

## Cantonese in Scotland

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**Abstract:** Of the two official languages in China, Mandarin is more widely spoken than Cantonese. However, the opposite is true within Scotland (and indeed within the United Kingdom). This article provides some background information to this phenomenon and exemplifies some of the ways in which information is made available to Cantonese speakers resident in Scotland. The author also reports on a small case study investigating awareness of these linguistic support mechanisms within one particular Cantonese-speaking community.

**Key Words:** Cantonese, Scotland, community languages

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### Background

Cantonese is one of China's official languages, along with Mandarin. However, it is only spoken in the Guangdong province and in Hong Kong, whereas Mandarin is widely spoken as a lingua franca within the rest of the country. By contrast, as revealed in the 2001 census (Scottish Government 2008a), Cantonese is the most commonly spoken language amongst Scotland's Chinese inhabitants, who make up just over 16% of Scotland's ethnic-minority population and around 0.3% of the total population.

In the 1950's, there was a migration of agricultural workers from the New Territories of Hong Kong to Great Britain, and there was a further wave of immigration after the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997. According to Akilli (2003) and Li Wei (2007), the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 was followed by a collapse of the agricultural economy, which left many rice farmers unemployed. As a result, these people immigrated to England and this later led to overland migration to Scotland. Glasgow saw its first settled Chinese community in 1960. Two factors that attracted the Chinese to Britain were the economic boom of the late 1950's and early 1960's and also the Britons' growing taste for foreign food. The new Chinese residents opened restaurants whose success attracted more Chinese immigrants. However, the chefs in these restaurants did not speak any English as they only worked in the kitchens and had little contact outside their immediate family and friends. The waiters, on the other hand, had to learn English since they would have to interact with the customers. To this day, a lot of Chinese employed in the catering sector still have poor literacy skills in English (Akilli 2003). Although catering has traditionally dominated the employment of Chinese in Scotland, Chinese people

have also moved into other fields of employment. For example, in recent years, traditional Chinese medicine has grown in popularity and practitioners can be found in most Scottish cities.

According to Li Wei (ibid), Cantonese is the lingua franca of many Chinese communities in Britain, especially amongst the immigrant generations. Within the Chinese-run businesses in Scotland, the proprietors may speak Cantonese to employees and to customers who speak the language. At the same time, many of Scotland's Chinese residents have been struggling to maintain their mother tongue whilst simultaneously becoming fluent in English. As Li Wei (ibid) points out, this has resulted in a complex pattern of polyglossia. Within the community, Cantonese is used for everyday communication, Mandarin for political and symbolic purposes. English comes in as an additional language used for socio-economic and educational purposes.

Li Wei shows that a shift in language use can be seen over three generations. The older generation has remained monolingual (non-English speaking); the middle generation has Cantonese as a first language but uses English in various circumstances whereas English is the dominant language of the younger generation. Because those in the catering business work long hours and begin their working day just at the time when their children come home from school, it is often not possible for the parents and children to be involved together in many social activities. Also, there are no 'Chinese districts' within Scottish cities, i.e. there are very few Chinese households situated close enough for the children to interact on a regular basis. Since Chinese children rarely make up more than three per cent of the school population in any urban area and thus spend most of their time with English speakers, their main language of communication is English. Despite all this, many British-born children of Chinese descent have a passive understanding of Chinese although levels of oral fluency vary considerably.

According to a recent survey carried out by the Scottish Government (2008b), Cantonese is the main home language of 1508 pupils in state schools, ranking fifth place on the list of main home languages after English, Punjabi, Urdu and Polish. Mandarin, interestingly, ranks in 17<sup>th</sup> place, being spoken by only 301 pupils. A more detailed analysis (Scottish Government 2008c) shows that Cantonese is the second-most common home language of pupils in state schools (after English) in three of Scotland's local authorities, third-most common in three other local authorities and the fourth-most common in a further three.

Efforts to preserve the Cantonese language can be traced back to the 1970's when Chinese schools were founded in Glasgow (<http://www.glasgowchineseschool.org>) and Edinburgh (<http://www.edinchineseschool.uk.org>). These establishments continue to be seats of learning for the children of the cities' Cantonese Chinese families. In addition, as Dick (2008) points out, there has been an increasing number of Scots studying at Edinburgh Chinese School within the past five years. The increased interest may be in response to China's generally booming economy and the realisation that having at least some competence in the language will help increase trade opportunities with the country. This view is certainly reflected in official Scottish Government papers (Yan Liang 2008).

In addition, as noted by Gallagher (2008), the SQA has introduced qualifications for schoolchildren in Cantonese and Mandarin at Intermediate, Higher and Advanced Higher levels. For several years, Scotland's police forces and local councils have worked with the interpreting service Language Line (<http://www.languageline.co.uk>), which includes Cantonese amongst others. This enables the patrons to talk to the official via a two-way audio or video link. As per Kable's Government Computing (2003), a doctor's surgery in Edinburgh piloted the same scheme because in that community there are many elderly Cantonese-speaking residents who do not speak English very well.

Another recent project has been the introduction of food-safety training in Cantonese for the Chinese catering businesses, provided jointly by the Food Standards Agency and the local authorities – initiated, as indicated earlier, because many of the Chinese people employed in this sector have limited grasp of English (Inverclyde Council 2007). In recent years, the National Health Service (NHS), several charities and various housing associations have tried to reach out to the ethnic minorities by issuing information on their services in other languages, including Cantonese (viz. <http://www.winterhealthadvice.co.uk/content/default.asp?page=s5>). The Scottish National Party even issued its 2007 manifesto in Cantonese amongst other minority languages (viz. <http://www.snp.org/node/13534>).

At the same time, it should be remembered that *Mandarin* is generally considered to be the more important of the two official languages in China. Most of China's population speak Mandarin (and are taught it at school) and it is one of the six official languages of the United Nations. Thus, whilst the Chinese schools in Glasgow and Edinburgh do offer classes in Cantonese, as mentioned earlier, the classes in Mandarin are more popular. The Confucius Institute for Scotland (<http://www.confuciusinstitute.ac.uk>), based at the University of Edinburgh, and the other eight Confucius classroom hubs in Scotland all offer classes in Mandarin rather than Cantonese.

Another point worth noting is that the number of Chinese students studying at Scottish universities is rising rapidly. As quoted by MacLeod (2008, 2009), UCAS figures indicate that 544 students from China were studying in Scotland during the academics session 2008/09 compared with 314 during 2007/08, which represents an increase of 73%. Chinese students make up a substantial fraction of the students at any one Scottish university and each of these universities has a Chinese Students' Association. Whilst most of these students speak Mandarin there are undoubtedly some whose first language is Cantonese. Notwithstanding the above reservations, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that Cantonese will remain an important minority language in Scotland for the foreseeable future.

## Case Study

I interviewed two Cantonese speakers in my community: Danny (a Chinese immigrant and owner of a local Chinese takeaway) and Michael (a dentist, born in Scotland but who grew up

speaking Cantonese) with the aim of finding out the extent to which they were aware of Cantonese language support in Scotland.

Danny speaks Cantonese to staff at work and also to his Chinese friends. He speaks English at work when talking to customers and also in various circumstances outwith work. Michael speaks English an estimated 65% of the time because his patients and colleagues all speak English. He speaks Cantonese at home with his family and also to his Chinese patients. Both interviewees often have to switch between the two languages and they can do it automatically.

From the results of the interview, it is evident that these speakers of Cantonese believe that their own language should be maintained and not forgotten by the younger generation of Chinese in Britain. Both interviewees believe that their language is part of their culture. Although both see the importance of English as a widely used language they think it is useful to be bilingual. Michael is passing on the Cantonese language to his children, which means they will be completely bilingual. Interestingly, neither Danny nor Michael believed there to be much need for Scots to learn Cantonese, as most of China's population speak Mandarin, and because Mandarin is regarded by many as *the* Chinese language. Michael's children are therefore also currently taking classes in Mandarin outside school. Interestingly, the two participants were unaware that there are substantial numbers amongst Scotland's schoolchildren with Cantonese as their first language. Michael thinks the central and local governments should recognise this and provide more funding for Scotland's Chinese schools. Neither of the two interviewees knew that increasing numbers of Scots in Edinburgh send their children to the local Chinese school to learn the language (although it is likely that most of these children studying there will be learning Mandarin rather than Cantonese).

Both interviewees knew of the interpreting service offered by the local authorities. However, in Michael's opinion, organisations such as the NHS, Employment Service, Citizens' Advice Bureau and charities do not accommodate Cantonese speakers to any great extent. Danny, on the other hand, believed the opposite, and this view is backed up by the findings of my research, as outlined above.

Both participants of my survey were aware that local authorities were offering food-safety training in Cantonese and they were strongly in favour of this move. They also knew about the Glasgow Chinese School and its role, but interestingly did not know that the SQA had recently introduced national qualifications in Cantonese. Michael, however, did know that for many years, GCSE and A-Level qualifications in Chinese had been available in England. Although neither interviewee knew that the SNP had issued its latest manifesto in Cantonese, Michael felt it would be beneficial for all political parties to communicate with the speakers of minority languages in their home languages.

In conclusion, it is clear that the state is doing more to support Cantonese than Danny and Michael believed to be the case. Recognising that this *is* an anglophone country there is

sufficient evidence to show that the Scottish Government has been making substantial efforts to reach out to Scotland's Cantonese speakers and offering them multiple opportunities to keep their language alive.

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