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Musing on the Sinophone: From Pulai to Portland and Beyond

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Abstract

The Sinophone has become an increasingly visible term in scholarly publications with a wide range of applications and meanings. This paper begins with an examination of definitions associated with the Sinophone, comparing it with key alternative Chinese studies frameworks and with the seemingly parallel concepts of Francophone and Anglophone, which display strategic differences. Adopting an historic and ethnographic view of the Sinophone, the paper's second section demonstrates how languages made a difference in the long-term adaptations of overseas Chinese in two distinctly different settings: Pulai, Malaysia, and Portland, Oregon in the U.S. The paper's final section explores the future of the Sinophone, focusing on the challenges of retaining Sinitic language abilities beyond the first generation of overseas residence, drawing on the literature of minority language retention.

Keywords: Sinophone; Chinese Malaysian; Chinese American; language retention

Introduction

The Sinophone has become an increasingly visible term in scholarly publications with a wide range of applications and meanings. As discussed in more detail below, while Sinophone may refer in a basic sense to Sinitic language speakers anywhere in the world, more theoretical Sinophone frameworks advocate a stance that is critical of previous approaches to understanding the Chinese

experience outside of the core of Han China (Shih, 2010). For many scholars, the term Chinese diaspora is particularly problematic, suggesting a type of continuing connection among overseas populations to their native roots. Sinophone proponents advocate instead a focus on the diverse localised understandings and experiences that have shaped Chinese speaking residents on the fringes of Mainland China's Han societies. Although this focus on local cultural adaptations is nothing new for scholars of overseas Chinese, paying attention to the expressions of these experiences through Sinitic language arts and literature has produced a series of innovative studies (Bernards, 2012; Groppe, 2013; Hee, 2019; Shih, 2007).

Meanwhile, as a scholar trained in the disciplines of history and anthropology, I have found myself wondering what the concept of the Sinophone can offer to our understanding of overseas Chinese experiences outside of the domains of literary and artistic production. How does viewing overseas Chinese experiences through the lens of shifting Sinitic language practices offer new insights into not only local adaptations, but also a comparative framework that highlights common trends and challenges? What are the limitations of this approach and how do these limitations lead to further questions about the future of the Sinophone? The following essay begins with an examination of definitions and constructs associated with the Sinophone, comparing it with alternative Chinese studies frameworks and to the seemingly parallel concepts of Francophone and Anglophone, from which it differs in important ways. Most theoretical debates about the Sinophone occur within the field of literary studies, and here I have benefited from Flair Donglai Shi's useful distinction between Sinophone as theory and Sinophone as history (2021:7), and I have found it useful for the purposes of this analysis to adopt the framework of the later. The paper's second section demonstrates the multiple ways that Sinitic and other languages shaped the experiences of residents in two contrasting overseas Chinese communities during different periods of time: the Malaysian Hakka community of Pulai, and the Chinese residents of Portland, Oregon. Their distinctive features are further highlighted by placing them within the broader linguistic contexts of Chinese experiences in Malaysia and North America. The paper's final section explores the future of the Sinophone, focusing on the challenges of retaining Sinitic language abilities beyond the first generation of overseas residence, drawing specifically on the literature of heritage language education and minority language retention.

Constructing the Sinophone

It would seem that Sinophone has become the *nom de jour* for a wide variety of Chinese peoples throughout the world. A search of the Portland State University library website in December 2020 produced some 1,464 results, with 1,918 results by January 2022. While noting that some entries

are listed more than once, these large numbers and their titles document the wide range of meanings now associated with this term. As expected, many entries use Sinophone in reference to Sinitic language speakers previously designated as overseas Chinese, but the term is also used for multiple literary and film studies set in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Focusing on Sinitic language speakers, the Sinophone designation ranges from historic descriptions of cultural interchanges on the Silk Road; to International Relations Theory scholars who write in Chinese, regardless of ethnicity or nationality; to students of Chinese language. Further papers and edited volumes identify Queer Sinophone Studies as well as Sinophone Musical Worlds.

Sinophone is in many respects just the most recent in a series of terms/frameworks related to the expansion of scholarly interest in overseas Chinese beginning in the 1990s. A growing awareness of China's increasing economic and political power encouraged the development of new frameworks to better understand Chinese identities/positionality in more global terms, including Cultural China (Tu, 1994), Greater China (Harding, 1993), Transnational Chinese (Ong & Nonini, 1997) and the Chinese Diaspora, a term that has garnered wide usage, although not without debate. The diasporic framework has in some cases been productively used to examine the diversity of overseas Chinese experiences (Wang, 1999) and to highlight the transnational and global connections of Chinese networks that transcend ties to specific nation states (McKeown, 1999). However, when used as a noun, the term Chinese diaspora can also tend to homogenise extremely diverse adaptations of Chinese over time and space, while continuing to reference ancestral origins in China.

Shih Shu-Mei explicitly critiques the framework of Chinese diaspora as she introduces the theory of the Sinophone in her 2007 monograph and in subsequent published papers (Shih, 2007; 2010; 2013). One of Shih's main goals is to decentre the interpretations of Sinophone literature and culture from comparisons with the literary and cultural traditions of mainland China, focusing instead on local sources of hybridisation (2007). Shih's Sinophone would embrace all Chinese speakers/readers/writers outside of China (or pre-1997 China), including Hong Kong and Taiwan, as well as the Han speaking ethnic minorities in China proper. While Shih's approach has inspired many, her theorisation of the Sinophone has also drawn critics, among them the literary historian, David Der-wei Wang, who notes the linguistic heterogeneity within Chinese Han culture and suggests a different conceptualisation of the Sinophone that could include mainland authors who "are also concerned with the changing meanings of Chineseness amid rapid mass urbanisation and internal migration in China" (Shi, 2021, p. 313). Critiquing Shih's theory of Sinophone from another perspective, Shi questions whether, given China's isolation during the Cold War period, it has consistently remained the "exclusive hegemonic centre of Chinese cultural and knowledge productions?" (2021, p. 317).

Sinophone suggests parallels with similar terms that have a longer history of scholarly

usage, in particular Francophone, Anglophone, and Lusophone, which were initially developed in reference to speakers and writers of these languages in post-colonial settings. Like Sinophone, the definitions of these terms, particularly Francophone and Anglophone can vary, as they refer to language practices that have emerged in response to divergent types of internal and external stimuli. Cecile Vigouroux (2013) identifies at least three distinctively different types of Francophones that include Quebec descendants of French settlers; Caribbean populations, where French became a Creole lingua franca among people from diverse language backgrounds; and the former French colonies in Africa, where the use of French in government and higher education has made it the language of certain elite groups. Individuals and groups that identify as Anglophone in places like Singapore, India or the Philippines may have their roots in British or American colonialism, yet the global spread of English and fluent English speakers far beyond these original colonies is more the product of global capitalism than of previous colonial experiences (Wright, 2004). In an effort to link the Sinophone framework with the postcolonial frameworks of Francophone, Anglophone, and Lusophone, Shih points to the Han colonised minorities in China who have adopted the Han Sinitic language, as well as the settler colonialism of Chinese migrants to Taiwan, Singapore, and in certain respects to other parts of Southeast Asia (2013). Nevertheless, a key critical difference that sets the Sinophone apart from Francophone, Anglophone and others, is that Sinitic languages were never adopted to any extent by colonised subjects outside of China and thus remain in overseas settings almost entirely the domain of ethnic Chinese. Even as linguistic practices have become localised and hybridised, Sinitic languages have not developed as a broader lingua franca in settings beyond the ethnic Chinese sphere. The reasons for this are multiple, and we will return to further discussion of this point in the last section of the paper.

The theoretic definitions of the Sinophone used for the purposes of literary analysis by Shih and others, particularly those that include majority Chinese speaking societies within the Sinophone, are not particularly useful in considering the special linguistic and cultural challenges of overseas Chinese Sinophones in societies dominated by non-Sinitic speakers. Thus, while acknowledging that the inclusion/exclusion of a variety of Sinitic writers from various parts of the Chinese speaking world may fit the purposes of literary Sinophone theories, viewing the Sinophone in terms of historic and linguistic adaptations outside of the core Sinitic territories of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, raises somewhat different questions about the role of language in overseas adaptations, and the forces that influenced linguistic retention and adaptations. In the following section, I apply a historic Sinophone lens to the two distinctively different overseas Chinese communities with which I am most familiar, the rural Pulai community of Malaysia and the urban Chinese of Portland, Oregon. The divergent paths of these two communities underscores the complex mix of internal and external factors that have shaped the Sinophone practices and identities of community residents. My comparative analysis focuses more specifically on the following questions. First, how did the

local environment encourage and reward different language skills and how did this change with time? Second, in addition to oral skills, what role did educational options and literacy play in Sinophone reproduction, and how did this vary with gender and social class? Third, how were Sinitic language practices shaped by the complexities of linguistic and political divisions among Chinese themselves, and once again, how has this changed with time?

Pulai: Introduction

Situated in the interior of Kelantan state in northeast Peninsular Malaysia, the Pulai community was originally settled by 18th century Hakka goldminers who mined the river valleys spreading south from the state capital of Kota Bharu. From their initial arrival in Malaya, these Hakka miners would have encountered a multilingual environment, in which they needed to rely on Hokkien speaking merchants and Malay brokers to obtain the necessary supplies and permissions to support their mining endeavours. We can surmise that some individuals (Hakka, Hokkien, Malay?) acquired sufficient multilingual skills to facilitate these transactions. By the turn of the 20th century, Pulai was the major settlement and trading post in southern Kelantan, with Chinese engaged in both padi farming and gold mining.

The bulk of the data in the following discussion comes from my field notes, inscribed during my initial year-long fieldwork in Pulai in 1978 and in multiple visits of weeks and months in the subsequent 30 years. Aside from household interviews, which were largely conducted in Hakka, the majority of my primary data came from observations and daily conversations, largely in Mandarin. Because the linguistic trajectories of Pulai residents varied, both individually and over time, it is useful to examine these practices during four distinct periods of Pulai history: 1) early settlement up to 1950; 2) settlement outside of Pulai between 1950 and 1970; 3) Pulai in 1978; and 4) Pulai in the 1980s and 1990s.

Pulai: Early Settlement to 1950

Pulai was from early days a Hakka dominant region. The few non-Hakka Chinese who settled in the area quickly acquired Hakka language skills and by the second generation spoke only Hakka. The Siamese women from the north and local Orang Asli women who married Pulai men also learned Hakka, and their assimilation into Pulai families was symbolised in their Chinese names written on ancestral altars. Reportedly, some Malay neighbours and Orang Asli also spoke some Hakka, which would have been useful in various types of economic exchanges.

For Pulai miners and farmers in the isolated interior, oral Malay skills were not necessary for daily communication, but individuals who acquired them could use Malay for profitable advantage in various types of middleman positions, including that of Kapitan and court interpreter. Appointed by the Malay royalty, Pulai Kapitans were selected for their Malay skills, rather than wealth or

community prestige, and this position brought special economic opportunities, as evidenced by the land records showing that the last Kapitan acquired considerable property during his tenure in office (Carstens, 1998). Malay skills were also useful for long distance trade. The son of the last Pulai Kapitan reminisced about accompanying his Malay speaking Chinese mother on riverine trading trips to Kota Bharu, an unusual practice for Pulai women, who were expected to focus on domestic labour. It is difficult to judge how many Pulai individuals spoke Malay but we can assume that men (and women) with ambitions beyond farming and gold washing understood its value.

There is no record of 19th century literacy in Pulai. The first schoolteacher, Wen Luk, arrived in the late 19th or early 20th century, bringing with him new possibilities for linguistic and cultural literacy for second-generation Pulai children. Claiming to hold a *xiu cai* degree (the lowest level degree in China's imperial examination system), Wen Luk and the teachers who followed taught classical Confucian texts in Hakka. Wen Loke also reputedly composed the original collection of temple prayers used in temple rituals honouring Guanyin and other local deities. A female teacher, Wen Ah Chong, said to have been educated by her father, also began teaching classical literacy in the 1920s. Families with sufficient resources paid for their sons' education, sometimes for only two years but sometimes for much longer. The more practical modern style of education, developed in China in the early 20th century, arrived in Pulai in the 1930s, with new teachers from China and with teachers sponsored by the British, who taught in Mandarin and English. School fees were a major barrier for poorer families, leading in at least one case to alternative outcomes. One young Pulai son from a poor family, who was sponsored for a free education in a left-wing school in Merapoh, became a jungle guerrilla and prominent leader with the Malayan Communist Party.

Education in Pulai was widely valued for sons, judging by the number of men in my interview data who reported some literacy.[1] However, even with a female school teacher, most Pulai families chose not to educate their daughters. Sometimes girls took matters into their own hands. Mrs. Kiow, born in 1919, was initially taught to read by her mother, who had been taught by her father, but Mrs. Kiow also described sitting outside the room where her brother received his lessons and teaching herself as she followed along with classical texts in the family almanac. Like others, Mrs. Kiow said that old style education instilled morality and one could tell educated people by their good manners. And for Mrs. Kiow, basic literacy enabled her to write Hakka folksongs in a notebook that she clearly treasured. Mrs. Sun, born in 1930, received a scant two years of schooling in English and Mandarin before the Japanese occupation but through further self-study taught herself to read Chinese newspapers and write letters. And in another instance, my closest female friend in Pulai, Mrs. Gan, born in 1934, was never formally educated, but spoke to me in Mandarin and had elementary reading and writing skills in Chinese. Like Mrs. Kiow, she collected Hakka folksongs, asking friends to write the lyrics of songs she particularly liked.

The Japanese occupation from 1941 to 1945 brought Pulai villagers into close contact with anti-Japanese communist fighters. In the years that followed, repeated communist incidents in the Pulai area led to the eventual expulsion of Pulai families and their resettlement in three different locations: the southern state of Johor; nearby Gua Musang; and a new village in Terengganu. For the next 15 years, Pulai families in Johor and Terengganu found themselves in contact and competition with the broader Malayan society, where their limited linguistic abilities, education and skills presented major liabilities.

The Emergency: 1950 to Early 1960s

The core of the Pulai community was resettled in a new village in Terengganu, an east coast state whose Chinese minority were mostly Hokkien speakers. Left to fend for themselves after six months of government-funded labour, their lack of linguistic skills created a grim situation. As Hakka speakers, even shopping in the Hokkien dominant Terengganu Chinese shops was difficult. While Mr. Wen, the headman, used his Malay skills to gain employment with the government agricultural department, most found themselves consigned to temporary low-paying manual labour jobs. Some individuals, mostly younger men, picked up new language skills in Hokkien, Malay, and Mandarin that widened their employment opportunities, although a majority remained in low skilled jobs. One woman, Mrs. Gan, mastered enough Malay to pass the test for a truck driver's license, but gave up this opportunity when she returned with her husband's family to Pulai. School-age children attended the local Malay medium primary school, with private Chinese lessons in the afternoons. While a few sons advanced to Malay medium secondary school, and in one case a private Chinese high school, for most Pulai children limited primary education remained the norm.

Pulai villagers resettled in the southern state of Johor were hired as rubber tappers on different rubber estates, where they were exposed to a variety of different Chinese topolects, encouraging new linguistic and social skills that widened employment opportunities, especially for the younger generation. Schooling was again available, and interview data shows that many children, both male and female, received six years of primary level education. Poverty, however, still played a role in educational opportunities. One woman related how her family sent her to work as a servant in a Singapore family at age ten. While there she managed to learn to read by matching the lyrics from popular songs from sheet music to what she heard on the radio. Although never formally educated, this woman spoke Mandarin (and other dialects), read Chinese newspapers, and headed the woman's branch of the Malaysian Chinese Association in Gua Musang in the 1980s.

Beginning in the early 1960s, Ulu Kelantan was declared safe for resettlement, and many Pulai families gradually returned, bringing their children to a village with a single school teacher, a one-room school, and rural isolation.

The Sinophone World of 1978 Pulai

The hundred or so families residing in Pulai in 1978, with a total population of more than 800, lived in a world whose seclusion was intensified by a 12-hour daily curfew, following the arrest of the Pulai headman and two dozen other men in 1976 accused of aiding communist guerrillas in the surrounding jungles. Hakka remained the language of community affairs, from casual conversations, to temple rituals, to community meetings, with the exception of school committee meetings conducted in Mandarin. While both Mandarin and Malay were used in meetings with local officials, the key points were invariably translated into Hakka.

Attitudes towards Malay language were mixed, with Malay considered important, but not at the expense of Mandarin or even English. Communication with government officials in Malay was usually conducted through the Pulai headman, although individuals found that simple Malay skills were useful in dealing with soldiers and police on the road heading to Pulai. Lack of fluency in Malay posed a special problem for those Pulai individuals who did not hold Malaysian citizenship, due to the loss or mismanagement of their birth records during the Japanese period. The citizenship examination, conducted in Malay, was said to be practically impossible to pass, greatly limiting employment and land ownership options for those in this category.

The Mandarin medium Pulai primary school offered instruction for students in grades one to four; classes in grades five and six required travel to or housing in Gua Musang, eight miles away, at some expense to the family. It was not uncommon for Pulai children to cease their education at grade four. Pulai students who enrolled in the Malay medium middle school in Gua Musang required an extra year of Malay language classes after primary six, which was seen as a further hurdle to continued education. The lack of options in more advanced Chinese education was bemoaned by some who noted the failed application for the Chinese medium Merdeka University discussed in Chinese newspapers that year.

The literate Sinophone world of Pulai was clearly evidenced in both temple and community affairs. A secretary kept hand-written minutes at all community meetings. During the annual ten-day Guanyin temple festival, hand-written proclamations were affixed to temple walls, and temporary altars were inscribed with the hand-written names of deities specially invited to the festival. Written petitions to the deities were chanted by ritual specialists before their fiery conveyance heavenward. The men responsible for writing announcements and ritual petitions held respected positions in temple affairs, as did those who kept financial records at tables set up in the temple throughout the festival. By contrast, less educated men who laboured in the temple kitchen preparing vegetarian food and ritual offerings performed lower status jobs.

Shifting Practices in 1980s and 1990s Pulai

The next twenty years brought significant changes to Pulai. The decision to proceed with large

scale government supported gold mining on previously farmed rice land shifted the Pulai economy away from self-subsistence to reliance on rubber and other enterprises such as cocoa and fruit trees, whose prices rose and fell with world markets. While Hakka remained the major language of village affairs, Mandarin and Malay were an increasing part of the mix. Malay was the medium of communication with the Thai Malay rubber tappers employed by a number of Pulai families. And increasing emphasis on education meant that in at least one family, Mandarin rather than Hakka was spoken to children to enhance their readiness for Mandarin schooling. The languages of transnational media added further diversity to local language domains, first through the Cantonese Hong Kong soap operas and martial arts productions viewed on videocassette players and then, by the late 1990s, through a variety of television programmes, including the satellite television of Mandarin Singapore productions.

The addition of grades five and six to the Pulai primary school enhanced educational opportunities. Where families in the past had tended to privilege the education of sons, by the late 1980s some Pulai daughters continued in school longer than their brothers, completing lower middle school in Gua Musang, which qualified them for jobs as clerks in Chinese logging companies. Female education also made a difference in the more public roles that a few women now played in Pulai. In the late 1980s two young women with secondary school education were appointed to the Pulai development committee, breaking a pattern of exclusively male committee membership. And during the 1990 temple festival two young women, not raised in Pulai but married to Pulai men, helped in writing names at the end of temple prayers.

By the late 1990s, families who valued education paid for extra tutoring for their sons and daughters and those with resources made plans to send them to better schools outside the area: public secondary schools in Kuala Lumpur and Kota Bharu; the private Chinese high school in Kota Bharu; or even as far away as Australia. Most families, however, had to settle for local options in education. For young men from poorer families, the challenges of Malay medium secondary school, with few guarantees of gainful employment as a result of this education, encouraged them to end schooling at grade six and make arrangements for apprenticeships as mechanics or electricians through connections with previous Pulai residents in Terengganu, Kuala Lumpur, and elsewhere.

Pulai in the Context of Malaysia

The Sinophone world of Pulai described in the previous pages developed in the context of the wider Malaysian Chinese experience of which it was a part. The earliest Chinese residents, mostly merchants and traders, spoke a creolised contact language that combined Malay and Hokkien known as Baba Malay. However, the large influx of Chinese migrants from the mid-19th century produced communities where Chinese topolects such as Hokkien, Cantonese, and Hakka became the majority language.[2] Speakers of minority topolects usually developed polylingual skills. In

mixed topolects settings it was not unusual for individuals to have at least partial mastery of several languages, which might also include Malay and English.

Chinese education in Malaya and Singapore began with community schools in the late 18th century, where boys were instructed in classical Confucian texts in their native topolects. Education options expanded in the early 20th century for the growing numbers of local born children with modern types of schools established in cities and towns (Tan, 1997). The British colonial government declined to support Chinese schools financially, yet eventually sought to control them as the nationalist politics of Chinese teachers and schools were deemed a threat. English medium education was made available to a small number of Chinese elites. As Malaysia moved toward independence in the late 1940s and 1950s, the future of Chinese education became central to fierce debates over the ultimate shape of Malaysian society (Tan, 1997). In the end, although the Malaysian Constitution recognised Malay as the sole national language and the primary form of national education, agreement was reached to allow vernacular education at the primary school level in Mandarin, Malay, Tamil and English. In the early 1970s, English medium education at primary and secondary levels was gradually eliminated and Malay medium education became the only option in secondary schools and universities. These policies, coupled with the strong Malay centric view of the nation promulgated in the Malaysian National Culture Policy of 1971 alarmed Chinese Malaysians and fostered increasingly intense support for Chinese schools and Chinese education. Whereas a growing number of Chinese families had previously enrolled their children in English medium schools, which constituted a seamless path to English medium higher education, families now returned their children to Chinese primary schools in significant numbers. By the late 1990s, over 90% of Chinese Malaysian children received their primary education in Mandarin, with additional lessons in Malay and English. Most Chinese students continued their education in Malay medium middle schools, in part because qualifications from private Chinese high schools were not recognised by the Malaysian government. For several decades Taiwan universities offered the only opportunity for higher education in Chinese, but these options expanded in the 1990s as universities in mainland China began opening their doors, and Chinese Studies departments expanded in Malaysia's private colleges and universities.

Chinese Malaysian media also played an important role in supporting and shaping Sinophone Malaysian society. Early 20th century newspapers carried constant news of the tremendous changes and challenges in China, spurring new forms of Chinese nationalism, which profited from the support of Chinese overseas. The media's singular attention to China pivoted in the 1950s to a new focus on topics more germane to the Malaysian and Southeast Asian setting (Carstens, 1988). By the end of the 20th century, Chinese Malaysian newspapers boasted a wider readership than either English or Malay newspapers (Carstens, 2005). Meanwhile, from the 1980s on, the popularity of transnational Chinese language media further enhanced Malaysian Sinophone worlds (Carstens, 2003).

It is important to note that outside of the Chinese core of the China and the territories of Taiwan and Hong Kong, Malaysia currently provides the only case of a multigenerational Chinese educated community, where Chinese remains the first and dominant language of a sizable population. It is also important to note the continued challenges that Chinese Malaysians face in nurturing their Sinophone culture, including the need to constantly defend Chinese schools on multiple levels. The growth of Chinese Malaysian literature has also not been straightforward. As Wang Gungwu observed, the perceived connection of Chinese authors to leftist sympathies dissuaded many local intellectuals from pursuing a literary path (2005). And although Chinese Malaysian literature is now receiving greater attention in Malaysia, most of its authors have relied on the literary scene in Taiwan as their main support. Chinese Malaysian children face the challenge of being educated in three languages: Mandarin, Malay, and English. One result is that Mandarin is increasingly replacing Chinese topolects as a family language (Wang, 2012). Government preference for hiring ethnic Malays makes the Malay language less useful, but English skills, which are required for most professional occupations, are now increasingly important.

Meanwhile, Chinese languages have remained central to the long-term identity of Chinese Malaysians. The Pulai example highlights the linguistic experiences of one Malaysian community where a variety of linguistic skills, not always equally shared, gave access to a range of different opportunities over time. The Portland experience, described in the following section, similarly highlights variations in language identities and opportunities, but with a very different outcome for Sinophone Chinese residing away from Chinese language homelands.

The Sinophone World of Portland, Oregon: Introduction

Like Pulai, gold mining played an important role in Portland's early Chinese history, bringing large numbers of Chinese to the west coast with the California gold rush in the early 1850s and soon after to gold mining areas in southern and eastern Oregon. Portland Chinese merchants provisioned these Chinese miners along with subsequent rural Chinese labourers. Between 1880 and 1900 Chinese accounted for more than 9% of the total Portland population, with as many as 10,000 Chinese residents during winter months, making it the second largest Chinese community in the United States (Wong, 2004). Nevertheless, despite what might have appeared as promising beginnings, Portland's trajectory as an enduring Sinophone community developed very differently from that of Pulai. By the early decades of the 20th century, the insistently harsh restrictions on immigration, marriage, property ownership, and citizenship took their toll, and the number of Portland Chinese declined significantly, leaving a community dominated by aging bachelors and families whose offspring increasingly used English as their primary language.

Focusing on Portland Chinese through the lens of language practices and strategies illustrates well the potentials and challenges of Sinophone continuity in the English dominant setting of North

America. The following account focuses on Portland Chinese during three distinctive periods of time: the first 50 years up to 1900, dominated by single male migrants seeking their fortune; the period from 1900 to 1950, when a second generation struggled to find their place; and late 20th to early 21st century, with a newly diverse Chinese population and multiple opportunities for Chinese language education. Working with historical sources on issues of language among Portland Chinese can be frustrating, both because the sources generally have little specific to say about Chinese language practices and because they commonly do not distinguish between different Chinese topolects or modes of education. My discussion thus draws both on Portland specific accounts and on similar experiences elsewhere that expand our understanding of the multiple ways that languages shaped the lives of Portland Chinese.

The Portland Sinophone World of 1850–1900

As with Chinese immigrants elsewhere in North America, Portland Chinese initially came from areas of the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong province as single men, where patterns of sojourning abroad for economic benefits had a history that predated their arrival in western North America (Bronson and Ho, 2015). Although commonly identified as Cantonese speakers, these Chinese migrants spoke at least three distinctive, mutually unintelligible, variations of the Yue topolects, with further linguistic variation at the subdistrict and village level. The majority of Cantonese speakers in the U.S. before 1930, between 70% and 90%, came from the four districts, known as Sze Yap, where Toishan, the language of Toishan city, dominated over other regional variations (Chan, 1984). Migrants from Sam Yap, which included the provincial capital of Canton and its three surrounding districts, spoke the more prestigious Yuehai, which became the standard for modern Cantonese. A third linguistic group, with migrants from the district of Chungshan, south of Canton, included both native speakers of Chungshan and other inhabitants whose native tongue was Hakka or Min, but who spoke Chungshan as a second language (Chan, 1984). In Chinatowns throughout North America, Chinese migrants drew on native place ties to organise a variety of collective organisations that included clans and district associations, as well as the secret societies known in the U.S. as tongs, which sometimes divided along lines of region and language (Armentrout-Ma,1983). Challenged and circumscribed by legal restrictions, Chinese migrants in turn competed with each other over the limited economic opportunities available in different times and places. Sam Yap merchants, with their connections to Canton and its trade, even though fewer in number "were extremely influential in the Chinese community socially, politically, and economically during the early phase of Chinese immigration to the Pacific Coast prior to the 1890s" (Chan 1984, p. 244). In San Francisco, the three main groups of Sze Yap, Sam Yap and Chung Shan monopolised different types of business, from tailoring, to butchers, laundries, restaurants, and fish retail (Chan, 1984). Although similar detailed information is lacking for linguistically defined occupational

divisions among Portland's Chinese, the pattern was probably similar. At least two regionally based associations were established in Portland in the early period: the Sam Yap Huiguan and the Hoy Yin Huiguan, the latter founded by men from an area southwest of Toishan city.

The Chinese population of Portland in the last decades of the 19th century was shaped socially and economically by legal restrictions at federal, state, and local levels. These restrictions were in large part the product of animus toward Chinese workers from white labourers, themselves often recent immigrants, who feared the economic competition from Chinese migrants and viewed Chinese as alien. The most infamous federal legislation, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, prohibited the immigration of Chinese labourers, who made up the vast majority of migrants, while allowing entry to merchants, students, teachers and diplomats. For those Chinese who managed to arrive and stay in Portland, however long, there was no possibility of becoming an American citizen: the American Naturalization Acts limited naturalised citizenship to free white persons,[3] although American born children could claim citizenship by birth under the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution adopted in 1868. The State of Oregon from the very beginning was not welcoming to Chinese; its initial Constitution in 1859 forbid Chinese ownership of mining claims and real estate, a provision that was overruled by the U.S. Constitution's 14th amendment in 1868 (Clark, 1978). Marriage and the possibility of family formation in Portland were also constrained by legal restrictions. Chinese male migrants, who considered their U.S. sojourn as temporary, typically left their wives in China. The few Chinese women living in the U.S. in the 1850s and 1860s were mainly enslaved prostitutes, prompting passage of the 1875 Page Act, which banned the entry of Chinese women brought to the U.S. for prostitution. Since Customs officials assumed that no honourable Chinese woman would voluntarily seek to enter the U.S., the Page Act complicated entry for all Chinese women, including the wives of migrants and potential marriage partners (Peffer, 1986). Meanwhile, unions with white women, even if they had been desired, were prohibited by the 1866 Oregon anti-miscegenation law, which remained in effect until 1951 (Paulson, 2006).

The primary occupations for the majority of Chinese living in Portland in the last half of the 19th century clustered around jobs that were considered undesirable by white settlers, such as running laundries; working as servants for wealthy white families; growing vegetables in a shantytown area on the fringes of Portland; and serving as contract labour in clearing land, digging ditches, or similar manual labour tasks (Wong, 2004). Most jobs were performed alongside other Chinese, and required no special language skills. Those who interacted with whites as laundrymen, vegetable peddlers, and servants acquired a modicum of English skills that may well have mirrored the pidgin English of the Chinese ports of Hong Kong and Canton (Ngai, 2011). We can also assume that Portland Chinese, like those in San Francisco, incorporated new words into their Chinese vocabulary that reflected the different environments they now inhabited (Chan & Lee, 1981).

Chinese who aspired to rise beyond the status of labourer or small trader found that functional

English skills were an essential tool in the white dominant society, paying potentially handsome dividends for import export merchants, labour contractors, and language interpreters.[4] One way to learn some English was through Christian Mission schools, the first of which opened in Portland in 1869 (Clark, 1978). The Portland schools, like those in San Francisco, which aimed to Christianise the Chinese, offered basic lessons in English literacy that were deemed particularly useful to merchants and their sons (Ngai, 2011). Working for a white family provided a more natural English language environment, and was seen by some as a stepping stone to acquiring the communication skills necessary to getting ahead. Two of Portland's most successful 19th century Chinese merchants, who came to Oregon as labourers, learned English through their contacts with local whites: Moy Back Hin as an employee of Judge Deady and Seid Back as housekeeper and cook in a white family (Wong, 2004).

By the turn of the 20th century, Portland's Chinese population began to shift in several directions: single male labourers were both in less demand and found physical labour increasingly challenging as they aged. Many returned to China, while some headed east to parts of the U.S. where there were less restrictions on Chinese economic activities (Wong, 2004). Census figures show that the Chinese population in Portland fell from 7,841 in 1900 to 1,846 in 1920. This reduction was accompanied by a dramatic shift in gender ratios, from a high of 25 men to one woman in 1910 to a ratio of 2.3 men to one woman in 1930 (Wong, 2004).

Sinophone and Anglophone Worlds of Portland's Chinese: 1900–1950

In the first decades of the 20th century, Portland's Chinese population gradually changed from one dominated by single males to a mix of bachelors and growing number of families, despite the continued barriers to female migration. While census figures show only 51 Chinese wives in Portland in 1910 (Wong, 2004), by 1938 Bessie Lee documented 176 Portland Chinese families (1938) and Liu reported 220 Chinese families in a total Chinese population of 2,500 in 1949 (1951). There was also a significant shift in living environments, as Chinese families in the 1920s and 1930s began to move out of the dirty and crowded conditions of Portland's Chinatown into a residential neighbourhood on Portland's southeast side. Their white neighbours were reportedly tolerant (Lee, 1938), but economic and social activities continued to be centered in Chinatown and with Chinese families and friends in segregated venues (Lee, 1938).

Cantonese topolects remained the dominant form of communication in Chinatown and in Chinese families, even as Chinese children, educated in public schools from the early 20th century, acquired an English fluency that was rare among first-generation parents. Some merchant families sent their sons (and sometimes daughters) to be educated in China, but they were in the minority. Portland's first Chinese school, started in 1907 by teachers sent by the Chinese government, offered night classes in Chinese language and culture to both adults and children, although parents

expressed greater excitement in learning the Confucian *Analects* than their offspring (Liu, 1951). In 1910 the Chinese Consolidated Benefit Association (CCBA) included six classrooms for its Chinese language school in their new association building. Conducted after regular public school hours, the school taught children basic Chinese literacy skills while also offering lessons in Chinese etiquette as well as Chinese social studies, history, and geography (Lee, 1938). The type of Chinese language used in Portland schools is not specified, but it most likely was the more prestigious Sam Yap Cantonese, which would have presented difficulties to the majority Toishan speaking Portland students. Lee reported in 1938 that "very few pupils show much interest in Chinese studies. Most of them attend against their will" (1938, p. 76). Liu's research on Portland Chinese families in 1951 offered more specific details on educational practices and Chinese language use. Of the 64 second-generation children interviewed, 10 had been sent to China for education while 46 others had spent between one and 12 years in Chinese classes that supplemented their American education (1951). When Liu asked his informants about Chinese language practices, 82% of both sons and daughters reported frequent use of spoken Chinese. However, Chinese literacy skills were much less developed, with a large gap that favoured males over females, representing the continuing tendency to favour education of sons over daughters (1951).

Chinese reading materials in Portland during this time period very likely included the San Francisco Chinese newspapers, *Chung Sai Yat Po*, published from 1900 to 1951 and *Sai Gai Yat Po*, published from 1909 to 1969, which espoused somewhat different social and political views (Lai, 1987). Marlon Hom asserts that Chinese in America from the late 19th century "actively pursued a literary tradition in their native Chinese language" with literary associations in Chinatowns across America (Hom, 1982, p. 75). However, while there is a record of some literary activity in the 19th century John Day (rural Oregon) community (Chen, 1972), we know nothing of a literary association in Portland itself. The Chinese publications produced in Portland during this period included *The Chinese Language Society Quarterly* published by teachers and students of the CCBA Chinese language school and the *Sing Shan Monthly*, a publication of the Sing Shan club that was organised in the 1930s "to keep young boys off the street" and which "held discussions on art, literature, and social issues" (Manchester, 1978, p. 233). Like other Chinese publications of this time period, the contents of these publications were more China than locally focused.[6] It is possible that Chinese literary journals from San Francisco and New York were available in Portland, including those from the late 1930s that featured the works of leftist activists who espoused a new style of Chinese American writing, independent from the literature of China, and relevant to the lives of those living in Chinatown. Unfortunately, this literature disappeared with the anti-communist attacks of the 1950s, as groups were disbanded and the literature destroyed (Hom, 1982). For American-born Chinese, journals such as the English language *Chinese Reporter* may have been more accessible than the Chinese press.

Up until the end of the Second World War, Portland's Chinese had great difficulty obtaining jobs in the white economy no matter what their educational background, and thus had little choice but to seek employment in Chinatown businesses and from Chinese clients, where their Chinese language skills remained important (Manchester, 1978). The post-war economic boom of the 1950s changed this, allowing the English-educated to move into professional, clerical, and engineering jobs, fostering "the growth of a Chinese American middle class rooted in American society" (Lai, 2010, p. 34). With daily lives dominated by English, the usefulness of Chinese for second- and third-generation Chinese Americans became increasingly restricted to family settings and private life.

21st Century Portland: A Diverse Chinese Landscape

In the decades that followed the Second World War, particularly after the passage of the 1965 immigration act, new waves of Chinese moved into Portland with linguistic backgrounds and education levels that contrasted significantly from those of earlier migrants. Census figures for 2022 record 11,330 Chinese residents in Portland, or 1.7% of a total population of 666,453.[7] The new migrants came from the diverse Chinese settings of Taiwan, Hong Kong, Mainland China, and Southeast Asia, and unlike the single male sojourners of the 19th century, they often came in family units with the intention of remaining in the U.S. With Chinatown now home to a few aging bachelors and a diminishing number of restaurants and groceries, these new Chinese residents settled in neighbourhoods throughout the Portland area.

Rather than uniting an otherwise diverse Chinese population, Chinese language practices and attitudes have more often fostered divisions among Portland Chinese residents, even among those from seemingly similar Cantonese backgrounds. In a 1992 study, Hong Kong Chinese migrants, who were largely of Toishan descent, highlighted their language and linguistic distinctiveness from other Cantonese speakers (particularly old Chinatown Chinese) as the most important component of their Chinese identity (Lo, 1993). Most first-generation Chinese migrants speak some form of Chinese with their children at home; Mandarin is dominant in families from Taiwan and with most Mainland Chinese, while families from Hong Kong, Guangdong province, and some Sino-Vietnamese speak Cantonese topolects. As with previous generations, Chinese children attend English medium public schools, where English becomes their dominant language. A number of different after-school and weekend Chinese language programmes target students from different Chinese backgrounds. The CCBA continues to offer Saturday languages classes at three levels in both Mandarin and Cantonese; the Portland Chinese School, founded in 1975 by a group of families from Taiwan, teaches Chinese literacy to children from Mandarin speaking families through the traditional phonetic script and complex Chinese characters; and the Springleaf Chinese school, founded in 1995, uses the pinyin system and simplified characters of Mainland China.[8]

Portland has long offered classes in Chinese language in its colleges and universities, and through private groups like the Northwest China Council, although their students have tended to be non-Chinese with an interest in China. This pattern continued with Confucius Institute classes, offered on a non-credit basis on the Portland State University campus from 2009 to 2021. In 1998, the first Mandarin immersion programme was established in a public primary school in Portland, with half day instruction in English and Mandarin. Parents (such as myself) hoped that acquiring Chinese language as a regular part of the school experience would eliminate the inconvenience and stigma of after-school Chinese classes and produce confident Mandarin speakers. However, the difficulty of learning Chinese coupled with the lack of a Chinese language environment outside of the classroom made this an impossible task. While it was exciting to watch young students in grades one and two quickly absorb a new language, as their Chinese skills increasingly lagged behind what they were capable of learning more easily in English, students found Chinese lessons less satisfying, and even those who continued with Chinese classes in middle and high school never advanced much beyond what could be attained with two years of university Chinese.

Thus, despite the comparative wealth of Chinese language opportunities, Cantonese and Mandarin remain largely languages of first-generation Chinese families in Portland, rarely heard in public settings beyond Chinese restaurants and groceries. The contrast between Sinophone practices in Pulai and Portland at this point in time is very clear, and it worthwhile to consider what this focus on language issues teaches U.S. both about the role of languages in overseas Chinese community adaptations and the long-term prognosis for Sinophone practices among overseas Chinese beyond first-generation migrants.

Pulai and Portland in Comparative Perspective

Language was clearly a key source of economic and social capital for Chinese sojourners in the 19th century. Coming from linguistically diverse areas of southeastern China, migrants initially settled into social and economic niches with fellow topolects speakers, both with the Hakkas of Pulai and with the various Cantonese topolects of Portland's Chinatown. At different points in time, certain topolects garnered greater social and economic privilege, as with Hakka when Pulai was the dominant community in early 20th century Ulu Kelantan, or with the Sam Yap Cantonese in early American Chinatowns. But situations could change, leaving monolingual speakers at a disadvantage, which Pulai Chinese learned through their experiences in Terengganu and Johor during the Emergency. Eventually, the greatest source of linguistic advantage came from the ability to expand beyond one's native topolects to access wider spheres of influence. In early Pulai, Malay skills were key to attaining the positions of Chinese Kapitan and court interpreter, or conducting successful riverine trading trips to Kota Bharu. In more recent contexts, poor Malay language

skills have served as a barrier to citizenship for some or to further secondary school education. In early Portland, migrants who hoped to advance beyond working class jobs cultivated the English skills that gave them access to more lucrative middleman positions such as import-export merchant, labour contractor, and Chinese interpreter.

Opportunities for enhancing one's linguistic skills were themselves often dependent on economic and social capital, particularly in the case of formal education, although individual ingenuity could also play a role, something that was especially conspicuous with Pulai females who wished to become literate. The accounts of Pulai and Portland provide numerous examples of wealthier families investing in educational opportunities, especially for sons, which not only enhanced their economic prospects, but brought social prestige. Access to different educational options, both formal and informal, could make a big difference in individual lives, from the poor Pulai son who attended a left-wing sponsored school, to Chinese servants learning English in Portland families, to the Portland Chinese whose church sponsored English classes led to Christian conversion. In the long run, it was the languages of public education that played the most crucial role in language retention and language shift, as they connected individuals most directly to the whole range of linguistic-specific social and economic opportunities within the wider society.

While it is obvious that the Chinese in Portland were forced to fit into a monolingual English dominant environment, even as the numeric and economic strength of Malayan Chinese fostered the creation of a multilingual society, these linguistic outcomes were amplified by the different patterns of Chinese migration to the U.S. and Malaysia after the 1950s. Unlike the initial Cantonese speaking migrants in Portland, who found common cause in defending their language and culture in the face of Anglo-American discrimination through organisations like the CCBA, the diverse geopolitical and linguistic backgrounds of post-1965 Chinese migrants have hindered a similar coalescence. Thus, there really is no Portland Chinese community but rather a range of different types of Chinese residents who usually see themselves as unique and different. For some second- or third-generation Chinese, the fight for ethnic equality in the U.S. has encouraged links with other Asian minorities, fostering a pan-Asian American identity defined through an Anglophone lens. Malaysian Chinese, by contrast, while also linguistically diverse initially, have not been joined by any significant new migration out of Greater China, and have pulled together in the face of Malay ethnic challenges, with intensified support for Chinese education and Chinese culture. Among Chinese Malaysians, the linguistic shift most evident in recent decades is the expanding use of Mandarin, in private as well as public settings, even as Chinese topolects retain their emotional resonance among family and friends (Carstens, 2019). And on another level, it is important to acknowledge that Mandarin also has its limits for those who seek careers beyond the Chinese speaking areas of the Malaysian and global Chinese economy, with English skills remaining paramount for most professional occupations in urban settings.

It is difficult to predict what the future holds for Chinese languages in Pulai, Portland, or other potential Sinophone settings because language practices are so intricately tied to a range of complex geopolitical, economic, and social factors. In the short term, given Pulai's continued comparative isolation, I would expect that Hakka will remain a community language, along with increasing use of Mandarin, even as those who aspire to seek their fortunes beyond Pulai will inevitably need to draw upon Malay and English skills as well. In Portland, despite the numerous educational opportunities for learning Chinese, it is unlikely that fluency will be retained beyond the first generation, unless there is a dramatic expansion in venues where Chinese language is utilised and valued. This observation prompts the concluding comments in the following section on the challenges faced in language retention for overseas Chinese, drawing on literature from scholars in the reversing language shift movement and from those involved with heritage language education.

Wither the Sinophone?

Given the different trajectories of the two Sinophone communities discussed in the preceding sections, it is useful to ask what the future holds for Sinophone speakers who now live scattered across the globe on every continent. While doing research on multilingual Chinese Malaysians in 2014, a number of people told me that they expected that China's new status as a major economic power would eventually make Mandarin a new global language alongside English. This assumed that Mandarin would become a lingua franca that would necessitate non-Chinese to acquire the skills for global communication. This scenario, however, seems rather unlikely, given the difficulty of Chinese language acquisition and the ubiquity of English as a prime means of communication (spoken, written, mass media, etc.), even among Chinese themselves.

Turning then to the prospects of Chinese language retention beyond the first generation in overseas environments, I believe there are lessons to be learned from those seeking to save threatened languages. Of course, Chinese is hardly a threatened language in its homeland, but the challenge here is one of sustaining it outside of those native settings. Speakers of minority languages in environments dominated by social institutions that require facility in the mainstream language know that there is no avoiding the mainstream language, but aim instead for a bilingual environment where the minority language can also fulfill a range of social functions. Fishman (2001) divides these social functions into those that are more and less powerful, arguing that there are stages in language acquisition and retention that begin with fostering the language in family, friendship, and community circles. However, unless the minority language can expand its use into the areas of more powerful social functions such as employment, higher education, mass media, and government, it will fight an uphill battle in maintaining its social relevance, beyond that of heritage identity. Granted, there are a few places in the U.S. where Chinese migrants from a single place

have clustered, such as Monterey Park and San Jose California, where Taiwanese immigrants have created "islands of culture…with all-Chinese shopping malls and strip malls offering everything from Chinese food shops to bookshops and pharmacies" as well as Chinese "clubs, churches, and newspapers" (Jones, 2014, p. 347). But this is the exception and throughout most of the U.S., except for the old Chinatowns of San Francisco and New York, where less educated recent Chinese migrants continue to cluster, Chinese in the U.S. conduct the majority of their public lives in a monolingual English-speaking environment.

Meanwhile, Chinese heritage education faces continuing challenges in developing and maintaining literacy skills for second- and third-generation children. Because of the ideographic nature of Chinese writing, studies have shown that the oral Chinese skills of family settings do not necessarily help in learning to read and write Chinese (Li & Duff, 2008). Retaining student interest remains a continuing problem, with class sizes dwindling as children grow older. Meanwhile, the variation in styles of characters and orthography that remain tied to geopolitical issues further complicate Chinese-language education. Given these challenges, it is perhaps not surprising that Wong Sau-Ling observes that American Sinophone writers are entirely first-generation immigrant or students, and she knows of no American-born authors who write in Chinese (2013).

Returning to the questions with which this paper began, most specifically the usefulness of the Sinophone lens in understanding adaptations of overseas Chinese, I would make two final points, neither of which are novel but deserve reiteration. First, as witnessed with both the Pulai and Portland examples, even as language remains a core component of ethnic heritage identity, the global nature of our world privileges those who have access to more than one language, and these skills can be attained in multiple ways. Second, the focus on language retention and shift among overseas Chinese highlights the broader connections between language identities and geopolitics, for language is not just about communication but conveys multiple messages that link individual and group identities with the wider social world. The economic and political rise of China in the past three decades has been a major factor in the return and spread of Chinese schools in Southeast Asia and the expansion of Chinese language programmes elsewhere. Nevertheless, as Chinese writers of a leftist bent in the 1950s discovered in the U.S. and Malaysia, the politics of language can change very quickly. The most recent example here is the push back against the Chinese language classes of the Confucian Institute on the Portland State University campus, which flourished briefly and have now disappeared: once again an object lesson that cautions U.S. not to take the Sinophone for granted.

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Notes

1 Household interview data from 76 Pulai families in 1978 included information on the education level, literacy skills, and oral language skills of Pulai family members. Almost 95% of men who

were of school age in the 1920s reportedly receiving some education.

2 Topolect, rather than dialect, is the term that linguists currently prefer for regional Chinese languages such as Hakka, Hokkien, and Cantonese, which are mutually unintelligible and include further regional subdivisions that may also vary widely, as discussed below in reference to Cantonese speakers in the U.S.

3 A series of U.S. Naturalization Acts passed between 1790 and 1802 gave immigrants the right to claim naturalised citizenship, but was limited to free white persons. In 1870 the law was revised to allow Blacks to be naturalised, but still did not include Asians.

4 Although we usually associate wealth with the merchant class, Bronson and Ho (2015: 72) state that "most Chinese who became truly wealthy during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries acquired the bulk of their wealth through labour contracting." According to Ngai (2011: 20–21) successful Chinese interpreters were among the first Chinese to move into the American middle class.

5 Him Mark Lai comments that his San Francisco Chinese school in the 1930s used the Sam Yap topolect of his mother's family, which gave him an advantage over some of his classmates (Lai, 2000: 5).

6 See Chen (1973) for translations of articles from these publications.

7 These figures come from the World Population Review: https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/portland-or-population

8 See the listing for Portland Chinese Schools in the National Directory for K-12 Academics. https://www.k12academics.com/national-directories/chinese-schools/Oregon/Portland

9 This was certainly the case in the programmes that I studied (Carstens, 2013) and has been echoed in research in a Chinese complementary school in the Netherlands (Li & Juffermans, 2014: 103).