Cantonese culture," says Chan, referring to Hong Kong's relatively prodigious artistic output over the decades. "[As] our popular art becomes closer and closer to the Mainland, we are losing our unique competitive edge."

"There are countless scholars and artists that speak Cantonese as a mother tongue," agrees award-winning Cantopop lyricist Chan Wing-him, who has written for artists including Fiona Sit and Pakho Chau. "Abandoning this language equals to cutting out their tongues. How cruel would that be?" Cantopop has had a significant influence in China and the rest of Asia ever since its birth in 1974. Non-Cantonese speaking Chinese enjoyed Cantopop regardless of whether or not they could understand the lyrics. They were interested in learning about Hong Kong's music scene and becoming fans of the city's artists. Even Faye Wong, one of China's most treasured artists came from Beijing to Hong Kong to develop her career.

Almost all Hong Kong movies made in the 1980s were done in Cantonese. The Cantonese movie brand was one of quality, and kung fu movies were popularised in both the East and West. There was a wave of film tourism, with visitors coming to Hong Kong to visit the locations of their favourite movies. According to a recent research project done by HotelClub, 172 Hong Kong movies were filmed in Cantonese in 1992. By 1997, as the handover approached, this number had dropped to under 100 for the first time in two decades.

"At one time, our culture was influencing all of Asia – especially in film, music and television," points out Ng. "But now, creative artists are struggling and the film industry isn't producing as many quality films. We need our soft power back. Take South Korea for example. People are wanting to learn Korean now because of its strong soft power, regardless of whether learning the language would be useful for career success."

A very real danger

"Right now, if you ask me about the current situation, I say that Cantonese is in great shape," says Bauer. "About 90 percent of the 96 percent ethnically Chinese people who live here speak Cantonese as their usual daily language. In terms of the number of speakers, it's doing well. But if children stop learning Cantonese because their parents only speak to them in English or their school teaches them in Putonghua, then there could be problems."

Bauer is currently working on a comprehensive Cantonese-English dictionary. "I've been working on it for 12 years," he tells us. "It's really sad that, given how important Cantonese is in Hong Kong, you'd think someone would have published a dictionary more recently. But the last comprehensive Cantonese-English dictionary was published in 1977! If you went out to the store today and tried to find a good one, you'd struggle. You'd find nothing about contemporary colloquial Cantonese, the vocabulary that's actually used here."

Cantonese is in danger of disappearing. If that happens, the cultural impact would be devastating for this ancient language, the closest dialect of Chinese to that used in poetic classics like *Dream of the Red Chamber* (Singer-songwriter Denise Ho did a stage rendition of this story called *Awakening*). It's not all doom and gloom though. There are many individuals like Ng and Bauer who are making efforts to preserve Cantonese in the face of the threat.

The most ideal situation in Hong Kong would be for citizens to become proficient in Cantonese, English and Putonghua. Visit Malaysia, Belgium or Switzerland and you'll hear three languages (or more) being spoken. Why do we even have to pick? Unfortunately, the issue in Hong Kong seems to be one that is politically driven.

It's easy to get caught up arguing whether Cantonese or Putonghua is 'better' or 'more useful'. But the wider picture is that a huge part of Hong Kong's cultural identity is more than on the line – it's hanging by its fingertips. "My mother tongue is Cantonese. My whole life and understanding of this world is through this language," says Ng with anguish in his voice. "In just a few generations, if parents don't emphasise Cantonese teachings and speak to their children in Cantonese, it will be gone." ■

To find out more about the Education Bureau's current language policy, visit bit.ly/languagepolicyhk.