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# Chinese Language in Chinese Communities: Language Shift, Maintenance, and Identity

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## Abstract

Language shifts and maintenance happen in the Chinese community, which is caused by a multicultural society, especially in Jakarta. The shift of languages defines someone's identity as it is one of the features of a culture. The goals of this study are to discover the factors that cause language shift and maintenance among Madyatama University (Pseudonym) students and how the Chinese language defines their identity as Chinese people. This study is conducted on 26 students of the university, which differs into 13 females and 13 males aged 19-22 years old. The writer uses quantitative and qualitative methods and finds that the Chinese language is shifted and maintained at Madyatama University (Pseudonym), which is influenced by a multicultural society. Moreover, most of the participants agree that the ability to speak the Chinese language does not define their identity. Nevertheless, the rest of the participants agree that the Chinese language becomes their identity.

## 1 Introduction

Indonesia is a multicultural country, especially Jakarta, as a center of economic and business life. Therefore, various languages, dialects, ethnicities, and cultures spread in society. Chinese ethnicity is one of the races that bring their culture to Indonesia and are able to grow rapidly in society. The population of Chinese people in Jakarta in 2024 has the highest number of other countries in Indonesia, which is over 5,53% of 11.436.004 citizens (Jakarta Population 2024, n.d.). In addition, the Chinese communities are also diverse in different cultures and languages, including Hokkien, Hakka, Khek, Teochew, and others, which they use as a vernacular language (Nasution & Ayuningtyas, 2020).

During the historical story of Chinese people in Indonesia in the late 1990s, Chinese communities were treated inappropriately and discriminated against by the rules of the government (Anggraeni,

2011). As a result, most Chinese Indonesians today are unable to use and speak their language, which is the Chinese language (Werhoru & Jhon, 2018). Moreover, Werhoru and Jhon stated that “. . . instead, only assume the ethnolinguistic identity as being a native Indonesian and occasionally an English language speaker” (2018). It shows that the use of the Chinese language in Chinese communities has shifted to Indonesian and English language. However, some Chinese people still speak their language rather than other languages, which shows language maintenance (Yuliana & Yanti, 2023). The ability to speak, use, and understand Chinese languages influences the Chinese population regarding their identity. The phenomenon of language shift, maintenance, and identity also happens among Chinese communities at Madyatama University (pseudonym). Therefore, to investigate these issues, the writer asks these questions:

1. What are the factors that shift the Chinese language among Chinese communities at Madyatama University (pseudonym).?
2. What are the factors that maintain the Chinese language among Chinese communities at the?
3. How does the Chinese language define the identity of Chinese communities at the university?

## 2 Literature Review

A language shift is an action of acquiring a new language that causes the community to lose its first language. Baker (2001) defined language shift as “A reduction in the number of speakers of a language, a decreasing saturation of language speakers in the population, a loss in language proficiency, or decreasing use of that language in the different domain” (p. 59). It is a process where a community replaces their ethnic language with other languages, and it happens because of many factors, such as historical, political, social, and eco-

nomic factors (Grenoble, 2021). The shift of the language happens for several reasons. According to Holmes (2013), language shift typically tends toward the majority language, who might find it difficult to learn the language of a minority (as cited in Werhoru & Jhon, 2018). In addition, Farisiyah and Zamzani stated that language shifts happen not only because of the lost interest in learning the local language but also because of the parents who choose Indonesian as their vernacular language (2018). Another reason that causes language shift is the need to fit social and economic life, which makes them learn a new language to be able to communicate with other people in a new area (Putri & Setiawan, 2014). On the other hand, language maintenance is defined as a continuity of language use without being affected by other languages and becomes the key to their identity (Yuliana & Yanti, 2023). Language maintenance describes a community that maintains its native language despite numerous factors that may cause a transition to a new language (Farisiyah & Zamzani, 2018). Moreover, Baker (2000) stated that “Language maintenance usually refers to relative language stability in number and distribution of its speakers, its proficient usage by children and adults, and its retention in specific domains, such as home, school, and religion” (p. 59). Identity relates to the characteristics that differentiate one individual or organization from others (Identity, 2024). According to Zenker (2018), identity is classified based on nationality, ethnicity, race, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, ability, and disability, which involves various linguistic phenomena. In addition, some philosophers agree that identity is something that the individual has and is inside them (Mahmoodi-Shahrehabaki, 2018). Language is one of the features that represent someone’s identity (Baker, 2000) and is part of the culture (Dekeyser et al., 2019). However, language cannot define true identity as it is the way to communicate with other people (Karsono, 2014). The phenomenon of language shift, maintenance, and identity happens because of multiculturalism. A multicultural community comprises diverse cultural groups categorized by nationality, race, religion, and language (Suroyo et al., 2023). In a multicultural society, the individual acquires two or more languages, and it affects the use of a language, which is based on the topics, the relation between the speakers, and the context of the conversation (Nasution & Ayun-

ingtyas, 2020). As a result, it impacts their identity and language use, which can be shifted or maintained. To support this study, the writer found several studies about language shift, maintenance, and identity, which some researchers have done. The first study was done by Eka Margianti Sagimin in 2020, titled *Language Shift and Heritage Language Maintenance Among Indonesian Young Generations: A Case Study of Pamulang University Students*. This study aims to find students’ attempts to maintain the local language and discover some factors that cause language loss at Pamulang University using a descriptive qualitative method. From 44 participants, the researcher finds that most of the students frequently use the local language and Indonesian with their family and use Indonesian with their friends in an educational context. However, the participants show positive feedback on heritage language. The second study is titled *Language Shift in Chinese-Indonesian Community* by David Werhoru and Elex John in 2018. This study focuses on finding the specific factors that cause language shifts in the family, institutional, and social context, especially in Jakarta, among three Chinese Indonesian females. To collect the data, the researchers used a questionnaire and recorded an interview that took around 20 minutes for each participant. From this study, the researchers discover that language shift happens because of the lack of knowledge of the culture, the need to learn the language, the uncertainty about their ethnolinguistic identity, and the social and political history regarding the traumatic events in the past and present generations of Chinese Indonesians. The study of Chinese language shift and maintenance in Jakarta is also done by Vina Yuliana and Yanti (2023) titled *Language Attitudes, Shift, and Maintenance: A Case Study of Jakartan Chinese Indonesians*. The purpose of this study is to find Chinese Indonesians’ language attitudes and the factors of language shift and maintenance. The researchers spread the questionnaire to 100 Chinese Indonesian people and did an in-depth interview with 9 of them. This study showed that most of the participants shifted to Indonesian and English, and only 9. The last study covers language as identity, which is titled *Chinese Language as an Identity Viewed by the Younger Chinese Ethnic in Indonesia* by Ong Mia Farao Karsono in 2014. This study investigates the younger Chinese community in Indonesia in viewing the Chinese language as an identity. In this study, the researcher

uses qualitative and quantitative methods by spreading questionnaires to all faculties at Petra Christian University. From this study, the participants who speak and do not speak Chinese language think that the ability to speak the language cannot be considered as their identity. Instead, there are various ways to recognize Chinese people, which are their skin color, eye shape, and manner of dress. Of the previous studies that the writer reviews all discuss language shift, maintenance, and identity in one study, which becomes the reason why the writer conducts this research. Moreover, there are only a few studies that covers language identity on Chinese Indonesian. Therefore, the focus of this paper is to discover the factors that cause language shift and maintenance among the university students and how the Chinese language defines their identity as a Chinese person.

### 3 Methodology

To collect the data, the writer uses quantitative and qualitative methods. Google Forms was used as the medium to ask the participants several questions, which was distributed on November 8, 2023. In the first section of the form, the writer asks for basic information regarding the participant, such as name, age, and gender. The second section of the form asks about how many languages the participants speak. This section also asks about their preferences in using language that makes them comfortable. The purpose of this section is to analyze whether the Chinese language is shifting or maintaining, which is in correlation to the third section. The third section consists of questions that ask how the participants acquired or learned the Chinese language. In addition, in the last section, the writer also asks the participants' opinions on the Chinese language. The participants of this study are 26 students of Madyatama University (Pseudonym). It differs into 13 females and 13 males which aged 19-22 years old.

## 4 Results and Analysis

### 4.1 Data from the second section

From the data, the writer finds that most of the participants learn and speak two languages. The data below shows how many languages the participants can speak.

Languages	Quantity
Indonesian	1
Indonesian and English	9
Indonesian, English, and German	1
Indonesian and Chinese (Khek)	1
Indonesian, English, and Chinese	2
Indonesian, English, and Chinese (Mandarin)	3
Indonesian, English, and Chinese (Teochew)	1
Indonesian, English, and Chinese (Hokkien)	3
Indonesian, English, and Chinese (Hokkien and Khek)	1
Indonesian, English, Chinese, and Japanese	1
Indonesian, English, Chinese, and Korean	1
Indonesian, English, Chinese, and Javanese	1
Indonesian, English, Chinese (Hakka), and Belinyu	1

Table 1: Languages that the participants speak

According to how the participants acquired the languages, the writer divided it into two sections, which are native language and foreign language. Eight of the participants stated that they had learned Indonesian since they were children, which made Indonesian their native language or first language; one participant has Chinese (Hakka) as her mother tongue and one participant has Chinese (Hokkien) as her mother tongue as she has been taught and spoken the language since young. However, other participants do not explain which language is their first language clearly.

For the foreign language, most of the participants learn English from schools, movies, books, YouTube videos, TV shows, English courses, social media, and self-taught. This statement is mentioned by one of the participants:

*“Inggris, pertama kali saya terpapar oleh bahasa inggris adalah pada saat saya mulai sekolah (TK). Disana banyak kata-kata (termasuk nama-nama, buku, dkk) yang menggunakan bahasa inggris serta terdapat pelajaran yang memba- has mengenai bahasa inggris. Disana saya mulai mengenal bahasa inggris. Pembelajaran bahasa inggris berlanjut*

*pada saat saya sudah mulai masuk masa SD-SMP-SMA. Disana saya belajar bahasa inggris secara lebih mendalam di sekolah, karena memang ada mata pelajarannya. Selain itu, saya juga belajar melalui internet dengan cara menonton/membaca konten yang menggunakan bahasa inggris.”* (original version) (data 1)

“English. The first time I got exposed to English was when I started school (kindergarten). There were a lot of words (including names, books, and others) that used the English language, and there was also an English subject. Since then, I have known the English language. The learning process continued until I entered elementary school, then junior high school, and then senior high school. I learned more about the language because there was an English subject. Moreover, I also learn through the internet by watching or reading English content.” (translation version) (data 1)

Another participant also learns English from her environment, which states:

“English: being in an English-medium playgroup from the age of 3 (due to learning it from a young age, I did not actively learn grammar, vocabulary, etc, but acquired and practiced it directly almost like a native speaker would).” (data 2)

The second foreign language is Chinese. The participants learn the Chinese language through schools, Chinese courses, families, friends, Summer Camp Events, Chinese drama, and Chinese movies. The following language is German, which the participant gets from private study and the Internet. Other participants also studied the Korean language using online materials and the Japanese language via games. On the other hand, the Javanese language is acquired from the participant’s family. Lastly, the participant, who speaks Hakka as her first language, learned Indonesian and Belinyu when she attended public school in her hometown.

Following the languages that the participants speak, the writer compiles it based on the language that they commonly use in their family and friends.

Languages between the family	Quantity
Indonesian	14
Indonesian and English	5
Indonesian and Chinese	2
Indonesian and Chinese (Mandarin)	1
Indonesian and Javanese	1
Chinese (Hokkien)	1
Chinese (Hakka)	1
English	1

Table 2: Languages between the family

Based on the participants’ answers, most of them use Indonesian because of the multiculturalism in the family, where Indonesian is the only language that connects them since their parents or siblings are unable to speak other languages. The participants say these statements:

“Indonesia. Cause my family is multicultural. So, may be difficult to blend the many local languages to speak for daily use.” (data 3)

“Of course, Indonesia, because only the Indonesian language that all of my family understood.” (data 4)

Meanwhile, other participants prefer to mix the languages to match their needs. For example, one participant mixes the languages to fit her family. Therefore, she speaks Indonesian to her mother and Chinese to her father.

“Mostly bahasa Indonesia with my mother and her family, but often use Chinese to my father and his family.” (data 5)

In addition, a specific participant speaks only English language to her family because they have been exposed to Western culture.

“English, my family was highly exposed to western culture (especially from movies and music). Also, my sister is a literal gen Z (she is too exposed to YouTube and the internet to the point that English becomes her first language).” (data 6)

Languages between the friends	Quantity
Indonesian	15
Indonesian and English	10
English	1

Table 3: Languages between the friends

The participants have similar reasons for choosing those languages to interact with their friends. The reasons the participants use Indonesian are primarily because of their environment, who can only speak Indonesian, and it is more convenient for them.

“Indonesia, because all of my friend is Indonesian people, and they must be understanding Indonesian language.” (data 7)

“Indonesia, cause Indonesia is a general language, and everybody will understand it.” (data 8)

“*Indonesia, lebih familiar.*” (original version) (data 9)

“Indonesian, it is more familiar.” (translation version) (data 9)

Other participants use Indonesian and English to their friends to match their environment and globalization, which are stated in one of the participants’ answers:

“Indonesia and English. Cause I try to adjust communicate with the same local languages and the foreigners too.” (data 10)

“*Indo karna ya kita orang Indo (especially ke orang yang gabisa b.ing) dan emang karna saya SaSing dan karena emang udah kebiasa dari dulu terus en-vironment SaSing bener-bener bikin terbiasa dengan ngomong bahasa Inggris hehe.*” (original version) (data 11)

“Indonesian, because we are Indonesian people (especially to someone who can- not speak English) and because I am an English literature student, I get used to the environment, which makes me speak English more.” (translation version) (data 11)

“Indonesian with a little bit English, because middle class Indonesians, also known as the bourgeoisie, tend to speak

using those two languages at once because of rampant globalization.” (data 12)

Lastly, one participant says that he speaks English with his friend because he is more proficient in this language.

The last question in this section asks about the participants’ preferences in languages that make them comfortable and express their ideas the most. From the answers, the writer finds that 11 participants answered Indonesian and English as the most comfortable languages. These languages also help them express their opinion for different purposes, which other participants agree on:

“Both languages because I’m fluent in both of them, but they belong to different realms to me. English tends to be for friends, academia, and sharing my opinions, while Indonesian tends to be for more basic, concrete things and family (especially since my extended family consist of some people who don’t speak English.” (data 13)

“If it’s academic ideas then English (because in English department we make lots of paper so I’m used to English vocabulary more) but in general it can be both, depending on what I want to say but I would probably opt to mix the two.” (data 14)

Nine participants answered this question in Indonesian as they thought it was the easiest way to say something, and everyone could understand this language. In addition, the participants know more about Indonesian vocabulary, and as a result, it makes them express themselves more.

“*Indo, karena lebih tau banyak kosakata, lebih bisa mengekspresikan diri.*” (original version) (data 15)

“Indonesian, because I know Indonesian vocabulary, express myself more.” (translation version) (data 15)

Five other participants answered in English because it explains their ideas accurately, which is shorter than Indonesian.

“English, especially in terms of writing, I’d prefer using English since it sounds less cringy since English has some words

that accurately convey an idea, while Indonesia doesn't." (data 16)

"Obviously English, cause sometimes that in Indonesia languages too long to provide your idea, but in English you can shorten your words to speak." (data 17)

The last participant differs in the use of the language for two different purposes. She is comfortable speaking Chinese (Hokkien) with her family and Indonesian with her friends since it is the national language.

"Hokkien at home because it has become our daily language. Bahasa Indonesia at school and public because it is the language that everyone can speak." (data 18)

According to the data that the writer collected, most of the participants were able to speak at least two languages, which are Indonesian and English. These languages are actively used with their family and friends because they are more comfortable with them and help them express their ideas since these languages are commonly used and heard in society. However, of 26 participants, 15 participants speak the Chinese language, and only 7 of them use this language actively with their family and friends.

## 4.2 Data from the third section

In this section, the writer asks about the participant's ability to speak the Chinese language. Of 26 participants, 15 participants were able to speak Chinese, namely Khek, Mandarin, Hakka, and Teochew. Meanwhile, the rest of the participants are not able to speak any Chinese language. The proficiency of the participants is divided into several points, which are presented in the table below. The writer uses a linear scalar from 1 to 5; 1 point means the participant is not fluent, while 5 point means the participant is fluent.

Point	1	2	3	4	5
Quantity	15	3	4	4	-

Table 4: Languages between the friends

Of 15 participants who speak Chinese, only 5 participants use this language in their families. Most of the participants do not use this language because no one in their family speaks Chinese languages, even though their parents come from a

Chinese family. The examples can be seen from these answers:

"I come from Indonesia, but my dad's side of the family came from Hainan and my mum's side of the family are Khek." (data 19)

"I think my papa speaks Khek? And Mandarin, beliau orang Aceh jadi keluarganya bicara begitu, tapi saya ga ngerti apa-apa hehe. Kalau ngumpul sukanya ngan gong." (original version) (data 20)

"I think my papa speaks Khek and Mandarin. He comes from Aceh; therefore, his family speaks that language. However, I do not understand anything. If there is a family gathering, I will go blank." (translation version) (data 20)

Moreover, here are their reasons for not speaking the Chinese language in their family:

"No, because my mum and I don't speak any Chinese dialects so we wouldn't understand anything." (data 21)

"Ngga, mama gabisa soalnya." (original version) (data 22)

"No, my mom cannot speak the language." (translation version) (data 22)

Two participants speak Chinese languages with their friends. The first participant uses this language with her course friend. Other participants only speak the Chinese language to their friends who can speak the Chinese language as well.

"Yes, with my Chinese course's friends, to recap the discussion at course, but at the university I don't." (data 23)

"Sometimes yes. Since not all of my friends can understand Chinese, so I only speak Chinese with the people that can speak Chinese also." (data 24)

Around seven participants stated that they actually felt comfortable speaking Chinese languages. The reasons are various for each participant; for instance, a participant says that the language is homey.

"Yes, I feel comfortable speaking the Chinese language since I grow up speaking Hakka. It makes me feel like home." (data 25)

Other participants also mentioned that even though this language is complex to learn, it is still fun.

“Yes and no because I’m struggling to study and get the fun of it.” (data 26)

“Actually comfortable. But I have to learn again.” (data 27)

Furthermore, the rest only feel comfortable if they find the right occasion.

“Yes, but it depends on where I speak the language.” (data 28)

*“Tergantung sama siapa ngobrolnya, kalau sama keluarga nyaman-nyaman aja.”* (original version) (data 29)

“It depends on who I am talking to. If it is my family, I feel comfortable.” (translation version) (data 29)

The reasons why another 19 participants do not feel comfortable is because they cannot speak the language, are not interested in learning it, do not have any friends to talk with, and this language makes them look like real Chinese people.

“No, because I’m not fluent in Chinese and I’m also not interested to learn it furthermore.” (data 30)

“No, I’m not fluent and I don’t have someone to talk Chinese with.” (data 31)

“No, because no speak Chinese in my home.” (data 32)

*“Tidak, karena terlalu cina sekali.”* (original version) (data 33)

“No, it is too Chinese.” (translation version) (data 33)

Despite the difficulty, all the participants gave positive feedback toward the Chinese language. For instance, they say it is a sound, excellent, unique, and attractive language.

“Unique, such a wonderful heritage, and attractive.” (data 34)

*“Menarik, karena memiliki karakteristik yang unik (dari penggunaan nada, tulisan, dan lainnya) dibandingkan bahasa-bahasa lain, serta terlihat seru untuk dipelajari.”* (original version) (data 35)

“Interesting because of the unique characteristics (from the use of the tone, writing, and others) which different from

other languages, looks exciting to be learned.” (translation version) (data 36)

It shows that the Chinese language has been shifting to Indonesian and English at Madyatama University (Pseudonym). The factors of this issue can be seen from 11 participants who did not acquire or learn the Chinese language even though their family speak the Chinese language, as can be seen from data 19 – 22. Some participants also mentioned that they did not find any of their friends or family members who speak Chinese (data 31 – 32). In addition, 9 participants stated that they did not want to learn Chinese languages because it is not exciting and really hard to learn. Therefore, they prefer to use Indonesian or English since everyone can understand both languages.

“I tried to learn Mandarin by myself because my parents wanted me to, but I never became fluent because I wasn’t really interested in it.” (data 37)

“Not, I’m interested in learning Chinese but it’s so hard, so I gave up.” (data 38)

“No, because I’m not really that interested learning Teochew, Cantonese, or Hokkien.” (data 39)

In this case, language shifting happens because of two dimensions: socio-cultural and educational. According to the data, the participants are growing up in a multicultural society where Indonesian and English are more important (data 10 – 12). It is also supported by their environment, especially in Madyatama University (Pseudonym). Most of the content that is served is written either in English or Indonesian. In addition, the participants prefer to communicate in both Indonesian and English with their friends.

At the same time, Chinese languages are also being maintained in some aspects, including education field and attitudinal. From the participants’ answers, some schools teach the Chinese language, especially Mandarin, to the students. Furthermore, some participants also learned the Chinese language from their Chinese course.

“My school has compulsory Mandarin subject.” (data 40)

“Course since junior until senior high school.” (data 41)

Seven participants who speak the Chinese language actively with their family and friends also show that the Chinese language is being maintained. It happens because they are still in contact with



their family or friends who speak this language (data 23 – 24). Another reason that they maintain this language is because it makes them comfortable, which makes them feel like they are in their home (data 25 – 29).

Regardless of the lack of the ability to speak the Chinese language, most participants do not feel like they have lost their identity as Chinese people because they live in Indonesia, which has become their new identity, Indonesian people. Moreover, no rule forces them to speak or learn the Chinese language. Instead, one of the participants mentions that there is another way to show his identity. The text below shows the statements from the participants.

“Not necessarily because I think lower rates of Chinese fluency are in themselves an aspect of the Chinese-Indonesian culture identity. Not being able to speak it or being less fluent differentiates us from other Chinese diasporas and forms part of our story.” (data 42)

“Nope, the language we speak doesn’t define our identity. We can speak Russian or Arabic if we’re Indonesian, it doesn’t change the fact that we’re Indonesian.” (data 43)

“Not really, because I live in Jakarta and not have to speak the Chinese languages.” (data 44)

“No, because I grew up in Indonesia and that’s my identity.” (data 45)

“*No, ga ada yang peduliin juga.*” (original version) (data 46)

“No, no one cares.” (translation version) (data 46)

“No, because there are still other traditions that I can do to show that I am Chinese.” (data 47)

However, the rest of the participants disagreed with these statements. For them, as Chinese people, they must be able to obtain the languages and the cultures because they are part of themselves, their history, and their identity.

“Yes, since I am a Tiong Hoa. It’s still a part of me.” (data 47)

“Yes, since language is part of who you are both ethnically and culturally. It is concurred that losing once’s language is a lost of culture and a form of cultural

degradation.” (data 48)

“Yes la, very embarrassing when Chinese people can’t speak Chinese la, so stop asking because I feel embarrassed la.” (data 49)

“*Ya mungkin, karena kalau tidak ngomong Chinese di keluarga nanti suka dikatakan bukan orang Chinese.*” (original version) (data 50)

“Maybe because when we do not speak Chinese in the family, people will mock us as non-Chinese people.” (translation version) (data 50)

“*Not really but also yes because all of our elderly can speak the language, dan kalau (semisalnya saya, atau generasi sekarang/anak-anak) tidak bisa berbahasa mandarin, seperti terasa budaya yang terbangun.*” (original version) (data 51)

“Not really, but also yes, because all of our elderly can speak the language, and if (for example, me or the next generation) cannot speak Mandarin, it feels like we lost the culture.” (translation version) (data 51)

## Conclusion

From this study, the writer concludes that language shift and maintenance of the Chinese language happens among 26 students the university. The Chinese language shifts to Indonesian and English is mainly caused by multiculturalism in the participants’ social lives, whether with their family or friends. As a result, they do not obtain the Chinese language from their family, they cannot find a friend who speaks the same language, and they find that the Chinese language is too difficult to learn.

Despite the ability to speak Chinese, most participants stated that the Chinese language does not define their identity, which interestingly in accordance with Karsono’s study. They mention that since they live in Indonesia, their identity is an Indonesian people, and no one will care whether they are Chinese or not. In addition, one of the participants also says that there is another way to show their identity besides speaking the Chinese language. In contrast, the rest of the participants declare that the Chinese language becomes their

identity as a Chinese person. They even say that it is embarrassing if Chinese people cannot speak the Chinese language, which means they lose their culture.

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