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Language attitudes and fluid identities: perceptions from Shenzhen-Hong Kong cross-border students

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ABSTRACT

Shenzhen-Hong Kong cross-border students (CBS) represent a distinctive Hong Kong student community residing in Shenzhen, a city within Mainland China. Their lifestyle bridging these two cities has wielded significant influence over their language attitudes and identities. This research adopts a quantitative approach, conducting a questionnaire survey among 505 CBS individuals to explore their attitudes towards Putonghua, English, Cantonese, and their hometown dialect, as well as their identities. Findings reveal that Putonghua receives the highest ratings in both integrative and instrumental dimensions, the hometown dialect receives the lowest instrumental rating while English scores lowest from the integrative perspective. Notably, CBS demonstrates a stronger Chinese national identity compared to native Hong Kong residents. Their regional identity is characterised by a prevalent 'dual identity' embracing both Shenzhen and Hong Kong. Merely about one-fourth of the students identify with their social role as 'CBS'. Statistical analysis emphasises the tangible impact of CBS' language attitudes on their identities. The frequent and intimate social interactions between CBS and Mainland China emerge as a pivotal factor contributing to their notably more favourable attitude towards Putonghua and heightened national identity, distinguishing them from native Hong Kong residents.

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Introduction

Shenzhen-Hong Kong cross-border students (CBS) represent a distinctive group of students actively engaged in the border regions straddling Hong Kong (HK) and Shenzhen (SZ), an economically advanced city in Mainland China located south of HK. As permanent HK residents with families residing in SZ, CBS attend HK schools from kindergarten to senior high. They commute daily between the two cities on weekdays, spending about two hours daily travelling from SZ to HK for their education. The emergence of CBS as a demographic group dates back to HK's sovereignty transfer to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1997. The increase is linked to the rise in cross-border marriages between HK and Mainland China, as well as the surge in cross-border births resulting from a growth in Mainland Chinese couples giving birth to their children in HK.¹ By 2016, over 200,000 children were born to these couples in HK, and in the 2021–2022 school year, a total of 18,260 CBS were enrolled in HK schools (Hong Kong Education Bureau 2022).

CBS, just as many cross-border Mainland Chinese university students studying in HK (Ma and Holford 2023), encounter an array of adaptation challenges in assimilating into HK due to socio-cultural, political disparities, and differences in educational systems between Mainland China and

HK (Sung 2021). Extensive research has explored their educational experiences, acculturation processes, identity formation, psychological well-being, and interactions with native HK residents (e.g. Song et al. 2023; Waters and Leung 2020; Yuen 2010). However, there exists a significant scarcity of research specifically addressing the language use and language attitudes among CBS, particularly in the context of identity formation, even though HK and SZ demonstrate discernible sociolinguistic distinctions. In SZ, Putonghua, the national language of Mainland China, holds sway as the dominant language, widely used in the government, the workplace and formal education, primarily due to the diverse immigrant population from across the country. Additionally, various local dialects such as Hakka and Cantonese are spoken. Conversely, HK has transitioned into a trilingual milieu following the handover. Putonghua was designated as the third official language, and the ‘Biliteracy and Trilingualism’² policy was introduced. Due to strong economic ties between HK and PRC, increased interactions between individuals from both regions in various sectors, and a rise in Mainland Chinese tourists visiting HK, the use and importance of Putonghua in HK have significantly increased (Sung 2020a). Cantonese maintains its status as the predominant language in everyday life, and it is the most frequently used language in most political, social, and cultural contexts among the Chinese population in HK. English also plays pivotal roles across diverse sectors of HK society, spanning governmental institutions, the mass media sphere, and professional workplaces (Sung 2020b). Additionally, it is regarded as a significant indicator of HK’s international image.

The intricate linguistic landscape of HK and the distinct linguistic hierarchy of Putonghua, Cantonese, and English in the two urban centres have engendered a complex and dynamic linguistic milieu for CBS. Similar to cross-border Mainland Chinese university students studying in HK (Sung 2022), CBS inevitably face the challenge of navigating linguistic differences during their cross-border studies in the multilingual environment of HK. Their daily linguistic experiences frequently entail the use of Cantonese for communication with teachers, classmates within HK educational institutions, and the broader local community. Upon returning to SZ, they seamlessly transition to the use of Putonghua. Furthermore, CBS may switch to the Chinese dialect of their hometown when conversing with their family members. This multifaceted linguistic profile vividly characterises the daily linguistic realities of CBS. This study undertakes an in-depth investigation of language attitudes and identity formation of CBS, utilising quantitative methods. The primary goal is to uncover: (1) How do the language attitudes and identity formation of CBS differ from those of native residents in HK? (2) What relationships exist between the language attitudes and identities of CBS?

Diversity and fluidity of identities

The evolution in identity studies, shaped by discursive or postmodern insights, has profoundly impacted contemporary sociological and sociolinguistic viewpoints on identity. This shift dismisses the notion of fixed, predetermined social categories, redefining identities as fluid, socially constructed frameworks. This redefinition steers away from essentialism, finding its basis in socio-constructionist, strategic, and positional paradigms. It contends that identities are never unified or stable, but are ‘increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions’ (Hall 1996, 4). Social constructionism, as the foundational framework for understanding identity, holds key assumptions. It regards identity not as an inherent product but as a dynamic process: (1) unfolding within specific interactive contexts, (2) generating multiple identities rather than singular constructs, (3) emerging through negotiation and contextualisation, (4) and involving discursive practices (De Fina, Schiffrin, and Bamberg 2006).

Contemporary constructionist research emphasises diversity and fluidity in understanding identities. Social constructionists argue that identities are formed and maintained through social interaction and communication dynamics. They view identities as dynamic, constantly shaped and

altered through these interactions, portraying social identities as fluid constructs evident in linguistic and social exchanges (Gumperz 1982). This perspective acknowledges diverse identity types shaped by language and communication, including national, ethnic, racial, class, professional, age, social role, and gender categories, with some more prescribed while others socially constructed. Importantly, these identity types are neither exclusive nor singular, and ‘individuals, as social actors, experience the multiplicity and interactivity of these levels, in their repertoires of identity’ (Kroskrity 1999, 112).

Faced with the intricate linguistic landscape of SZ and HK, CBS exhibit diverse and hybrid identities. They navigate multiple layers of identities, primarily encompassing national, regional, and social role categories, even within a singular sociopolitical context. Firstly, CBS possess a Chinese national identity, characterised by a profound connection to China and an acknowledgment of Chinese cultural heritage. CBS, like the majority of HK residents, share a deep-seated affinity for China, particularly its culture, taking pride in the cultural heritage of the Chinese nation and also identifying with the industrious spirit of the Chinese people, as well as the breathtaking landscapes of China (Brewer 1999; Lau 2017).

Secondly, they embrace a regional identity as either Hongkongers or Shenzheners due to their daily commute between the two cities. Regional identity refers to the feeling of belonging to an area at the meso-scale, offering a potential response to the question ‘where do I belong to?’ (Smelser and Baltes 2001). Nevertheless, this sense of belonging is not self-evident and its determination frequently stems from a personal or family spatial history, which is increasingly less bound to one specific region (Paasi 2009). For CBS, their response to this inquiry may fluctuate between HK and SZ, resulting in shifts in their regional identity depending on their physical location, toggling between Hongkongers and Shenzheners. Regional identity is rooted in the regional history, the surrounding landscape, a special language or dialect dominating in the region, or even specific regional dishes (Smelser and Baltes 2001). Consequently, the regional identity of CBS is deeply ingrained in both Putonghua, the primary language in SZ, and Cantonese, the predominant language in HK.

Lastly, these students assume a distinct social role identity as CBS, differing from local students in HK and SZ. Role identities constitute discrete elements of self, corresponding to each of the role positions in society that individuals undertake (Burke 1980; Wiley 1991). For instance, a person’s role identities may include the fact that she is a mother, a spouse, a daughter, a scholar, and a blood donor. Role identities offer significance to the self, not just by delineating specific role specifications but also by differentiating roles from pertinent complementary or opposing roles (Hogg, Terry, and White 1995). For instance, the role of mother takes on meaning in connection with the role of father, ‘lawyer’ in connection with ‘client’, and so forth. Consequently, the students attending school in HK while residing in SZ adopt the unique social role as CBS, distinguishing themselves from both local students in HK and SZ. This identity is formally acknowledged by the HK and SZ governments and is deeply integrated into the daily lives of both cities’ residents, establishing the conventional title ‘CBS’ for this specific student group.

The three identities elucidated constitute the layers of the complex CBS identity structure. At the top tier is the Chinese national identity, followed by the regional identity as Hongkongers or Shenzheners at a lower level. Their identity as CBS aligns with the role identity, situated at the lowest tier within this hierarchy. The regional and role identities for these individuals should be subordinate to their overarching Chinese identity.

Prior research on language attitudes and identity in Hong Kong

The discourse on language attitudes and identity in HK dates back to the period before its sovereignty transfer. During the 1980s and 1990s, early investigations focused on whether HK individuals perceived English as a threat to their Chinese cultural identity. Pierson, Fu, and Lee (1980) conducted a prominent study involving 466 secondary students, revealing that English was seen as a threat to Chinese identity. This perception led students to feel unpatriotic when using English

and discomfort when encountering Chinese speakers using English. They suggested English should not be used as a medium of instruction in schools. Thirteen years later, Pennington and Yue (1994) replicated this study with 285 secondary students using a 22-item questionnaire. The findings were consistent with the earlier study, indicating a strong motivation among participants to learn English. However, students surveyed in the 1990s did not view English as a threat to their Chinese cultural identity, nor did they experience discomfort using it. They also did not advocate for abandoning English as a medium of instruction in schools. Instead, English was positively regarded as a valuable international language for understanding foreigners and their culture.

Following HK's handover to China, a new wave of research on language attitudes and identity emerged. Building on Pennington and Yue (1994), Lai (2001) surveyed 134 senior secondary students to explore their attitudes toward Cantonese, English, and Putonghua. The findings showed positive attitudes towards all three languages. English was seen as most beneficial for academic and career growth, Cantonese as their mother tongue, and Putonghua as the language for nationwide communication. Students' attitudes formed a three-tier ethnolinguistic identity: Cantonese or a mix of Cantonese and English represented HK and its regional identity, Putonghua symbolised 'Chineseness' and Chinese cultural identity, and English was associated with a modern Westernised identity. However, the study didn't strongly support Putonghua's role in fostering a stronger national identity. Instead, its rise in popularity was mainly due to its growing practical value.

Subsequent studies by Lai echoed similar outcomes. In Lai (2005), participants displayed a strong inclination towards Cantonese, viewing English as having the highest instrumental value and social status, while Putonghua received the lowest ratings from both integrative and instrumental perspectives. These results emphasised the enduring popularity of Cantonese as a significant language variety in HK, acting as a crucial marker of its identity. Moreover, the significance of English shifted from being merely an international language in the early 1990s to becoming another identifier of HK's identity. Lai (2011) concluded that participants' generally positive attitudes towards the three language varieties indicated an ongoing process fostering multiple identities at different levels – local, national, and international. This suggested a continued convergence of HK and Chinese identity, effectively balancing different identities and languages in HK.

Edwards (2015) noted that tertiary students in HK generally held moderately positive attitudes towards Hong Kong English (HKE), the prevalent form of English favoured in the region. They not only acknowledged HKE's presence but also its role in representing HK's identity. The study revealed that embracing HKE and affiliating with a local HK identity notably influenced language attitudes, correlating with more positive views of HKE and its credibility. A subsequent study by Edwards (2019) revealed a significant increase in the acceptance of speaking HKE from 2014 to 2017. The study noted a growing trend of adopting HKE, in conjunction with Cantonese, to embody a distinct local HK identity, aiming for both linguistic and cultural differentiation from PRC.

Expanding on Lai (2005), a recent study Park and Uhm (2020) produced similar findings on language attitudes in HK. The study concluded that people in HK have maintained consistent attitudes towards the three official languages in the region over twenty-three years following the sovereignty transfer. This continuity emphasises the close connection between language attitudes in HK and the region's distinctive local identity.

In summary, previous research indicates consistent language attitudes among HK residents in the postcolonial era. Cantonese remains the primary local language for intragroup communication, holding a central position as a distinctive marker of HK's identity. English has sustained its significance, transitioning from a global language to a vital symbol of HK's identity, alongside Cantonese. Bilingualism in Cantonese and English is integral to the construction of the local identity, increasingly emphasised since the handover to establish a conspicuous HK identity that sets them apart from Mainland China. In contrast, Putonghua is perceived as the least significant language, trailing behind Cantonese and English in linguistic importance within HK, despite expected accommodations due to growing cultural and economic interactions with Mainland China.

Measurement scales of language attitudes

Language attitudes can be succinctly defined as *evaluative responses towards language* (Dragojevic et al. 2021). In accordance with this perspective, language attitudes encapsulate not only assessments of language varieties and speakers, but also broader sociolinguistic phenomena like bilingualism, multilingualism, code-switching, and language preservation. The challenge emerges concerning how to effectively measure language attitudes. With roots in social psychology and sociolinguistics dating back almost a century, language attitude research has extensively explored the multidimensional nature of these attitudes (Santello 2015). Scholars have deliberately emphasised the inherent multidimensionality in their devised measurement tools. One widely used model in this context is the ABC model (Liang 2015). This model delineates attitudes into three intertwined components: affect, behaviour, and cognition, commonly described through action verbs: ‘feel’, ‘do’, and ‘think’. Guided by the model, the exploration of language attitudes involves creating suitable measurement instruments or scales to evaluate these components. Among them, two notable studies, Zahn and Hopper (1985) and Baker (1992), have outlined the most prominent dimensions or components in significantly different ways.

Zahn and Hopper (1985) introduced an assessment tool that captures three dimensions: *superiority* (e.g. upper class-lower class), *attractiveness* (e.g. nice-awful), and *dynamism* (e.g. active-passive), using 30 pairs of semantic differential items distributed across these aspects. Meanwhile, Baker’s model proposed two dimensions for language attitudes: instrumental orientation and integrative orientation, derived from Gardner’s sociocultural model (Gardner 2001). Instrumental orientation signifies a positive stance towards a language for practical reasons like economic advancement or social recognition. Conversely, integrative orientation indicates a positive emotional connection with a language and its community, fostering a sense of belonging. Baker’s (1992) model has been widely applied to assess attitudes toward Putonghua, Cantonese, and English, both in HK (e.g. Lai 2011; Park and Uhm 2020) and Mainland China (e.g. Ng and Zhao 2015). The survey in this study was also based on this model.

To address diverse linguistic contexts, Schoel et al. (2013) developed ‘the Attitude toward Languages (AToL) Scale’, comprising three evaluative dimensions: *structure* (e.g. structured-unstructured), *value* (e.g. ugly-beautiful), and *sound* (e.g. harsh-soft). This scale emphasises the *structure* of language varieties, focusing on their systematic and logical aspects. Notably, Santello (2015) introduced three distinctive idiosyncratic dimensions of language attitudes within a bilingual context: *attractiveness* (e.g. ugly-beautiful), *superiority* (e.g. unimportant-important), and *efficiency* (e.g. impractical-practical). A noteworthy feature that sets this scale apart from its counterparts is the reduction in the number of paired semantic differential items to 14, as compared to 30 in the scale of Zahn and Hopper (1985) and 15 in the scale of Schoel et al. (2013).

A parallel trend in the exploration of language attitudes is evident in the realm of Chinese academic discourse. Chen (1999) employed a model comprising ten evaluation dimensions, including criteria such as *friendliness*, *usefulness*, and *melodicity*, to gauge the attitudes of Chinese Singaporeans towards Putonghua and English. Subsequently, Ni et al. (2004) organised Chen’s ten evaluation criteria into three overarching factors: *affection*, *status*, and *applicability*. They highlighted the central role of *affection* and *status* as core determinants in shaping the attitudes of international students towards the Chinese language, particularly when acquired as a second language in China. Wu (2007) introduced a model featuring four evaluation criteria, specifically *melodicity*, *warmness*, *usefulness*, and *status*, in order to explore the interplay between language attitudes and language behaviour among Chinese ethnic minority college students in Beijing.

Following that, Wu’s model gained considerable traction and became widely adopted in China’s academic sphere, featuring prominently in various research studies (e.g. Chen 2012; Liu and Li 2020). Consequently, the present survey on language attitudes among CBS heavily relies on Wu’s model because of its wide applicability in the Chinese context. Additionally, its straightforward criteria for assessment align well with the age group of the participants, who are young children.

Research design

This study employed structured questionnaires as a direct method to measure the language attitudes and identities of CBS. The survey was conducted in 2022 at three ‘HK Style’ CBS tutor centres³ situated in the Nanshan, Futian, and Luohu Districts of SZ. A total of 505 students from 3rd grade and above in primary schools were invited to take part in an online questionnaire, available in both traditional and simplified Chinese. Their respective tutors supervised the questionnaire administration. Among the participants, 260 were male and 245 were female. The majority, 475 students, had more than three years of experience in cross-border education.

To ensure data robustness and validity, focus group interviews were conducted to cross-check and validate the questionnaire survey findings. However, due to space limitations, this article focuses solely on the results derived from the questionnaire survey.

Part One of the questionnaire collected personal information, home language, and self-ascribed identities based on the frameworks developed by Lau (1997) and Lai (2011). Participants were tasked to categorise their national identity as ‘Hongkongers’, ‘Chinese’, ‘HK Chinese’, ‘Chinese Hongkongers’ or ‘I’m not sure’. The terms ‘HK Chinese’ and ‘Chinese Hongkongers’ were utilised to explore the complexities of ‘dual identity’. Similarly, participants self-ascribed their regional identity (‘Hongkongers’, ‘Shenzheners’, ‘HK Shenzheners’, ‘SZ Hongkongers’ or ‘I’m not sure’) and social role identity (‘HK primary/secondary school students’, ‘CBS’, ‘Shuangfei’⁴, ‘New immigrants’ or ‘I’m not sure’). To assess how strong participants’ identities were, they were also prompted to employ a rating scale ranging from ‘1’ to ‘5’, where ‘5’ indicated exceptionally strong, ‘1’ represented exceedingly weak, and ‘3’ indicated a neutral stance.

Part Two of the questionnaire contained 16 statements exploring CBS’ attitudes towards Putonghua, Cantonese, English, and, if applicable, their hometown dialect.⁵ Drawing inspiration from Baker (1992) and Wu (2007), these items used a five-point Likert scale ranging from ‘5’ for the most positive to ‘1’ for the most negative responses. They were categorised into two dimensions: the integrative dimension focused on perceptions of *melodicity* and *warmness* in languages, focusing on whether the language varieties were perceived as having melodic and warm qualities by the participants; the instrumental dimension assessed the perceived *usefulness* and *social status* of these languages, concentrating on whether the participants believed the language varieties were useful and held high social status.

Findings

This section elucidates the findings from the inquiry into the attitudes of CBS towards Putonghua, Cantonese, English, and their hometown dialect, while also exploring their perceptions of national, regional, and social role identity. Additionally, we thoroughly investigate the impact of language attitudes on the identities of CBS, employing correlation analysis and multiple linear regression analysis as analytical tools.

Language attitudes of CBS

As illustrated in Table 1, the most significant divergence in language attitudes is observed concerning Putonghua, exhibiting substantial favourability in both integrative and instrumental dimensions compared to the other three language varieties. Conversely, the hometown dialect holds notably less esteem, with all the mean values hovering around the 3.0 threshold, and notably, the mean for the instrumental dimension falling below 3.0 (Mean = 2.83). Intriguingly, upon scrutiny through item analysis, participants manifest the belief that their home dialect emanates a warmer affective quality (Mean = 3.29) in comparison to English, with English emerging as the least linguistically warm language to them (Mean = 2.94). Evidently, the hometown dialect assumes the role of

Table 1. Language attitudes of CBS ($N = 505$).

Dimensions	Items	Putonghua		Cantonese		English		Dialect	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Integrative Dimension	Mean	4.41	0.67	3.85	0.90	3.22	1.02	3.27	1.13
	melodicity	4.42	0.74	4.01	0.95	3.51	1.12	3.26	1.19
	warmness	4.40	0.80	3.71	1.03	2.94	1.14	3.29	1.27
Instrumental Dimension	Mean	4.32	0.81	3.75	0.85	4.13	0.98	2.83	0.99
	usefulness	4.57	0.72	4.05	0.91	4.21	1.05	3.04	1.19
	social status	4.08	1.26	3.45	1.08	4.06	1.21	2.62	1.11

Note: SD, standard deviation.

the least prominent and subordinate linguistic code for CBS, primarily employed in communication with their parents or grandparents.

Evident disparities are observable in the attitudes of CBS towards Putonghua, Cantonese, and English. Among these three languages, participants exhibit the highest degree of integrative inclination towards Putonghua (Mean = 4.41) and perceive it as the language of the highest instrumental value (Mean = 4.32). In contrast, Cantonese receives the lowest instrumental rating (Mean = 3.75), while English scores lowest from the integrative perspective (Mean = 3.22). Notably, item analysis unveils an overwhelmingly positive disposition towards Putonghua, as all item means exceed 4. In terms of *melodicity*, both Putonghua (Mean = 4.42) and Cantonese (Mean = 4.01) are perceived as highly melodic by participants. Furthermore, all three languages are considered highly utilitarian, as indicated by means for *usefulness* exceeding 4. Regarding *social status*, Putonghua (Mean = 4.08) marginally surpasses English (Mean = 4.06) and is accorded the highest ranking by participants. Putonghua is thus perceived as holding the highest social status among the languages under examination.

Diverse identities of CBS

Table 2 illustrates that the prevalence of a ‘dual identity’ is conspicuous within the spheres of national and regional identity. Concerning national identity, the combined proportion of the two dual identities, namely ‘HK Chinese’ (43.6%) and ‘Chinese Hongkongers’ (16.0%), stands notably high at 59.6%. Additionally, 37.0% of the participants self-identify as ‘Chinese’. Consequently, it can be inferred that the overall proportion of participants who partially or wholly identify themselves as ‘Chinese’ reaches an impressive 96.6%. This indicates a remarkably strong Chinese national identity within the CBS community.

Turning to regional identity, the combined proportion of the two dual identities, specifically ‘SZ Hongkongers’ (38.8%) and ‘HK Shenzheners’ (37.8%), reaches a substantial 76.6%. Evidently, the majority of participants maintain a dual regional identity, identifying themselves as both ‘Hongkongers’ and ‘Shenzheners’. This dual identity is rooted in a profound sense of connection to both cities, given their daily commuting between the two. Conversely, fewer than 10% of participants opt for a singular identity as either ‘Hongkongers’ (9.9%) or ‘Shenzheners’ (8.5%). This underscores the

Table 2. Overview of CBS’ identities (frequency/percentage) ($N = 505$).

National identity	Chinese 187/37.0	Hongkongers 8/1.6	HK Chinese 220/43.6	Chinese Hongkongers 81/16.0	I’m not sure 9/1.8
Regional identity	Hongkongers 50/9.9	Shenzheners 43/8.5	SZ Hongkongers 196/38.8	HK Shenzheners 191/37.8	I’m not sure 25/5.0
Role identity	HK primary/secondary school students 260/51.5	CBS 131/25.9	‘Shuangfei’ 8/1.6	New immigrants 3/0.6	I’m not sure 103/20.4

predominance of the dual identification of ‘Shenzheners’ and ‘Hongkongers’ as the prevailing regional identity among CBS.

In the segment on role identity survey, participants were tasked with specifying their preferred term of address by HK residents. Notably, 51.5% of participants express a preference to be addressed as ‘HK primary/secondary school students’. This preference indicates that a majority of participants are disinclined to embrace the label ‘CBS’ when interacting with native residents in HK. Instead, they aim to be seen as equal to local citizens, aspiring to be perceived as typical primary/secondary school students in HK. This aspiration for equal treatment aims to foster their inclusion rather than exclusion within the category of HK students. Additionally, 25.9% of participants lean towards being identified as ‘CBS’, signifying that more than a quarter of them recognise and accept their identity as CBS. It is noteworthy that a significant portion of participants, specifically 20.4%, choose the response ‘I’m not sure’. This observation highlights that over one-fifth of the participants grapple with uncertainty regarding their role identity.

For a deeper understanding of the nuanced identities among CBS, participants were asked to rate the strength of their identities on a 1–5 scale. The findings in Table 3 highlight that the strength of Chinese national identity stands notably high (Mean = 4.80), indicating a robust national identity among CBS, consistent with the results in Table 2. Additionally, participants’ strength of regional identity as ‘Hongkongers’ is comparatively lower (Mean = 3.93), distinctly below the strength of national identity and role identity (Mean = 4.50). This relatively diminished emphasis on HK regional identity aligns with the predominance of the ‘dual identity’ encompassing both ‘Shenzheners’ and ‘Hongkongers’ among CBS, as observed in Table 2. Regarding their role identity as CBS, the mean score is 4.50, indicating a strong awareness of their group affiliation among a substantial majority of participants. This distinction sets them apart not only from local HK students but also from local SZ students.

Robust relationships between language attitudes and identities of CBS

To explore the link between language attitudes and the identities of CBS, we conducted correlation analyses. The results presented in Table 4 indicate statistically significant positive correlations between CBS’ attitude towards Putonghua (PthAtt) and the strength of their identities as Chinese (strength of national identity, SNI) ($r = 0.197, p < 0.01$), Hongkongers (strength of HK regional identity, SHKRI) ($r = 0.149, p < 0.01$), as well as CBS (strength of role identity, SRI) ($r = 0.132, p < 0.01$). Similarly, statistically significant correlations exist between CBS’ attitude toward Cantonese (CanAtt) and their SNI ($r = 0.104, p < 0.05$), SHKRI ($r = 0.442, p < 0.01$), and SRI ($r = 0.217, p <$

Table 3. Strength of identity as Chinese, Hongkongers and CBS ($N = 505$).

	Strength of national identity as Chinese	Strength of regional identity as Hongkongers	Strength of role identity as CBS
Mean	4.80	3.93	4.50
SD	0.51	0.94	0.75

Table 4. Results of correlations between language attitudes and identities of CBS.

	PthAtt	CanAtt	EngAtt	DiaAtt	SHKRI	SNI	SRI
PthAtt	1						
CanAtt	0.541	1					
EngAtt	0.396	0.482	1				
DiaAtt	0.206	0.233	0.306	1			
SHKRI	0.149**	0.442**	0.232**	0.006	1		
SNI	0.197**	0.104*	0.086	0.040	0.219	1	
SRI	0.132**	0.217**	0.162**	0.011	0.317	0.362	1

Note: * significant at $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed); ** significant at $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed).

0.01). Furthermore, significant correlations are observed between CBS' attitude towards English (EngAtt) and their SHKRI ($r = 0.232, p < 0.01$) and SRI ($r = 0.162, p < 0.01$). Remarkably, no evident correlation is observed between CBS' attitude towards their hometown dialect (DiaAtt) and the three identities.

It is crucial to highlight that among these correlations, only the link between CanAtt and SHKRI reaches a moderate level ($r = 0.442, p < 0.01$), while the remaining correlations demonstrate small or very small strength. Essentially, these findings indicate that more positive PthAtt and CanAtt are associated with higher levels of SNI, SHKRI, and SRI. Similarly, a more favourable EngAtt correlates with elevated levels of SHKRI and SRI.

Correlation analysis provides insights into the degree of association between two variables, but it does not establish causation between them. To explore potential causal relationships between language attitudes and the identities of CBS, this study conducted multiple linear regression analyses on the variables that exhibited significant correlations. Specifically, regression analyses were employed to assess the influence of CBS' language attitudes as independent variables on their identities as dependent variables.

The initial multiple linear regression analysis was conducted, with SNI as the dependent variable, while gender and age were controlled as covariates. PthAtt and CanAtt were considered as the independent variables. The results outlined in Table 5 show that despite a significant positive correlation between SNI and CanAtt, the predictive influence of CanAtt on SNI lacks statistical significance ($\beta = 0.007, p > 0.05$). Conversely, the predictive impact of PthAtt on SNI proves to be statistically significant ($\beta = 0.201, p < 0.01$), accounting for 4.6% ($R^2 = 0.046$) of the variance in SNI.

Following this, another multiple linear regression analysis was performed, using SHKRI as the dependent variable, while controlling gender and age as covariates. PthAtt, CanAtt, and EngAtt were employed as the independent variables. The outcomes presented in Table 5 demonstrate the statistically significant predictive impact of CanAtt on SHKRI ($\beta = 0.492, p < 0.01$). However, the predictive influence of EngAtt on SHKRI lacks statistical significance ($\beta = 0.048, p > 0.05$). Interestingly, a negative regression relationship is observed between PthAtt and SHKRI ($\beta = -0.093, p < 0.05$), despite a positive correlation indicated in Table 4. Consequently, a disparity exists between the correlation and linear regression findings regarding PthAtt and SHKRI. In this context, the conclusions drawn from the correlation analysis take precedence.⁶ Specifically, there's only a positive correlation and no observable regression relationship between PthAtt and SHKRI. To summarise, the sole identified regression relationship exists between CanAtt and SHKRI, explaining 21.2% ($R^2 = 0.212$) of the variance in SHKRI.

Moving to the concluding phase, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted, utilising SRI as the dependent variable, while controlling gender and age as covariates. The independent variables considered were PthAtt, CanAtt, and EngAtt. The findings depicted in Table 5 show that CanAtt emerges as a statistically significant predictor of SRI ($\beta = 0.179, p < 0.01$), accounting for 5.4% ($R^2 = 0.054$) of the variance in SRI. Conversely, both PthAtt ($\beta = 0.024, p > 0.05$) and EngAtt ($\beta = 0.075, p > 0.05$) do not exhibit statistical significance in forecasting SRI.

Table 5. Results of multiple linear regressions between language attitudes and identities of CBS.

Models		Unstandardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients		<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²
		<i>B</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t</i>		
SNI	PthAtt	0.174	0.038	0.201	3.790	0.001**	0.046
	CanAtt	0.009	0.032	0.007	0.128	0.898	
SHKRI	PthAtt	-0.147	0.07	-0.093	-2.977	0.04*	0.212
	CanAtt	0.589	0.057	0.492	9.011	0.001**	
	EngAtt	0.055	0.053	0.048	1.116	0.265	
SRI	PthAtt	0.004	0.06	0.024	0.464	0.643	0.054
	CanAtt	0.15	0.05	0.179	3.257	0.001**	
	EngAtt	0.046	0.39	0.075	1.481	0.139	

Note: * significant at $p < 0.05$; ** significant at $p < 0.01$.

Discussions

This section highlights the differences in attitudes towards Putonghua, Cantonese, and English between CBS and native HK residents. Additionally, it emphasises the contrasts in national identity between these two groups. Furthermore, it discusses the profound impact of CBS' frequent social interactions with Mainland China on their language attitudes and national identity.

Differences in language attitudes between CBS and native HK residents

Similar to local students in HK (Lai 2011), CBS display positive attitudes towards Putonghua, Cantonese, and English. However, notable differences in language attitudes exist between CBS and native HK residents (Lai 2005; 2011; Park and Uhm 2020). Firstly, Putonghua significantly dominates among CBS, with their integrative and instrumental evaluations of Putonghua surpassing those of Cantonese and English. Their appraisal of Putonghua's social status even rivals that of English. This sharply contrasts with native HK residents, who rate Putonghua the lowest in integrative and instrumental terms. Secondly, Cantonese holds paramount importance as the heritage language for native HK residents; it serves as their mother tongue and a significant marker of their HK identity, resulting in their strongest emotional connection to Cantonese. Conversely, CBS exhibit lower emotional attachment to Cantonese compared to Putonghua. Thirdly, native HK residents place exceedingly high instrumental value on English, deeming it crucial for academic and career advancements. By contrast, CBS prioritise Putonghua with the highest instrumental value.

Differences in national identity between CBS and native HK residents

To explore the parallels and disparities in national identity between CBS and native HK residents, we conducted a comparative analysis aligning our data with insights from a longitudinal survey conducted bi-annually since 2013 by the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute (PORI). PORI survey targeted individuals aged 18 and above residing in HK. As delineated in Table 6, our examination entailed contrasting their survey data from June 2022 with our independent findings (PORI site 2022). Table 6 reveals a prevailing dual identity among both native HK residents and CBS. However, the dual identity proportion within CBS is approximately 17% higher. Notably, a significant contrast emerges in perceptions of a singular HK identity, standing notably low at 1.6% among CBS. In contrast, their Chinese identity is markedly higher, reaching a substantial 37%, surpassing that of native HK residents by a considerable margin.

Impact of social contact on language attitudes and national identity

Previous investigations have provided valuable insights into how intercultural and social interactions shape individuals' language attitudes (Dörnyei 2001; MacIntyre 2002). In the realm of exploring the attitudinal foundations of second language acquisition, significant effects of substantial contact have also been underscored. For example, studies focusing on study trips, delving into the impact of extended stays abroad on students' language attitudes, have elucidated this phenomenon (Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern 2002). Dörnyei and Csizér (2005) have observed a positive correlation between the depth of contact and the improvement of language attitudes in most

Table 6. Differences in national identity between native HK residents and CBS.

	Hongkongers	Chinese	Dual identity	I'm not sure	Total
Native HK residents	39.1%	17.6%	42.3%	1%	100%
CBS	1.6%	37%	59.6%	1.8%	100%

interaction scenarios. They argue that intercultural and inter-group interactions wield substantial influence in shaping language attitudes at a national level.

The frequent and close social interactions between CBS and Mainland China constitute a primary factor leading to their notably more favourable and positive attitude toward Putonghua, compared to native HK residents. Despite being HK citizens attending school in the region, CBS return to reside in SZ outside of school hours, on weekends, and during holidays. This lifestyle allows them to sustain deep and extensive involvement across various aspects of SZ society. CBS' primary social connections, living environment, and friendships are rooted in Mainland China. Given that Putonghua serves as the dominant language in SZ, the frequent interactions between CBS and the broader SZ society inevitably exert a favourable influence on their attitudes towards Putonghua.

Regular interactions with Mainland China have additionally had a constructive impact on the national identity formation of CBS. Due to their extended stay in SZ, CBS have encountered and been shaped by the social, historical, and cultural dimensions of Mainland China. Consequently, they naturally develop a deeper sense of belonging to China. Their sense of national identity is likely to be more pronounced in comparison to native HK residents who have primarily resided in HK without substantial exposure to or comprehension of Mainland China's social facets.

It is argued that HK commenced the development of a distinct identity and culture separate from Mainland China in the 1950s (So 2011). The local sentiment of belonging among the people of HK was solidified and strengthened due to the HK government's imposition of stricter immigration controls, particularly since the late 1970s (Ku 2004). A significant consequence of the restricted influx of Mainland immigrants has been the consistent maintenance of a predominantly locally born population, which has remained at approximately 60% in recent decades. The majority of young individuals are native HK residents, as evidenced by 2021 data, indicating that 90.5% of those under 18 and 70.8% of those aged 15–34 were born in HK (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department 2021). Moreover, they have had limited direct exposure to Mainland Chinese people and culture. Within this context, being born and raised in HK has led to a diminished sense of belonging to China. This significant segment of locally born youth is argued to contribute to the cultivation of a local identity while simultaneously diminishing their sense of affiliation with China.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study underscore the influential role of language attitudes within a social group in shaping their identity, a relationship empirically reinforced through statistical analysis in this paper. The research outcomes presented here provide strong empirical backing for exploring the influence of language attitudes on identity, notably emphasising the significant link between attitudes towards Putonghua and Chinese national identity. However, previous investigations into the language attitudes of the student population in HK have indicated that there is a lack of robust evidence demonstrating the impact of Putonghua on the promotion of a heightened national identity (Lai 2001).

The language attitudes of CBS wield considerable influence over their process of identity formation. The predictive capacity of these students' attitudes towards Putonghua on their national identity is statistically significant. Additionally, their attitudes towards Cantonese also demonstrate a statistically notable predictive impact on both their HK regional identity and their role identity as CBS. It is noteworthy that a significant positive correlation exists between CBS' attitudes towards Putonghua and their HK regional identity. In other words, a positive and favourable attitude towards Putonghua not only does not adversely affect their HK regional identity but rather fosters and strengthens their sense of belonging to HK. Consequently, it facilitates their adaptation to the schooling and living environment in HK, enabling them to more effectively assimilate into HK society and become integral members thereof.

This study highlights the pivotal role of social interactions in shaping language attitudes and identities of groups. CBS, as a unique subgroup among HK students, demonstrate language

attitudes and identities that notably differ from those of native HK residents. Whether in terms of the integrative or instrumental dimension, CBS exhibit significantly more positive attitudes towards Putonghua, with Putonghua being the dominant language among CBS community. Furthermore, CBS demonstrate a heightened sense of national identity towards China in comparison to local residents of HK, while displaying a comparatively much lower attachment to HK regional identity. These distinctive characteristics of CBS in their attitudes towards Putonghua and their identities are closely interlinked with their residency and daily life in the city of SZ, as well as their extensive involvement with Mainland Chinese society.

Notes

1. The Court of Final Appeal of HK revised HK's 'Right of Abode' on July 20, 2001. The ruling affirmed that Chinese nationals born in HK have an inherent right to claim residency there. This extended to children born to Mainland Chinese couples through cross-border birth, granting them HK residency and access to education services provided by the HK government.
2. The term 'Biliteracy and Trilingualism' denotes the utilisation of standard English and Chinese in written forms, while spoken varieties encompass English, Cantonese, and Putonghua.
3. Many CBS, like other students in HK, attend tutoring centres after regular school hours. The Mainland side of the SZ-HK border has a thriving tutoring industry tailored for CBS. Tutors typically communicate with CBS in Cantonese.
4. In HK, the term 'Shuangfei' is often used for children born to Mainland Chinese parents, indicating 'dual negation' as neither parent holds HK residency. This label highlights the discrimination and bias faced by these children in the city.
5. Some CBS have Cantonese as their native dialect. Others might have parents who speak a different Chinese dialect, which becomes the primary family language.
6. In statistical analysis, discrepancies can arise between correlation and linear regression outcomes. Sometimes, there's no correlation but a notable regression relationship, or a positive correlation aligns with a negative regression. In such cases, prioritising conclusions from the correlation analysis is advisable. These discrepancies might stem from a suppression effect, causing these analytical challenges.

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