

> OPINION

Reclaiming our Cantonese heritage

Relearning dialect helps people restore pride, connect to their culture

WANYEE LI
VANCOUVER BUREAU

VANCOUVER—"Speak English!" I looked up to see my Grade 1 teacher walking toward me and my two friends.

"You are in Canada now, speak English," she said to us.

It was recess, and I was playing hopscotch.

Why my teacher told us to speak English that day, when we had already been speaking English, baffled my young mind. But even as a six-year-old, I guessed it had something to do with the fact that my friends and I were all ethnically Chinese.

By that time, English was already the language in which I was most proficient. Cantonese, the Chinese dialect my parents, grandparents and more than half a million people in Canada speak — and the first language I learned — was already fading in me.

But that experience pushed me to distance myself from anything that might lead people to believe I was different. I could speak Cantonese. That made me different.

New friends would sometimes ask me, "Do you speak Chinese?" And I would immediately tell them no, of course not. I speak English. And only English.

It was a lie.

My parents, who moved to Vancouver from Hong Kong at the ages of 13 and 14, switched between Cantonese and English at home. I understood Cantonese. I ate Cantonese food. I am Cantonese.

But over time, that lie became truth.

I forgot my Cantonese.

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"*Neih sihk jo faahn meih ah?*" I force the sounds out of my mouth. The words feel foreign.

It's Saturday and I'm sitting at the back of a small classroom on the third floor of a heritage building in Vancouver's Chinatown. I and two dozen other adults bravely recite common greetings in Cantonese, following the instructor's cues.

We're here to learn Cantonese.

That afternoon, I speak more of my ancestral language than I have in my life — as far as I can remember, anyway. My parents tell me I spoke Cantonese as a toddler, and that I only learned English once I started going to kindergarten.

But by the time I was seven, I had stopped speaking the language altogether. Today, I have no recollection of ever speaking it.

I still understand dinner-table conversation and casual gossip — I can even recognize simple characters and some food items



JONATHAN DESMOND

Toronto Star reporter Wanyee Li, back row centre, attends a Cantonese class in Vancouver. Many of the students there felt discouraged from speaking the language when they were growing up.

on dim sum menus.

But I've never been brave enough to utter words in Cantonese. I knew that if I did, my butchered pronunciations would betray how "un-Chinese" I had become.

Cantonese, the Chinese dialect traditionally spoken in Hong Kong and parts of southern China, is an endangered language, says instructor Zoe Lam. We're sitting in the Wong Benevolent Association's lounge after Saturday's class, sipping tea.

Lam is a linguistics lecturer at the University of British Columbia and in 2018, she completed her PhD dissertation on how Chinese-Canadians speak Cantonese compared to Hong Kongers.

Many millennials of Cantonese heritage who were born in Canada are self-conscious about their "Canadian" accent due to a combination of racism from dominant mainstream society, as well as pressure from their own families, Lam said.

At school, we were too Chinese.

"They would do everything to not eat Chinese food at school because people would laugh at them," said Lam.

We hid our lunches. We said we only spoke English.

But then there were times when we were not Chinese enough.

"A lot of Chinese-Canadian students were traumatized when they were little," said Lam. "Maybe their cousins or other relatives from Hong Kong laughed at them — saying things like, 'Oh my God, you said it wrong; your Cantonese is so horrible.'"

Lam has taught dozens of Cantonese classes in her decade-long career, but none are as special to her as the one she teaches on Saturdays — a survival Cantonese class for adults.

Most who sign up for the class have an existing connection to Cantonese culture, whether they grew up in a Cantonese-

speaking household or have a spouse who speaks Cantonese.

"It doesn't just feel like a job to me," said Lam. "It feels like it's important work. It's something that may impact a person's life."

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It's Brandon Yan's second time taking a Cantonese class.

Yan, who grew up in a mixed-race household and ran in Vancouver's 2018 civic elections, knows the perils of navigating race.

When he added his Chinese name to the ballot, people threw accusations at him: Everything from pandering to the Chinese-Canadian community, to money laundering, to having connections to the opioid drug trade in China.

"Growing up, I wanted to distance myself from being Chinese, and then I tried to embrace it and got in trouble for embracing it," the 33-year-old tells me. "I was literally given this name when I was born. It's a real name."

But Yan's father, who was born in China, never spoke Cantonese to his five children. Yan says he knows zero Cantonese, save for phrases such as happy birthday and cultural practices, such as how to say thank you when receiving a red envelope during Lunar New Year.

Yan, who grew up in the predominantly white suburb of Langley, used to push away the Chinese side of his heritage.

"For a long spread of my life, I always thought — and it goes to a lot of internalized racism — whenever I heard someone speaking Chinese I would get angry they weren't speaking English."

But when Yan's brother performed in drag a few years ago with the name "Maiden China" in over-the-top traditional Chinese dress meant to help him reclaim his identity and take away the shame of being Chinese, Yan was inspired to reconnect with his heritage.

"We had conversations about

being more proud of who we are and how part of that pride is being rooted in your history," he said.

It took until adulthood for both Yan and his brother to face internalized racism, because for them, it runs deep.

When Yan told his father he had signed up for a Cantonese class, his father told him Cantonese was an "ugly language," that had no practical value anymore.

Besides, the world is moving toward Mandarin, he told his son.

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Youngsters' handwriting adorns the walls of the intimate 26-seat classroom that once held after school Cantonese classes. Now, the four walls are home to the revitalized Mon Keang Saturday school, brought back to life thanks to June and Doris Chow, sisters who run the Youth Collaborative for Chinatown.

Students, all adults, practise conversational Cantonese and learn about the history of Chinatown.

It's part of the sisters' efforts to keep Cantonese, considered by many to be a dying language, alive.

"Political forces in Hong Kong and in China are making people predict how long it will be before Cantonese in those areas are stamped out because of government policy," said June Chow.

Mandarin is the official language in the People's Republic of China and has become the language of business and education.

But in many Chinatowns around the world, where immigrants from Guangdong province and Hong Kong first settled more than a century ago, Cantonese remains the go-to language.

Some have characterized Chinatowns as sanctuaries or bastions for the Cantonese language, surrounded by cultures

dominated by English, and increasingly, Mandarin.

In 2016, the number of Mandarin speakers surpassed the number of Cantonese speakers in Canada for the first time. According to Statistic Canada, 610,835 people reported Mandarin as their mother tongue. In contrast, 594,030 reported Cantonese as their mother tongue.

After school Cantonese programs are turning into Mandarin programs in order to cater to growing numbers of immigrants from mainland China.

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As Saturday's class nears its end, I sit at the back of the room, listening to everyone take turns sharing why they are here.

Many say once upon a time they spoke Cantonese, but they let it slip away. Others say they had grandparents who were growing old and they wanted to connect with them better.

I felt a pang in my heart. There were so many like me.

Chow, who is in her thirties, says she sees the loss of language play out in her own family.

"You can see the struggle with the language that is being experienced between all three generations."

Her mom speaks mostly Cantonese and struggles to communicate with her grandson. June and Doris speak Cantonese, but struggle to express more complex thoughts. The grandson only speaks English.

"Now we're getting to the generations where it is very much *sic tang mm sic gong*," said Chow.

We can understand but can't speak. Or we just won't speak.

"Sometimes when I teach my students, I feel like I'm not teaching them the language itself, I'm just giving them a safe space to practise," said Lam.

She said she sees an interesting relationship between shame and pride in many of her students.

"When they shift that shame to pride, they start to become more open to the idea of picking up the language."

We're here not just to learn Cantonese, but to embrace our families and to accept who we are. I finally understood — learning Cantonese would not make me more Chinese or less Canadian.

One of the many ways Lam helps her students realize that shift is to explain all the various Cantonese terms used to describe ourselves.

We all belong, there are just many nuances, she said.

Jung gwok yahn refers to Chinese nationals, *tong yahn*, refers to Cantonese people, *wa yahn* refers to ethnically Chinese people.

And me? What am I? I am *wah yeuw ga nah daaih yahn* — Chinese Canadian.

Waterloo Region is Canada's fastest growing urban area

CATHERINE THOMPSON AND BRENT DAVIS
WATERLOO REGION RECORD

WATERLOO REGION—Waterloo Region is the fastest-growing urban area in the entire country, according to new data from Statistics Canada.

A study looked at the growth in 35 census metropolitan areas, which are the urban areas in the country with a population of 100,000 or more. Waterloo Region topped the list, growing by 2.8 per cent from 2018 to 2019 to a population of 584,259 as of July 1, 2019.

That growth outpaces even the next two fastest-growing cities, both of which are in Ontario: London and Ottawa both saw population increases of 2.3 per cent. Growth in all 35 census metropolitan areas averaged 1.7 per cent, while growth was much slower in smaller communities and rural areas, where populations grew an average of 0.6 per cent.

"It just aligns with everything else we've been seeing happening in Waterloo Region," said Matthew Chandy,

manager of the region's Office of Regional Economic Development. Growth in the labour market, increased construction activity and corporate expansions all reflect a growing population.

The most recent population estimate from the region stands at 601,220 at the end of 2018. That's projected to increase to 835,000 by 2041. Rising populations can bring accompanying challenges in areas such as transportation and housing availability and affordability. Chandy said the importance of significant investments in transit infrastructure, such as the Ion light rail system, will be further emphasized as the region grows.

The study found that populations in urban areas are younger than in smaller communities and that smaller communities are seeing their populations age more quickly than urban areas, often because young people move away. Waterloo Region's population is younger than the country as a whole, with 68.8 per cent of residents aged 16 to 64, compared to 66.5 per cent across Canada.

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