
PROFILE OF THE SINGAPORE CHINESE DIALECT GROUPS

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INTRODUCTION

The Singapore society is made up of different ethnic groups who originate mainly from Southeast Asia, China, India and the European countries. Today, the Chinese comprised 77 per cent of the Singapore resident population, the Malays 14 per cent and the Indians 8 per cent. There are also sizeable groups of Eurasians, Arabs and Europeans.

The Chinese in Singapore are a relatively heterogeneous population in terms of dialect origin. There are more than 20 dialect groups here. This paper describes the profile of the three main dialect groups – the Hokkiens, Teochews and Cantonese.

Data are drawn from the Population Censuses 2000 and 1990. Data on basic demographic characteristics for the year 2000 are obtained from the Register-based Census covering all persons who are usual residents of Singapore. Other 2000 data pertain to a 20 per cent sample of households covering only persons present in Singapore.

POPULATION SIZE OF THE DIALECT GROUPS

The dialect group composition of the Singapore Chinese resident population had remained stable in the last decade (Chart 1). The Hokkiens, numbering 1 million in 2000, remained the biggest group by dialect origin among the Singapore Chinese population. The Teochews and Cantonese constituted the next two largest groups, numbering 526,000 and 386,000 respectively. Collectively, these three dialect groups formed three-quarters of the Singapore Chinese population. The remaining one-quarter belonged to one of at least 19 other dialect groups in Singapore.

OLDER AGE STRUCTURE AND MORE FEMALES AMONG THE CANTONESE

The Cantonese stood out among the three main dialect groups. They were older than the Hokkiens and Teochews, and had more females than males. In 2000, the median age of the Cantonese community was 37 years, higher than the other two dialect groups (Table 1). They had a sex ratio of 946 males per 1,000 females whereas the Hokkiens and Teochews had almost equal numbers of males and females.

CHART 1 CHINESE RESIDENT POPULATION BY DIALECT GROUP

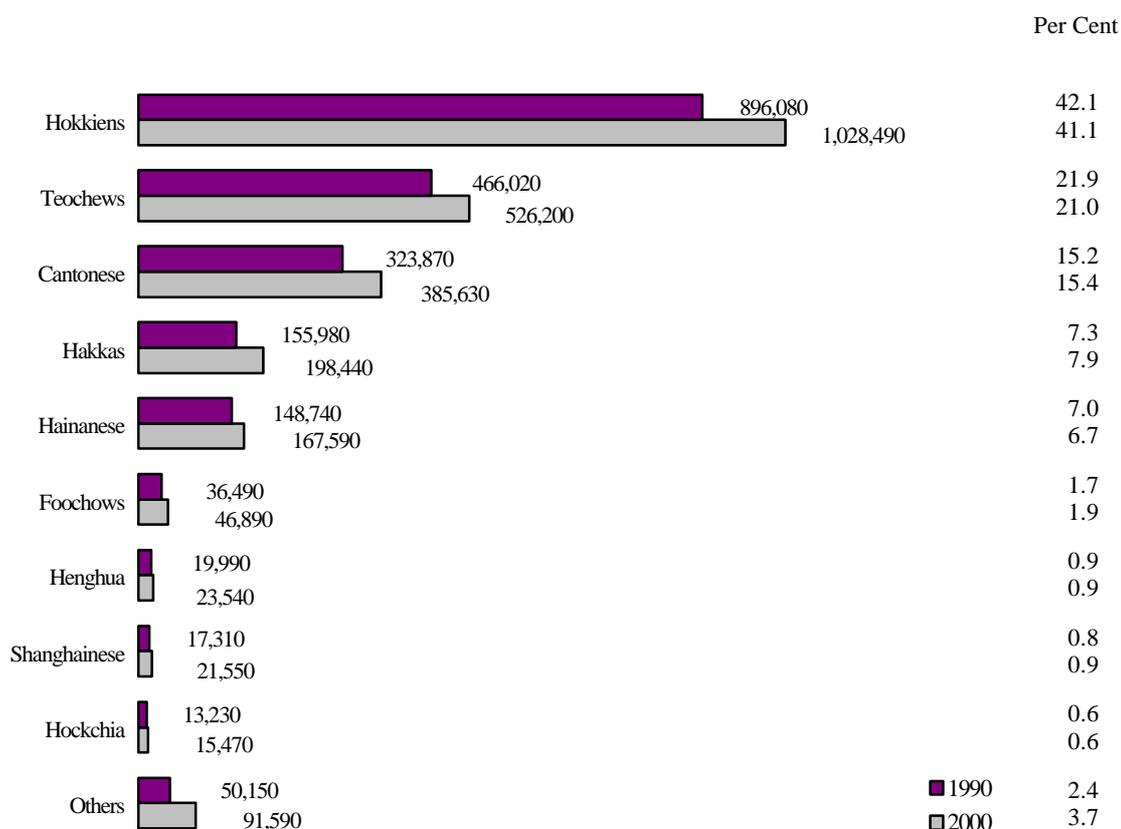


TABLE 1 DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MAIN CHINESE DIALECT GROUPS

	Hokkiens		Teochews		Cantonese	
	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000
Number ('000)	896.1	1,028.5	466.0	526.2	323.9	385.6
Median Age (Years)	29	34	30	35	33	37
% Aged 65 & Over	5.2	7.1	6.3	7.7	9.2	10.0
Dependency Ratio (Per Hundred Persons Aged 15-64)						
Child (Below 15)	31	27	31	27	27	23
Old Age (65 & Over)	7	10	9	11	13	14
Sex Ratio (Males Per 1,000 Females)						
Below 55 years	1,030	1,007	1,021	1,005	938	946
Aged 55 years & Over	832	865	798	855	648	741

The Cantonese had the highest proportion of elderly persons in 2000 – 10 per cent against 7–8 per cent for the other groups. As a result, old age dependency was highest among the Cantonese. The ratio of persons aged 65 and over to those aged 15–64 was 14 per hundred among the Cantonese, compared with around 10 per hundred for the Hokkiens and Teochews. In contrast, child dependency was the lowest for the Cantonese.

The sex ratio imbalance among the Cantonese was mainly due to the females outnumbering males in the age group of 55 years and over. There were 741 males per 1,000 females among the older Cantonese, compared with over 800 males per 1,000 females for the other two dialect groups.

HIGH PROPORTION OF CANTONESE BORN OUTSIDE SINGAPORE

Immigrants formed a larger proportion of the Cantonese community compared with the Hokkiens and Teochews. Proportionately more Cantonese were born outside Singapore – 22 per cent against 12 per cent for the other two dialect groups (Table 2). The bulk of the Cantonese immigrants were born in Malaysia, Hong Kong and China.

Even among the younger Cantonese aged 25–39 years, one-quarter was born outside Singapore. This was much higher than the 10–14 per cent for their Hokkien and Teochew counterparts.

TABLE 2 COUNTRY OF BIRTH OF THE MAIN CHINESE DIALECT GROUPS

	Per Cent					
	Hokkiens		Teochews		Cantonese	
	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Born in Singapore	89.7	88.2	86.9	87.9	80.5	78.0
Born Outside Singapore	10.3	11.8	13.1	12.1	19.5	22.0
Malaysia	5.3	7.8	4.5	6.2	9.5	12.7
Hong Kong	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.1	1.1	3.5
China	4.0	2.6	7.7	4.6	8.2	4.7
Others	1.0	1.3	0.9	1.2	0.7	1.1
% Born Outside Singapore						
15 – 24	2.0	4.4	1.6	2.8	4.0	11.6
25 – 39	7.8	14.1	6.7	10.3	13.6	25.1
40 – 54	16.8	12.9	19.1	12.3	23.9	23.3
55 & Over	37.0	25.9	56.2	35.3	55.1	38.2

A significant proportion of the Cantonese immigrants comprised recent arrivals in Singapore. Slightly more than one-quarter of the Cantonese who were born outside Singapore first arrived in Singapore during the last ten years (Table 3). The proportion arriving during 1991–2000 was lower among the Hokkiens and Teochews.

TABLE 3 YEAR OF FIRST ARRIVAL
AMONG RESIDENTS BORN OUTSIDE SINGAPORE

	Per Cent		
	Hokkiens	Teochews	Cantonese
1991 – 2000	20.3	12.7	26.4
1981 – 1990	20.6	13.2	19.2
Before 1980	59.2	74.2	54.4

CHINESE DIALECTS LESS PREVALENT

Census data suggest that the use of Chinese dialects as predominant home language is no longer a distinguishing feature of the Chinese dialect groups. The number of dialect-speaking Chinese residents declined by 28 per cent between 1990 and 2000 (Table 4). In contrast, those speaking Mandarin most frequently at home increased by 78 per cent. As a result, Chinese dialects had been replaced by Mandarin as the most commonly used language at home.

TABLE 4 LANGUAGE MOST FREQUENTLY SPOKEN AT HOME
AMONG CHINESE RESIDENT POPULATION
AGED 5 YEARS AND OVER

Home Language	Number ('000)		Per Cent		Change (%)
	1990	2000	1990	2000	
TOTAL	1,884.0	2,236.1	100.0	100.0	18.7
English	363.4	533.9	19.3	23.9	46.9
Mandarin	566.2	1,008.5	30.1	45.1	78.1
Chinese Dialects	948.1	685.8	50.3	30.7	-27.7
Others	6.4	7.9	0.3	0.4	23.4

STRONGER RETENTION OF OWN DIALECT BY CANTONESE

The Cantonese, however, appeared to have some success in retaining their dialect as home language. In 2000, some 36 per cent of the Cantonese spoke Cantonese most frequently at home (Table 5), higher than the proportion speaking Mandarin (32 per cent) and English (28 per cent). In contrast, proportionately more Hokkiens and Teochews spoke Mandarin than their own dialect.

The stronger retention of their dialect by the Cantonese might be partly due to the relatively older age structure of the Cantonese, and partly due to the relatively high proportion of Cantonese born in Malaysia or Hong Kong where Cantonese is still commonly used.

TABLE 5 LANGUAGE MOST FREQUENTLY SPOKEN AT HOME
BY THE MAIN CHINESE DIALECT GROUPS

Home Language	Per Cent					
	Hokkiens		Teochews		Cantonese	
	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
English	17.6	21.8	19.6	24.6	22.9	28.4
Mandarin	29.5	46.3	28.4	43.4	20.2	32.0
Own Dialect	48.5	29.0	42.8	25.7	51.5	36.2
Others	4.4	2.9	9.1	6.3	5.5	3.4

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The data in this paper show that while the Hokkien and Teochew communities share similar characteristics, the Cantonese community differs from them in several aspects. The Cantonese have the oldest age structure, with females outnumbering males. Unlike the Hokkiens and Teochews, immigrants form a larger proportion of the Cantonese community, not just in the older age groups but also in the younger age cohorts.

With the general decline in dialect usage at home among the Chinese, the distinction between dialect groups appear to be blurring as fewer Chinese speak their own dialect most frequently at home. This is particularly so for the Hokkiens and Teochews, amongst whom Mandarin has become the most commonly used home language. For the Cantonese community, the Cantonese dialect remains as the most commonly used language at home. Nonetheless, the decline in their usage of Cantonese dialect at home is likely to continue over the next decade as the older generations pass away.