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“Mandarin Fever” and Chinese Language-learning in Brunei’s Middle Schools: Discrepant Discourses, Multifaceted Realities and Institutional Barriers

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ABSTRACT

China’s rise as a global economic powerhouse has led to a surge in Chinese language-learning worldwide, including in Southeast Asia. This article examines how this phenomenon has unfolded in Brunei, a Muslim and English–Malay bilingual majority country. Drawing on participant observations at two private Chinese middle schools, 19 interviews with teachers and parents, and 10 focus group discussions with students conducted in 2018, we find that there are discrepant discourses and multifaceted realities within and between different groups. While parents and teachers articulate the economic and cultural benefits of learning Chinese, students struggle to understand these and instead articulate banal motivations (e.g. being able to communicate with non-English-conversant family members and foreigners). Contextualising our findings to the historic marginalisation of the ethnic Chinese diasporic minority community in Brunei, we argue that the cumulative effects of educational and non-educational institutional barriers (e.g. lack of teaching materials relevant to the local context, and reliance on foreign teachers) hamper the development of effective and comprehensive Chinese language-learning in Brunei. Our findings suggest that, to date, the rise of China has had limited impact on Chinese language-learning among Chinese students and their parents in Brunei.

KEYWORDS

Chinese language-learning; Mandarin fever; Mandarin; ethnic minorities; ethno-politics; Chinese diaspora; education system; Brunei

Introduction

The rise of China as a global economic powerhouse has led to a surge in Chinese language-learning worldwide, including in Southeast Asia. Corresponding to “English Fever” in South Korea (Park, 2009) and China (Jin, 2016) in the past few decades, “Mandarin Fever” that emerged in the past decade signifies a rapidly growing interest in Chinese language-learning around the world (Hoon & Kuntjara, 2019). In fact, the Chinese language is now the most spoken language worldwide. “Mandarin Fever” has brought about shifts in some Southeast Asian governments’ stances towards Chinese education and Chinese language-learning in schools.¹ Given the long histories of suppression or curtailment of Chinese schools and Chinese language-learning in many Southeast Asian countries, as we next explain, does Mandarin Fever signal the cusp of a transformative change in ethnic minority education and language-learning in these

multicultural contexts? In this article, we explore this question through the case study of two Chinese middle schools in Brunei Darussalam (hereafter “Brunei”), a Muslim and English–Malay bilingual majority country.

In many Southeast Asian countries, there has been a long history of Chinese schools serving the educational needs of ethnic Chinese diasporic communities (Haw, 2003; Sai, 2016). However, the development of these schools has often been intertwined with domestic ethnic and communal politics (Chantavanich & Sikharaksakul, 1995; Dawis, 2008; Tan, 1996). From the 1940s to the 1960s, Chinese schools were sites for the dissemination and incubation of Chinese nationalism and communism (Yong, 1991). Chinese nationalism was seen as a threat to nation-building projects, while communism led to social unrest and bloodshed. This historical legacy continued to cloud Southeast Asian governments’ attitudes towards the development of vernacular Chinese education. The Chinese communities’ positions as ethnic minorities in their respective countries further placed them in a vulnerable position vis-à-vis changing government policy stances that are to some extent influenced by racial politics (Hoon, 2008; Skinner, 1957; Tong, 2010). Indeed, the education of ethnic minorities in plural or multicultural societies is “influenced by, and reflects, the nature of overall majority-minority relations” (Tan & Santhiram, 2010, p. viii). This predicament, in turn, circumscribes the effectiveness of Chinese schools as educational sites for the teaching, learning and self-preservation of Chinese language and culture (Lee, 2011; Raman & Tan, 2015).

This is similarly the case in Brunei. In 2017, the total population of 421,300 consisted of the majority Malays (277,300, 65.8%), the ethnic Chinese (43,100, 10.2%) and other ethnic groups (100,900, 23.9%) (Brunei Darussalam DEP, 2018).² Brunei’s ethnic Chinese are second- and third-generations who were born locally, but most have been excluded from access to citizenship and have been either rendered stateless (Somjee & Somjee, 1995), or at best, given permanent resident (PR) status. However, as de Vienne (2011, p. 43) notes, PR status “remains highly discriminatory in terms of land ownership and of education”. Brunei PRs have limited access to land ownership,³ and their access to free education applies only to government primary and secondary schools.⁴ Additionally, Chinese Bruneian citizens have limited access to property ownership compared to Malay Bruneians. The ethnic Chinese are therefore structurally excluded from enjoying full citizenship privileges. This structural exclusion arguably contributed to some ethnic Chinese holding onto a strong sense of ethno-cultural and minority diasporic identity, especially among the older generation.

Chinese schools exist in Brunei, but they are private schools operating outside of the public education system. Nevertheless, Brunei’s Ministry of Education (MOE) exerts considerable control over the Chinese schools with respect to their curriculum, teacher recruitment and school fees (Zheng et al., 2014, p. 244). Currently, there are five Chinese schools offering pre-primary to primary education (i.e. “primary schools”), and three schools offering pre-primary to secondary education (i.e. “middle schools”). By contrast, in 2016 there were 122 public primary schools and 34 public secondary schools (Brunei Darussalam MOE, 2017, p. 19). The Chinese schools in Brunei are “Chinese” in the sense that they are run and financed by the ethnic Chinese communities, they offer the Chinese language as a compulsory subject,⁵ and the majority of their students are ethnic Chinese (including locals and foreigners). In recent years, however, non-ethnic-Chinese students have started to enrol in these schools. In 2007, for example, there were 612 ethnic Malays

attending these schools, constituting 18 per cent of their student population (Cui, 2010, cited in Suryadinata, 2013, p. 285).

The bilateral relationship between Brunei and China has grown tremendously over the past decade with rapidly increasing collaborations between the two countries on trade and economic cooperation in the agricultural, forestry, health and energy sectors. Under the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese investments in Brunei play a major role in contributing to Brunei's economic diversification strategy and have created market opportunities for the local business community. There has also been an increasing number of Chinese companies investing in agriculture, halal food, aquaculture and bio-innovation through the Brunei–Guangxi Economic Corridor (Pan & Hoon, 2018). President Xi Jinping's visit to Brunei in 2018 further affirmed China's commitment to maintaining close bilateral relations.

Given these recent shifts in the geopolitical and cultural climate in Southeast Asia, and the growing Brunei–China economic exchanges, are more Bruneian parents and students jumping onto the “Mandarin Fever” bandwagon? To what extent is effective Chinese language-learning possible in the context of a Muslim and English–Malay bilingual majority country where the ethnic Chinese diasporic minority community has been historically marginalised? How can the Brunei case be comparatively understood vis-à-vis its neighbours in the region? In this article, we seek to address these questions by examining the Chinese language education landscape in Brunei middle schools, set against China's rise as a global economic power and the accompanying “Mandarin Fever” in Southeast Asia. Specifically, we examine the cases of two Chinese middle schools in Brunei through a combination of participant observations, interviews with teachers and parents, and focus group discussions with students. This article contributes to the literature on the education of ethnic Chinese diasporic minority communities in Southeast Asia (Bourgerie, 2017; see Curdt-Christiansen & Hancock, 2014 for cases in and beyond Southeast Asia), as well as on Chinese language-learning in relation to “Mandarin Fever”.

Following this introduction, the next section reviews key themes on language and the education of ethnic minorities in multicultural societies, and provides an overview of the ethnic Chinese community, Chinese schools and Chinese language-learning in Brunei. The third section explains the methodology used in this research, and introduces the aggregated profiles of the respondents. The fourth section highlights the discrepant discourses and multifaceted realities from the perspectives of teachers, parents and students. The fifth section discusses the cumulative effects of educational and non-educational institutional barriers that hamper the development of effective and comprehensive Chinese language-learning in Brunei. The sixth section discusses the implications of mixed ethnic genealogies for Chinese language-learning in Brunei. We conclude by discussing the broader implications of our findings.

Language and the Education of Ethnic Minorities in Multicultural Societies

Theoretical context

According to Keith Watson (1979), three types of societies had a need for multicultural educational policies: first, societies with “a deep-rooted social mix” (Watson, 1979, p. 17)

such as China, India and the Soviet Union; second, those whose cultural mix was brought about by colonialism such as Malaysia and Singapore; and third, societies that had become multicultural due to immigration such as the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. Countries in the first category are relatively similar in accepting and guaranteeing the co-existence of educational provision for ethnic minorities alongside that of the national majority. Countries in the second and third categories, however, display a wide range of shifting and inconsistent educational policy stances, including assimilation, integration and cultural pluralism. Watson rightly concluded that these shifting policy stances have been informed by entrenched prejudice and fear in relation to ethnic-minority communities on the one hand, and the countries' political and economic factors at particular milestones on the other.

Governments' shifting policy stances have direct and indirect consequences for ethnic-minority communities' education, as well as the preservation of ethno-cultural identities vis-à-vis that of the imagined nation. Indeed, Takeda and Williams (2008) compared the differential policy stances adopted by Japan and Canada during the nation-building period at the turn of the 20th century. They found that Japan's cultural/ethnic rationale promoted a socially coherent sense of national integration, but this left little space for ethnic minorities to assert their ethno-cultural identities. By contrast, they found that Canada's adoption of the civic-assimilationist approach allowed considerable space for ethnic minorities, but the co-existence of ethnic diversity challenged the national unity project. The two cases suggest that governments face moral and political dilemmas in designing educational and language policies: to what extent should ethnic diversity be allowed, and how will this challenge national unity?

In this regard, language becomes a highly contested issue in multicultural societies. According to Watson, "[e]ducation and ethnicity cannot be discussed without taking language into account" (2007, p. 52). Indeed, language is an important medium through which culture (national or otherwise) is cultivated, preserved and transmitted. Schools and homes constitute the key platforms where the younger generation learn about their culture and heritage. However, cultural knowledge transfers and education cannot take place effectively without a shared language. Arguably, one can only attain a deeper appreciation of one's cultural heritage with a higher level of ethnic language proficiency.

However, investment in ethnic languages by individuals and families may be influenced by national language policies and ideologies, as well as the ways in which these policies and ideologies are implemented through school pedagogy (Duff et al., 2017, p. 411). Indeed, beyond its role in cultural preservation, language is also "a very significant indicator of power relations in societies . . . and [an] instrument for continuity and/or change" (Bray & Koo, 2004, p. 215). Language policies could be an effective tool for governments to accord cultural and linguistic power to certain ethnic groups – typically the majority group, recognised as "the national group" – thereby maintaining political legitimacy. Such a policy stance could translate into the formal and informal prioritisation of the national language(s) by schools and families. In practical terms, this could mean a lack of funding, resources and classroom time in schools for the learning of ethnic languages. Outside the classroom, this could mean a lack of familial support and capacity for the sustained learning of ethnic language and culture.

In sum, the issue of ethnic language-learning in multicultural societies is highly complex and likely to be politically sensitive, and needs to be situated in the specific context in question. We now turn to the Brunei context to understand the development of the Chinese community, Chinese schools and Chinese language-learning.

Empirical context: Brunei

The Chinese community has a long history in Brunei, with the first arrivals recorded circa 1600 (Ho, 2007). The community comprise the dominant Hokkien, Hakka, Cantonese and Hainanese, as well as other smaller communities. Despite the existence of linguistically diverse and often non-mutually intelligible dialects among these co-ethnic communities, Mandarin is the *lingua franca*.⁶ Mandarin is also often the language spoken at home. Inter-ethnic communication between ethnic Chinese and ethnic Malays is usually conducted in Brunei Malay and/or English.

Formal education in Brunei began during the British Residential period (1906–1959). In 1929, the School Attendance Enactment was passed, giving the British Resident the power to establish compulsory education for children in certain areas. During the middle of the 20th century, there were three separate systems of education in the country: Malay vernacular schools, Chinese medium schools and Christian mission schools.

Brunei's first vernacular Chinese primary school was established in 1912. Yik Chye School was eventually developed into a secondary school and renamed the Chung Hwa Middle School, Bandar Seri Begawan (de Vienne, 2011, p. 33). Seven other Chinese schools were established in various parts of Brunei between the 1930s and the 1950s. To cater to the educational needs of the Chinese community, Mandarin was used as the medium of instruction in these schools. As the Chinese schools were largely left to their own devices, they formed a Board of Chinese School Examinations, whose members were appointed by the Director of Education, to administer a common examination among the schools (Brunei, 1973). This changed in the mid-1970s when the government required all schools to follow a national curriculum and public examinations (Brunei, 1976).

In 1985, in a clear departure from the language-in-education policies of neighbouring Malaysia and Indonesia, Brunei decided to adopt a bilingual Malay and English language-in-education system (*Dwibahasa*, lit. “dual language”) (Noor Azam Haji-Othman et al., 2019). Under this system, all primary and secondary schools (including Chinese schools) adopted a national curriculum prescribed by the MOE. From pre-school level to Primary Three, the medium of instruction for all subjects was Malay, except for the English language subject. From Primary Four (Upper Primary), English was used to teach the English language subject, Science, Mathematics, Geography and History,⁷ while Malay was used to teach the Malay language subject, Islamic Religious Knowledge, Physical Education, Arts and Crafts, Civics, and Malay Islamic Monarchy.

After the introduction of the *Dwibahasa* system, Chinese schools in Brunei began to offer a trilingual Mandarin–English–Malay learning environment rooted in Chinese culture and tradition while still adhering to the education policy established by the MOE (Ho, 2007). Mandarin is an additional subject that is taught at every level. Mandarin classes at the lower primary levels are devoted to learning the basic aspects of the language, such as word-recognition, reading, and the writing of Chinese characters.

At the higher levels, Mandarin classes focus on reading comprehension and composition. For non-Chinese students, the Mandarin exam is optional at secondary levels.

In 2009, the *Dwibahasa* system was replaced by the *Sistem Pendidikan Negara Abad ke-21* (National Education System for the 21st Century, SPN-21). This system still predominantly uses English and Malay, but with a new emphasis on information and communication technologies, and entrepreneurial skills. Significantly, SPN-21 includes Mandarin as an elective in the national curriculum. While this can be seen as an inclusive policy effort toward the preservation and promotion of an ethnic minority language, we shall later show that there are various educational and non-educational institutional barriers that continue to hamper effective Chinese language-learning in Brunei.

Methodology: School Ethnography

In this study, we used the case study method in the form of school ethnography. Two research assistants carried out data collection over three months in mid-2018. We relied on research assistants for these school ethnographies, as they were able to gain easier access to the schools and build rapport with the students due to their age (early 20s) and their being alumni of the schools. We selected and approached two Chinese middle schools in Brunei, one located in the capital city Bandar Seri Begawan (School A), and one located in the second-largest town Kuala Belait (School B). We obtained permission to conduct participant observations, interviews and focus group discussions at these schools.

We observed Chinese language classroom lessons and extracurricular activities (e.g. a Chinese language fun fair) over two weeks. The Chinese language classes include Chinese as a first language (Chinese I), Chinese as a second language (Chinese II) and Chinese as a foreign language (Chinese III). We also observed the school and classroom environment, teaching materials, school magazines, notices displayed on noticeboards, and displays of students' work. Thereafter, we conducted individual semi-structured interviews with 11 parents and eight teachers, as well as a joint meeting with the Principal and Dean of Studies (Chinese) at School B. Some of the parents are also teachers, who taught either at the same school or at other non-Chinese schools. We also conducted 10 focus group discussions with students, stratified by their year of study and Chinese class stream (Years 8–11, Chinese I–III). Four of the groups were from School A, and six from School B. Each focus group consisted of between four and six students. [Table 1](#) summarises the profiles of the parents and teachers interviewed for this project, while [Table 2](#) summarises the ethnicity/nationality of the students who participated in the focus groups.

The interviews and focus group discussions explored the respondents' motivations, observations, experiences and insights about Chinese language-learning in their schools. The focus groups were mainly conducted in Mandarin, with the exception of sessions for Chinese III groups which were conducted in English. The interviews, particularly with parents, were conducted in a mix of English, Mandarin and Malay. Some ethnic Chinese parents codeswitched between Mandarin and English during their interviews. All interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed. Mandarin and

Table 1. Profiles of Parents and Teachers

	Parents		Teachers ^a	
	Ethnicity	<i>n</i>	Nationality	<i>n</i>
School A	Chinese	1	Malaysia	1
	Filipino	1		
	Indian	1		
	Total	3	Total	1
School B	Chinese	6	Brunei	2 ^b
	Malay	2	Malaysia	2
			China	2
			Taiwan	1
	Total	8	Total	7

Notes:

^a Teachers are all ethnic Chinese.

^b One of the teachers mentioned having taught at the school for 30 years. It was unclear whether this teacher holds Brunei or Malaysia nationality, or is a Brunei PR.

Table 2. Profiles of Students in Focus Group Discussions

	Ethnicity/Nationality	<i>n</i>
School A	Bruneian Malay	1
	Bruneian PR ^a Chinese	1
	Malaysian Chinese	18
	Malaysian Indian	2
	Filipino	2 ^b
	Total	24
School B ^c	Chinese born in Brunei ^c	16
	Chinese born in Malaysia	5
	Bruneian Malay	1 ^d
	Chinese from China	1
	Filipino	1
	Indian	1
	Total	25

Notes:

^a Permanent Resident.

^b One student is a "Filipino mix Chinese".

^c Students were asked their country of birth, but not their nationality. Since the majority of ethnic Chinese in Brunei are PRs or stateless, it may not be accurate to categorise these students as "Brunei Chinese".

^d Officially a Malay, but actually of mixed ethnicity (Chinese, Dusun, Iban and Malay).

Malay transcriptions were not translated since two of the authors read Mandarin, and all authors read Malay. Transcribed interviews were coded and analysed for emerging themes.

Discrepant Discourses and Multifaceted Realities

Overall, we find that there are discrepant discourses and multifaceted realities from the perspectives of the parents, teachers and students. By this, we mean that there are *conflicting and irreconcilable desires and realities* in the learning of Mandarin in Brunei. Teachers and parents agree with and understand the need for Brunei's school children to learn Mandarin, and often articulate this in relation to ethno-cultural

preservation as well as China's global and local economic position. Students repeat similar discourses to a certain extent, but the reality is that they find learning Mandarin burdensome and challenging. Some ethnic Chinese students, especially those who are taking Chinese II, are reluctant and resistant to learning Mandarin as they find it difficult to understand and master. Malay-Muslim students, on the other hand, face constraints attending Mandarin classes as they are required to attend mandatory *Ugama* (i.e. Islamic religion) and Islamic Religious Knowledge classes once they reach Year 1 and Year 9 respectively.

Teachers and parents

Generally, teachers and parents articulated similar economic and cultural benefits of learning Chinese. For example, a teacher from mainland China who had taught for a year in School B explained:

Firstly, for a Chinese person . . . [Mandarin] *is something that should be learnt*. A cultural language that he or she *should understand*. Otherwise, *if you are a Chinese and you can't even speak Mandarin, what will the Westerners think of you?* Secondly, from the broader perspective, whether it's China's global influence or the future employment market, learning Mandarin would be beneficial for the students' career and job prospects. In any case, I believe that learning an additional language won't be disadvantageous. (authors' translation and emphases)

Parents likewise mentioned these two points, although they placed greater emphasis on the maintenance of Chinese identity and culture. However, despite their desire for ethno-cultural maintenance, parents ironically emphasised that a *basic* understanding and command of Mandarin was *the least* they expected from their children. This paradoxical co-existence of desire and actual expectation among parents is understandable, given the context of Brunei's linguistic and cultural environment, which does not usually require advanced use of Mandarin either in the workplace or in everyday life.⁸ Furthermore, parents themselves may not be fluent Mandarin speakers and may lack the ability to nurture their children's learning of the language outside the classroom. Lastly, parents spoke about the uncertainties of the future economic and employment landscapes – locally, regionally and globally. Mandarin is thus a “good-to-have” skill – a kind of “insurance” for their children's futures. The three excerpts below are representative of parents' narratives (authors' emphases).

Speaking Mandarin is not a choice, it's a must-know that symbolises your culture and identity. (Chinese, male, two children, the eldest in a Chinese school)

Because we grew up in a Chinese family, so *Chinese is a must for us*. *At least*⁹ *you must know the basics*, like how to write in Chinese, especially your name . . . I think that *learning Chinese is a must*. *At least* when the Chinese newspaper is in front of you, you're able to read it . . . [if] you are a Chinese, *it's your mother tongue*. You *must* speak [it] better than [people of an] other race. I witnessed a lot of non-Chinese [who] are able to speak and even sing very well [in Chinese]. (Chinese, female, two children in same school)

The main reason is that I personally prefer Chinese education in terms of the emphasis on *liyi lianchi* (礼义廉耻, i.e. sense of propriety, justice, integrity and honour) and Chinese culture. Secondly, I think that as a Chinese we *should* know how to speak the Chinese

language. *That's the basic thing* . . . Thirdly, if you look at the current global economy, China is playing a big role. So from that perspective, we don't know what will happen in the future. Maybe [my child] might need this skill to support herself. (Chinese, male, one child in Chinese school)

As argued in Ien Ang's (2001) seminal book, *On Not Speaking Chinese*, knowledge of the Chinese language is often perceived as a quintessential criterion of authenticity for one to claim Chineseness. In his study of the relationship between the Chinese body and the Chinese language, Mu asserts that "habitus of Chineseness is a system of dispositions both by descent through morphological presentation and by consent through sociological learning" (2016, p. 303). In insisting that their children be able to speak their "mother tongue", Chinese Bruneian parents were trying to reproduce the cultural/ethnic habitus of essentialising Chinese looks with Chinese language. It also reflected an often implicit expectation among diasporic Chinese that they should maintain cultural heritage in the "host country" through the preservation of language.

Students

Students, however, struggled to understand the broader and longer-term benefits articulated by their parents and teachers. Instead, they articulated banal motivations such as being able to communicate with non-English-conversant family members and foreigners. This suggests that students primarily consider Mandarin to be a communication tool with "others" who are not conversant in English, which students thought of as their first language. Others gave deviant responses, demonstrating their inability to understand the utility of the language, and their frustration at having to learn what they perceive to be a difficult and unnecessary subject. The following are representative responses when students were asked why they thought it was important for them to learn the Chinese language (authors' emphases).

It's important because my grandparents don't know how to speak English. (Year 8 student A)

I think what she means is that it enables better communication with Chinese speakers. (Year 8 student B)

I think Mandarin is very important because *it helps in communicating with family members and foreigners*. Otherwise you don't know what they're talking about. If you can't understand what they're saying, you wouldn't know what they are asking you to do. (Year 10 student)

There are many foreigners now slowly migrating to Brunei for job opportunities. We have seen in the school there are more Chinese teachers from mainland China. I think *at least* being able to speak in basic Mandarin, and considering many immigrants from China, surely their English language wouldn't be that good, so being able to communicate with them in the mother tongue language would be good. (Year 11 student A)

It's not important to me but for my family and my parents it is. I don't think I'll be studying in China or some other places that require Mandarin. (Year 11 student B)

I think it's important because I'm Chinese. I look like Chinese. *Everyone expects me to know Mandarin*. It's important but doesn't mean I have to know [it well]. (Year 11 student C)

In the linguistic literature that discusses learners' motivations to learn second or foreign languages ("L2"), the concept of "integrative motivation" is used to describe "the desire to learn [a second language] of a valued community so that one can communicate with its members and sometimes even to [sic] become like them" (Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2017, p. 456). Moreover, the L2 Motivational Self System suggests that there are three sources for the motivation to learn a second or foreign language: "the learner's internal desire to become an effective L2 user; social pressures coming from the learner's environment to master the L2; and the actual experience of being engaged in the L2 learning process" (Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2017, p. 457).

The students' responses above suggest that learning Mandarin was important for communication with members of the Chinese community, but we find little evidence that this was motivated by their own internalised appreciation of the value of such communicative ability. Instead, these responses suggest that the students thought that they *ought* to learn basic Mandarin for rudimentary communication with non-English speakers. There is therefore little evidence to suggest that the students valued the Chinese community (including their extended family members and new migrants from China) or wanted to become effective Mandarin speakers. By contrast, the students thought of members of the Chinese community as non-English speakers. Basic Mandarin, in other words, was their only means to understand these non-English speakers.

We also found that students tended to regurgitate the discourses that they seemed to have learnt and internalised from their parents and teachers. The following two focus group excerpts illustrate this clearly (authors' emphases).

Years 10 and 11

Researcher: Why did your parents choose this school for you?

Student A: We are from Chinese background so *at least* we should be able to speak Mandarin. *The root of Chinese cultural tradition is important.* I think that's one of the important reasons why my family sent me to this school.

Student B: I think it's compatible with our societal needs as we have many Chinese people here [in Brunei]. It's easy for us to get along in the circle of Chinese speaking environment so we wouldn't [be] influenced [too] much by the majority Malay as their culture is different from [ours]. I don't think our parents would want us to study in a school that does not teach [the] Chinese language.

Year 9

Researcher: Do you think that it is important to learn Mandarin? Why?

Student A: I think that learning Mandarin is very important . . . through learning Mandarin we can get exposure to more knowledge about China. We can broaden our knowledge.

Student B: Because we are Chinese, and our ancestors came from China. So Mandarin is our mother tongue and *we should learn it.*

Student C: Because it's our mother tongue. *If we don't even understand our mother tongue, how can we learn other languages?*

Student D: I agree. Mandarin is now spoken in many countries. It will be important as a communication tool in the future. It will become a very important language.

Student E: *If we say that we can't even speak our own language, isn't that very shameful?*

As evident in the excerpts above, students repeated the discourses of “*should* learn the mother tongue as a Chinese person”, “*at least* being able to speak Chinese” and “*shameful* if we can’t speak our own language” that their parents and teachers had verbalised. In their study on language attitudes and linguistic practices among parents and students in the Chinese diaspora in Britain, Australia and Singapore, Li and Zhu found that the parents articulate similar ethno-essentialist ideologies, but the younger generation tend to embrace multilingualism and desire “a more dynamic and fluid definition of Chineseness” (2010, p. 166). In contrast, our student respondents did not seem to downplay their Chineseness. For them, learning Mandarin appeared to be a necessary task that they *should* do because their parents and teachers told them to. This apparent lack of inherent motivation on the part of students was linked to the institutional barriers to Chinese language-learning in Brunei, which we now turn to.

Cumulative Effects of Institutional Barriers

In this section, we draw primarily from interviews with teachers to analyse the educational and non-educational institutional barriers in Brunei that hampered students’ interest and progress in learning Mandarin.

Educational factors

First, there is a lack of textbooks and teaching materials appropriate to Mandarin school learners in Brunei. According to the teacher respondents, most learning resources come from China and Singapore. Textbooks from Malaysia are not used as they are too advanced for Bruneian students. Since the MOE does not set any standard or quality criteria for Mandarin textbooks, all Chinese schools select their own textbooks. New materials are typically purchased every five or six years. However, without the MOE’s approval, the schools cannot purchase newer textbooks and have to rely on old editions. There have been discussions between the eight Chinese schools about designing and publishing a common Mandarin textbook, but the plan stalled due to copyright issues. All of the teacher respondents felt that the textbooks from China and Singapore were outdated and lacked relevance for Bruneian students. For example, a teacher from Taiwan explained: “We use the textbook from Jinan University for Chinese III. Some of the materials are good, but others are not suitable because they are in the form of poetry. Students don’t know how to relate poetry to everyday life” (School B, authors’ translation).

Indeed, Zheng et al. (2014, p. 246) noted that imported teaching materials contain vocabulary and scenarios that Chinese language-learners in Brunei cannot relate to. The lack of economies of scale in producing localised teaching resources makes it inevitable for the small community of learners in Brunei to rely on imported materials. In fact, the same issue has occurred even in a large country such as Indonesia, which has also experienced Mandarin Fever (Hoon & Kuntjara, 2019).

Second, there is a heavy reliance on foreign teachers since there is no teacher-training programme for Mandarin teachers locally. As Ho (2007) also found, most of the teachers come from Malaysia, China and Taiwan. They are trained and/or experienced Mandarin

teachers, but not specifically trained in teaching Mandarin to Bruneian learners.¹⁰ This is an important distinction, as learners in Brunei may differ from others due to various locally specific circumstances. For example, a teacher from Taiwan (at School B) highlighted that teachers from Taiwan and China face challenges teaching in Brunei as they do not understand Malay and may not be conversant in English. Since Bruneian students – including the ethnic Chinese – speak either English or Malay as their first language, teachers find this particularly challenging in their classes. Furthermore, the increase in the number of non-ethnic-Chinese students in Chinese schools has contributed to students communicating with their peers in English rather than Mandarin.

Another problem with the over-reliance on foreign teachers is that this is not a sustainable long-term solution. As a teacher from China (at School B) explains:

Foreign teachers, whether they are from Malaysia or elsewhere, they can't stay here forever ... So if there are no foreign teachers in the future, who will teach the Mandarin classes here? ... No matter how excellent foreign teachers are or how vibrant the teaching pool is, you should have local teachers. (authors' translation)¹¹

The inability to produce local Chinese teachers will undoubtedly hamper the sustainability of Chinese language-teaching in Brunei in the long run. However, there is no easy fix on this matter: no higher education institution in the country offers Chinese language teacher-training (Zheng et al., 2014, p. 245), and there has been insufficient interest among Chinese Bruneians in studying in China or Taiwan, let alone in taking a degree in Mandarin. The hiring of foreign teachers seems to be the only solution for the time being.

Furthermore, a lack of local teachers resulted in occasions when students had no regular Mandarin teacher or no Mandarin teacher for months at a time. The following focus group (Year 10, Chinese II) excerpt captures this:

Student B: Maybe the problem is ... that our teachers kept on changing. Like beginning this year, around one month, we didn't have a teacher.

Researcher : You didn't have a Mandarin teacher?

Student D: For a few months.

Student B: Almost two months after Chinese New Year ... And also last year I think our teacher changed twice and the year before that also changed.

Student D: The teacher came on probation, so ...

Third, Mandarin is not a compulsory or significant subject in key examinations such as the Primary School Assessment (*Penilaian Sekolah Rendah*, PSR) taken at the end of Year 6 and the “O” Levels taken at the end of Year 9. The PSR examines five subjects – Malay, English, Maths, Science and Malay Islamic Monarchy. For the “O” Levels, students have a choice of the Singapore–Cambridge General Certificate of Education (SGCSE), the Brunei–Cambridge General Certificate of Education (BGCSE), or the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE). From 2015, Mandarin has no longer been available as an examination subject under the SGCSE in Brunei (interviews, Principal and Dean of Studies [Chinese], School B; teacher, School A). For the BGCSE and IGCSE, students only need to obtain a minimum of four credits for entry into Pre-University “A” Levels in Brunei. This means that although Mandarin is a compulsory

subject for Chinese school exam candidates, the students could choose not to prioritise Mandarin over other subjects that they consider more important. A teacher in School B observed that:

... the Chinese language is not a government examination subject, so as long as it's not examinable, they won't study. This is especially obvious in Primary Six when they have the PSR ... So I feel that regardless of Chinese or non-Chinese, for them Mandarin is not the most important subject. That's why they are not interested. (authors' translation)

Finally, the state-led prioritisation of Malay culture and language, enshrined in the national philosophy of *Melayu Islam Beraja* ("Malay Islamic Monarchy") which has been institutionalised since Independence, may also have had some influence over the development of Mandarin and other Chinese dialects in Brunei. While there has never been any official ban on languages other than Malay, the official language of Brunei, many younger Chinese perceive an instrumental and integrative need to master the Malay language, and English, the main working language of Brunei. A good credit in both the Brunei-Cambridge "O" Level examination subjects, *Bahasa Melayu* and English Language, can mean the difference between a state-sponsored scholarship and a potentially high-paying job thereafter, or having to quit school and take up lower-paying employment. Many Chinese students and parents believe that they need to work extra hard to prove their proficiency in Malay language in order to secure a government scholarship, because the state often links Bruneian national identity to the observance of Malay culture and language.

Non-educational factors

In addition to the educational factors described above, there are also non-educational factors that contribute to students' lack of interest in learning Mandarin. One of the key factors is the lack of a conducive language-learning environment at home and in everyday life. This includes a lack of, and an inability to provide, parental support for learning Chinese. A teacher from School B explains:

The interest to learn Mandarin among ethnic Chinese students is declining ... in our school [and] other schools ... Maybe it's the language environment, which makes them feel that learning Mandarin is a very burdensome thing. For non-Chinese students, it's even more challenging. I think the biggest problem is because students have to learn three languages. Since English is the main medium of instruction, for them Mandarin is only for normal conversation. Families these days speak English at home – naturally the students will think that Mandarin is not very important, and so there is a lack of interest. In recent years, non-Chinese students have very strong parental support for learning Mandarin, so their passion is even higher than our Chinese students. (authors' translation)

One parent who is a teacher at a public school observed that students accumulate negative impressions about Mandarin. This, combined with a lack of support at home, results in them neglecting the language:

I've heard a lot of stories. When they were younger they had a negative impression, like the Mandarin teachers are especially strict, especially tough, and there's no one to help them at home. A lot of students, [including] my own students, even though they are pure Chinese

and they are from Chinese schools, but they take Mandarin as their second or third language, which is actually quite a disappointment. When I probe further, it turns out they didn't have enough support [at home], and the conditions in school were not very [conducive] for their learning. And they always have the thinking that Mandarin is not important as long as English and [Malay] are there. They will neglect Mandarin. (Chinese, female, three children in the same Chinese school)

A more serious and irreversible problem is the cumulative erosion and loss of ethno-cultural heritage among the ethnic Chinese in Brunei. A teacher who has taught in Malaysia made the following comparative observation:

The difference between students in Brunei and Malaysia is in terms of their attitude towards their mother tongue. The identification with Chinese culture and respect for their own mother tongue. Malaysian Chinese families will speak in Mandarin or dialects at home. But Bruneian children have lost even their own dialects. What more about Mandarin? (School B, authors' translation)

The factors described above contributed to students' lack of inherent motivation to learn Mandarin. Existing research has identified that limited access to Mandarin at home is one of the contributing factors to students' struggle with Mandarin language-learning in schools (Wu et al., 2012). Biedinger, Becker and Klein (2015) have found that active exposure to a "heritage language" (i.e. a minority language, typically spoken and learnt at home or in informal settings by ethnic minorities, indigenous groups or immigrants; see Ennser-Kananen & King, 2020) through parents and communication within the family influences second-generation migrants' heritage language ability. Additionally, they found that passive exposure through the media also seems to be influential. While broadcast media in Mandarin are available in Brunei on dedicated satellite TV channels, the student respondents did not mention these media sources at all. Moreover, there are no home-grown Mandarin newspapers in Brunei – although there are a number of Mandarin newspapers imported from Malaysia, some of which have Brunei editions (Zheng et al., 2014, p. 244). Our findings thus suggest that the relative lack of such active and passive exposure in Brunei contributes to an overall language-learning environment that does not enable, encourage or facilitate Chinese language-learning among the respondents.

Mixed Ethnic Genealogies: Obstacle or Opportunity?

An interesting finding of this research is the prevalence of mixed ethnic genealogies across generations in Brunei. This emerged from some of the focus group discussions (especially Chinese II and Chinese III), as well as from some parents' responses to the question on why they sent their children to Chinese schools. We see this as both an obstacle and an opportunity for Chinese language-learning in Brunei. Here, we highlight a few of the parents' responses.

One Chinese parent (three children in the same Chinese school) mentioned that her husband's family is biracial but identify themselves as Chinese. When asked whether she thought it was important for her children to learn the Chinese language, one Malay parent replied affirmatively:

Yes, because their father was a Chinese. Their origin is Chinese. They have Chinese blood. On my side [of the family], my great grandpa was a Chinese too . . . I want them to learn Chinese as it is their mother tongue. I don't want them to have no knowledge about China. (parent with four children in the same Chinese school)

Similarly, another Malay parent (who had a Malay husband) mentioned that her grandmother was Chinese. However, this ethnic connection was not the key motivation for her and her husband to send three of their five children to a Chinese school. In fact, the couple had listened to advice from her brother, a former education officer in the MOE. Furthermore, her aunts, her sister and her nephew had attended Chinese schools.

Despite the prevalence of mixed ethnic genealogies involving the Chinese in Brunei (Nur Shawatriqah Binti Hj Md Sahrifulhafiz & Hoon, 2018), the promotion of children's Chinese language-learning did not seem to follow suit. This has been due to decades of de-prioritisation of the ethnic Chinese community and their culture in Brunei. Furthermore, non-Malay-Muslims who marry Malay-Muslim Bruneians are expected to convert to Islam. This has resulted in the cumulative suppression of Chinese identity and the associated cultural practices, including speaking Mandarin. The Malay parent mentioned above, for example, spoke nonchalantly about her Chinese grandmother: "Last time, Chinese [was] not seen as important, so [our family] didn't emphasise it".

It therefore remains to be seen if the development of "Mandarin Fever" brings forth wider acceptance of Chinese identity and cultural practices among Brunei's mixed ethnic individuals.

Discussion and Conclusion

The politics of ethnic minority language-learning

Gardner and Lambert (1972) identified two motivations for the learning of a new language: integrative and instrumental.¹² The former allows learners to integrate into the community in which the language is spoken, while the latter enables learners to use the acquired language for functional or practical purposes. Data collected from the interviews and focus group discussions in this study seems to suggest that the motivation for learning Mandarin for our respondents is more instrumental than integrative. In fact, such instrumentality in the learning of Mandarin has been a common characteristic in "Mandarin Fever" among ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia since the end of the Cold War (e.g. Chokkajitsumpun, 2001; Hoon & Kuntjara, 2019).

Based on a study of ethnic Chinese young adults in Canada, Li and Duff (2014, p. 234) find that their respondents' accounts of their motivations and experiences learning the Chinese language reveal "the ambivalence, desires, pressures, positionings and struggles" of this endeavour. Indeed, the narratives of our respondents reveal similar themes. In the broader socio-cultural and educational context of Brunei, where the ethnic Chinese community has been deemed a non-indigenous ethnic minority, and where there is an emphasis on English–Malay bilingualism in schools, our young respondents struggled to fully comprehend the salience of learning Mandarin. Even if they cited reasons such as learning Mandarin as their mother tongue, we find that these tended to be uncritical regurgitations of the discourses they had learnt and internalised from their parents and teachers.

Puah and Ting (2016, p. 81) highlighted that “[t]he conceptualisation of ethnicity has a bearing on language shift and maintenance because it influences the extent to which the ethnic language is valued and used as a symbol of ethnicity”. Our data suggests that this is evident to a certain extent in the Bruneian case. Specifically, students who spoke about the importance of learning Mandarin in essentialist terms often referred to having parents who had a primordial understanding of their ethnic Chinese identity. However, our data also suggests that this perspective offers only a partial explanation. Almost all of the respondents spoke about the rise of China’s global economic position as a forward-looking impetus for learning Mandarin. In this sense, Mandarin came to be seen not *just* as an ethnic language tied to one’s ethnic identity, but also as a *lingua franca* for the impending “Asian century” where China’s dominance was implicitly assumed.

Nevertheless, there is still some way to go before the Chinese language sheds its historical baggage as the “ethnic minority’s language”, especially in Southeast Asia. Our study finds that there are similar challenges to Chinese language-learning in Brunei as there are in neighbouring countries where the Chinese are an ethnic minority, such as Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines (Hoon & Kuntjara, 2019; Hou, 2012; Yang, 2014; Zhang, 1995). These challenges include a lack of unified Chinese language curriculum in schools with a long-term objective, a lack of Chinese language resources relevant to the context of the country, a shortage of adequately trained and compensated teachers catering to the specific learning needs of the students, a lack of a Mandarin-speaking language environment, an inconsistent level of Chinese language competency and interest among students, a lack of creative pedagogy in stimulating interest in the language, and limited class hours dedicated to Chinese language. In sum, there is a lack of educational resources and a supportive socio-cultural environment to encourage and facilitate Chinese language-learning in schools. We argue that it is the cumulative effects of these educational and non-educational institutional barriers that hamper the development of an effective and comprehensive Chinese language-learning environment in Brunei.

More importantly, our findings suggest that it is important to understand the ethno-cultural and ethno-political contexts within which the Chinese language-learning of ethnic minorities must be situated. Observers have highlighted that national language policy is political. For example, it can be used “to maintain one particular ethnic group in power” (Watson, 2007), and it can also “accelerate language loss” (Sonntag & Cardinal, 2015, p. 5). Indeed, as Gellman (2019, p. 526) highlights, language is “an intimate conveyor of intergenerational and intra-communal memory”. Decades of marginalisation as unrecognised citizens and residents have progressively eroded the ethno-cultural and linguistic heritage of the ethnic Chinese community in Brunei. The student respondents exhibited a general reluctance to learn Chinese – or, at best, a superficial reiteration of their parents’ motivations for them to learn the language. Even their parents showed largely instrumental motivations in this regard. This suggests that the lack of an open and supportive educational, socio-cultural and political environment inadvertently contributes to the intergenerational erosion of ethnic-minority language education.

Whither “Mandarin Fever”?

With regards to the Philippines, Kotah (2016) suggests that there is a need for a paradigm shift from teaching Chinese as mother tongue to teaching Chinese as a second language. Our study reveals that this is already taking place in Brunei through the availability of Chinese II and Chinese III for students of Chinese descent in Chinese schools. However, our findings demonstrate that the enthusiasm and motivation for Chinese language-learning have not significantly increased. Our findings therefore suggest that the rise of China has had a limited impact on Chinese language-learning among Chinese students and parents in Brunei at this stage. A plausible explanation for this is that the cumulative institutional barriers are relatively entrenched, and there may be a time lag before the effects become evident. This highlights the importance of contextualising any analyses of “Mandarin Fever” to the specific ethno-cultural and ethno-political contexts of the location under study.

Nevertheless, our exploration of the emergent interest among non-Chinese students and students of mixed ethnic genealogies in Chinese language-learning suggests that the rise of China may have potential longer-term impacts on Chinese language-learning in Brunei as a whole. With the continuing rise of China and increasing trade exchanges with Brunei, it remains an open question whether attitudes towards learning Chinese will change in the future.

Notes

1. For example, in 2002 the Indonesian government declared its support for Chinese language education and for Sinology departments to be established in Indonesian universities, triggering a proliferation of after-school and after-work Mandarin courses (Hoon & Kuntjara, 2019); in 2011, Thailand’s Ministry of Education was reported to have adopted a policy encouraging schools to offer the Chinese language (Asia News Monitor, 2011); and schools in Vietnam started offering the Chinese language to students from Grades 3 to 12 in the 2017 school year (Xinhua, 2016).
2. The Malay population includes seven sub-ethnic groups (Brunei, Kedayan, Murut, Tutong, Belait, Dusun and Bisaya) who are constitutionally recognised as the *Puak Jati* (indigenous groups) in the Brunei Nationality Act of 1961 – generally understood to mean “rightful heirs” of the country. “Other” groups include the Iban and Penan ethnicities, who are indigenous to Borneo but not to Brunei.
3. PRs can own land leases for up to 60 years.
4. Public education is free for Brunei citizens and PRs at the primary and secondary levels, but not at the tertiary level. Brunei citizens who enrol in local public universities enjoy a full fee waiver and a monthly allowance.
5. Although this is a compulsory subject, schools offer two to three levels of proficiency to suit students’ needs.
6. In this article, we use “Mandarin” interchangeably with “the Chinese language”.
7. Switched to Malay medium in 1995.
8. Those holding committee positions in Chinese associations, guilds and chambers of commerce may require a more advanced command of Mandarin.
9. As we show later, the phrase “at least” is often repeated in students’ articulations of the reasons to learn Mandarin.
10. Some teachers came to Brunei as fresh graduates without any teaching experience. Some mainland Chinese teachers came through overseas teaching programmes under the Office of Chinese Language Council International (*Hanban*) or the Chinese Overseas Affairs Office.

11. Foreign teachers hold renewable fixed-term employment visas. As explained earlier, given Brunei's stringent citizenship and PR policies, it is highly unlikely that they could attain permanent residence in Brunei.
12. We are aware that there are alternative and more recent theories on second or heritage language-learning motivations (see Comanaru & Noels, 2009, p. 133–135). Nevertheless, we find the instrumental-integrative model useful in the context of this case study.

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