

## “Chinese Languages spoken in Mauritius: an overview.”

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### Abstract

Up to now, studies on the Chinese community of Mauritius have mainly focused on Chinese immigration and settlement from a historical point of view and little attention has been given to Chinese languages and linguistic practices involving Chinese languages. Although different varieties of Chinese are spoken in Mauritius, namely Hakka, Hokkien, Cantonese, and to some extent, Standard Mandarin, the few studies on Chinese languages of Mauritius have focused on the Meixian-Hakka language, which is often seen as the only variety spoken in Mauritius. In this article I provide an overview of the Chinese languages spoken in Mauritius from a sociolinguistic perspective. I give an introduction about the history of Chinese immigration to Mauritius in order to understand how these varieties have led to today’s situation and will show that the Chinese community of Mauritius is not as homogeneous as it is often believed to be. I will try to classify the different speakers according to the Chinese variety they speak and their situation, giving concrete examples of families in which this particular variety is spoken. I will show that the Chinese languages spoken in Mauritius can be classified between ancestral transmitted ones and imported vehicular ones.

Key words: Chinese languages; Language Contact; Mauritian Chinese; Ancestral languages.

### 1. Introduction

Up to now, studies on the Chinese community of Mauritius mainly focussed on Chinese immigration and settlement from historical point of view (Song: 2001; Ly-Tio-Fane: 2008). Other studies on the Sino-Mauritian community discuss the Chinese diasporas, social integration, cultural practices (Xu: 1993; Lau: 2006; Carter & Ng Foong Kwong: 2009), cultural transmission and evolution (Wu: 2009) from a synchronic perspective referring to historical elements. However, little attention has been given to Chinese languages and linguistic practices involving Chinese languages. Although different varieties of Chinese are spoken in Mauritius, namely Hakka, Hokkien, Cantonese, and to some extent, Standard Mandarin, the few studies on the particularities of the Chinese languages of Mauritius have focused on the Meixian-Hakka language, which is often seen

as the only variety spoken in Mauritius. Meixian-Hakka has been briefly discussed from typological (Liu: 1990; Xin: 1992) and a sociolinguistic (Shao: 1999, Gan: 2007) perspectives in short articles by Chinese scholars and written in Chinese. These are short introductions to the problem and so far, no scientific research has been conducted on Mauritian Chinese languages or contact situation involving Chinese. Moreover, and as far as I am aware, there has been no systemic research conducted to identify and list the different varieties of Chinese spoken in Mauritius, and no classification of the speakers has so far been provided. Other studies discussing Chinese language in Mauritius focus on Standard Mandarin language acquisition (Xu: 2015), pedagogy (Lin & Xia: 2015) and teaching in multicultural environment (Yang: 2013). These studies focus on linguistic interferences from the students' point of view, are more related to didactics rather than to socio-linguistics and raise the problem of the 'Chinese ancestral language' perception in Mauritius.

As literature on Chinese languages in Mauritius are almost nonexistent, it is important, in my opinion, to start with general considerations and observations on this subject. In this article, I will give an introduction on Chinese languages spoken in Mauritius from a sociolinguistic perspective. It is a preliminary work based on data collected during field observations in different contexts and interviews conducted with about 50 informants between 2016 and 2018. Primary data have been collected in the context of participant observations during socio-cultural events organised by the Chinese Cultural Center, the Chinese Embassy, the League of Chinese Associations, the Chinese Universities Students Association and the Chinese Alumni Association. Other information has been collected from students during classes I gave as a Part-time lecturer at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute for Chinese Studies Program (Diploma and Masters degree) and other private conversations with friends. Except for the informants present during the Chinese Alumni Association events, all the other informants are of Chinese origin, either born in Mauritius or in China. The informants have all shared their personal stories during one to one informal interviews and discussions. The subject of conversation about Chinese language was most of the time coming from the informant him/herself and they were always willing to share their experience and relationship with Chinese language naturally and spontaneously. The data have been classified according to four criteria: 1. Type of variety(ies) spoken by the informant, 2. Origin of the informant (born and raise in China or in Mauritius), 3. Family's linguistic background and 4. Education received in Chinese language. The information has

then been analysed in order to provide a preliminary classification of speakers. I do not aim to give precise statistics and numbers of speakers of each variety as a complete survey of the Chinese community would be needed, but rather to provide a qualitative description of the facts that have been observed and the data collected.

First, I will give an introduction about the history of Chinese immigration to Mauritius in order to understand how these varieties have led to today's situation and will show that the Chinese community of Mauritius is not as homogeneous as it is often believed to be. I will try to classify the different speakers according to the Chinese variety they speak and their situation, giving concrete examples of families in which this particular variety is spoken. I will show that the Chinese languages spoken in Mauritius can be classified between ancestral transmitted ones and imported vehicular ones.

## **2. Chinese migration to Mauritius and Chinese communities**

As the subject of Chinese immigration to Mauritius as already been detailed in other studies (Tsang Mang Kin: 2009, Carter & Ng Foong Kwong: 2009, etc.), I will only give here only a brief introduction to the subject. Chinese migration to Mauritius can be divided into 5 periods, beginning from British rule in the early 1800's to today.

The first Chinese nationals to come to Mauritius were originally from the Province of Fujian, situated on the south-western coast of China (see map 1), during the early 1800's. They are known as the 'Fokien' (also sometimes found as Fukien) or 'Hokkien' people in Mauritius, in reference to their original region (Fujian-福建), which is pronounced differently depending on the dialect used. Most of them were merchants that by law were not allowed to bring their families along with them. Also, they were not allowed to buy land as they would have to give up their Chinese citizenship and adopt the British one in order to do so. Therefore, many of them have intermarried with creoles and Indian women (Ly-Tio-Fane Pineo: 2008) in order to settle families and buy land in their spouse's name. As most of the Chinese from this community have mixed with other ethnic groups, they are perceived as 'sino-creoles'. However, the members of this groups are often very proud of their ancestors and consider themselves as Chinese.

The second wave of immigration from China originates from the Guangdong province (广东) situated in the South of China. According to estimate provided in secondary sources, between 1833 and 1846 around 400 immigrants from Fukien and Canton came to settle in

Mauritius (Carter & Ng Foong Kwong: 2009). The later ones came mainly from the region of the city of Guangzhou (also known as Canton - 广州) and more precisely from the district of Shunde (顺德) during the mid-1800's. Part of them were coolies that came through Hong Kong and were sent to Mauritius as workers through Britain's colonial network. Others were merchants and craftsmen. The Chinese nationals from the Guangdong province are known as the "Cantonese" and "Namsum" (南顺) in Mauritius. The Chinese of Cantonese origin in Mauritius have their own separate associations, societies and events (e.g. Nam Sum Society in Port Louis).

During the late 1800's to the mid-1900's, the number of Chinese nationals migrating to Mauritius grew considerably. Most of them were Hakkas from the region of Meixian (梅县) also known as Moyen in the Hakka language, which was the name commonly used before the People's Republic of China (founded in 1949), and which is situated in the Guangdong Province (see map 1). By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Hakkas were more numerous than Cantonese and Fukienese together (Ly-Tio-Fane Pineo: 2008). Among other reasons, they came to Mauritius to escape from the Taiping rebellion repression between 1841 and 1865 (Carter & Ng Foong Kwong: 2009). By that time, women were allowed to come to Mauritius, which changed the Chinese community's demographics and contributed to the growth of the Chinese Community. The Hakkas became reluctant to intermarry with other ethnic group members and began to organise marriage with Chinese women from Mainland China to keep the community 'pure' from other blood. Some women were even known as 'marriage breakers' as they were putting a lot of pressure and effort to break interethnic marriages of Chinese men in order to remarry them with Chinese women. With the Moyen Hakka's community growing, tensions with the Cantonese community arose<sup>1</sup> and led many Cantonese to re-settle to Reunion Island and Madagascar.

The end of the civil war between communists and nationalists and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 was a turning point in the history of Chinese immigration to Mauritius. Between the 1950's and the 1980's, contacts were considerably reduced and Chinese immigration from Mainland China almost completely stopped. The

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<sup>1</sup> Animosity between Hakkas and Cantonese origins from existing conflicts between the two Chinese communities in mainland China, and which have started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. See for example Leong: 1997; Luo: 1940.

well-establish flow of Chinese women from Meixian to Mauritius was not possible anymore. During this period, women from Nationalist Taiwan, which is also an area where Hakka people have settled, came to Mauritius to marry local Hakka Chinese and constituted a small parallel community. Until the retrocession to the People's Republic of China in 1997, investors and merchants from Hong Kong were also encouraged to come to Mauritius to start their own trading businesses. However, only a few migrated permanently to Mauritius. On the other hand, a lot of Sino-Mauritians migrated to Canada, the United States and Australia, reducing considerably the Chinese community of Mauritius<sup>2</sup>.

After 1980 and the initiation of Chinese economic reforms (改革开放 Gǎigé kāifàng, literally: "reform and opening-up"), the People's Republic of China began to open up, and migration to Mauritius slowly began again. The old network of Hakka women from Meixian coming to Mauritius to marry local Chinese was put back in place. In parallel, many women from all over China came to Mauritius as workers in textile factories. Most of them went back to China after their contract was completed but some of them married local Chinese men and settled their families in Mauritius.

As from the 1990's, the government of the People's Republic of China has encouraged Mauritian citizens to go to China as students and offered a great number of scholarships. Some of these students, of which most were of non-Chinese origins, came back to Mauritius with Chinese spouses, creating a new community of mixed couples, a new generation of "Sino-creole".

From the above, it is easy to understand that the Chinese community of Mauritius is far from being homogeneous and so is the community of Chinese languages speakers.

It is important to note that, a large part of the Sino-Mauritian Community has abandoned their 'ancestral language' to shift to Creole, French and to some extent English as their home language. Part of the reason being that some Sino-Mauritian have intentionally or unintentionally lost contact with Mainland China after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Therefore, Chinese was considered useless in society as, for example, trade with China was not possible anymore. Also, an emotional clash was created as the ancestral land was not accessible anymore and some communists intellectual currents were willing to abandon part of the Chinese traditions in order to create a new modern China (Nivison: 1956). Indeed, the civil war between Communist and Nationalists

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<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, there are no official numbers available on the Sino-Mauritian migration.

in China between 1945 and 1949 which led to the establishment of the People's Republic of China and the nationalists fleeing to Taiwan in 1949, has also provoked a deep division among the Sino-Mauritians, still visible today<sup>3</sup>. Today, pro-communists and pro-nationalists still have different socio-cultural events, associations and even newspapers, where Chinese characters, either simplified as used in the People's Republic of China or traditional as used in Taiwan and Hong Kong, are symbols of their political orientation. In other words, the ancestral language was not considered as useful as it used to be and many Sino-Mauritians adopted the 'western side' of Mauritian society, giving preference to French and English as prestigious, useful varieties of language. A good illustration of this fact is the evolution of the Chinese School of Port Louis, the Xinhua school (新华学校 -Xīnhuá xuéxiào in Standard Chinese), which was founded in 1912. The School was initially aiming to provide education to the Chinese community and was teaching classical Chinese in the traditional characters alongside with general subjects. The main medium of teaching was the Hakka language, which has contributed to the maintenance and high vitality of this language during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Around the 1950's, it became a public school, the programs were aligned with other schools in Mauritius, and French and English started to be taught while Creole was the main medium of teaching. This change also corresponds to the establishment of the People's Republic of China. The school deviated from its primary goal and as from that time, aimed to prepare students of the Chinese community to go abroad to study, mainly in Europe, Australia and North America. Hakka Chinese was only taught on weekends. As from the 1970's and the set-up of 'oriental languages' in primary & secondary public schools programs, the Xinhua School started to teach Standard Chinese (see section 3 below) and simplified characters on weekends. Nowadays, it has stopped its week-days operations but is open only during weekends for Standard Chinese classes as well as socio-cultural activities.

### 3. Chinese languages and groups of speakers

Today's Sino-Mauritian community is for the greatest part of Hakka origin, mainly from Meixian in Guangdong Province in the South of the People's Republic of China, though some Sino-Mauritians also origin from other part of China (see section 2). Sino-creoles, as

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<sup>3</sup> See for example on this subject Charles O. Hucker, Chusei Suzuki & Al. 2018. China. In Encyclopædia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/China/War-between-Nationalists-and-communists>

described above, are categorized as part of the “general population” even though they can be considered as a subgroup of Sino-Mauritians<sup>4</sup>. Officially, Sino-Mauritians account for 3% of the population<sup>5</sup> out of a total of 1.2 million individuals. Even if they live all over the island, there are three main areas where Sino-Mauritians are concentrated, namely the Chinese district (and the China Town area) in Port Louis, the Morcellement Swan in Baie du Tombeau and the Roches Brunes district in Beau-Bassin-Rose-Hill.

Creole, English and French are the three main languages of Mauritius. In addition, ‘ancestral languages’ are also spoken by the different communities to a greater or lesser extent and are regrouped under the umbrella of “Oriental languages<sup>6</sup>” by the official institutions (Tirvassen: 2003). Although different varieties of Chinese are spoken in Mauritius, the Chinese language taught in schools and seen as the ‘ancestral language’ of the Sino-Mauritians is none of the Chinese vernacular languages but Standard Chinese, commonly acknowledged as Chinese Mandarin (see section 4.4) or Mandarin in Mauritius. Chinese language is commonly seen as a compact and homogeneous variety of language in most sociolinguistic studies about Mauritius and by government institutions. There are several linguistic disparities in the different existing varieties which is why they are often referred to as ‘dialects’ by linguists. In Mauritius, there are four main Chinese dialects spoken, i.e: Minnan (Hokkien-福建话), Yue (Cantonese-粤语) Hakka (Kejia-客家话) and Standard Mandarin (Putonghua-普通话). Each of those are originally spoken in specific regions in China (see map 1). It is very difficult to state the number of speakers of each variety as the official censuses fail to take into account each variety properly. For example, the 2011 census proposes 5 categories of Chinese language to choose from as the main language spoken at home, namely ‘Cantonese’, ‘Chinese’, ‘Hakka’, ‘Mandarin’ and ‘other Chinese’. Therefore it is impossible to understand to which varieties the speakers were referring to when answering the question, as all proposed answers are

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<sup>4</sup> The Mauritian constitution recognizes only four communities, classified according to both origins and religions, namely 1. Hindus 2. Muslims (who both originate from the Indian Subcontinent) 3. Sino-Mauritian (who originate from China), and 4. the General population, including descendants of European settlers and Creole people, which is a mixed population mainly of African, Malagasy and European descents. This category also includes any person born from inter-ethnic marriage.

<sup>5</sup> However, this number is questionable as the last ethnic census dates back to 1996 and as mentioned, part of the Sino-Mauritian community has migrated to Australia, North America and Europe.

<sup>6</sup> Oriental languages comprise Indo-Aryan languages (Bhojpuri, Hindi and Urdu), Dravidian languages (Telugu, Marathi and Tamil), Senitic languages (Hakka, Cantonese and Mandarin) and Semitic languages (Arabic).

Chinese languages. However, if all the number of speakers of each category is added, it gives a result of 3712 individuals who speak at least one variety of Chinese at home and which, according to my own estimate based on my field observations, more or less correspond to the total number of speakers of Chinese languages in Mauritius.

All these languages have to a greater or lesser extent been influenced by other Chinese varieties or by other languages. In Mauritius' multicultural and multilingual context, contact language phenomena is expected and Chinese varieties are not an exception. I have not been able to collect precise data on Hokkien, however, code-mixing involving Cantonese, Hakka, Mandarin and other languages such as creole, French and English, has been observed during my field study is attested in other sources (Liu: 1990; Xin: 1992; Shao: 1999, Gan: 2007 etc.). These phenomena are not surprising and do not differ from other language contact situations in the world. Loan words, neologisms, calques and to some extent grammatical loans are common in all varieties spoken in Mauritius. However, due to the great heterogeneity of the community of speakers of each variety, those phenomena have been limited and cannot be considered as stable.

I will now give an overview of each variety of Chinese spoken in Mauritius and the situation of their speakers. The map below shows the geographical origin in China of the Chinese dialects spoken in Mauritius, which also corresponds to the original regions of Chinese migration to Mauritius.





Map 1: Geographic Source of Chinese languages spoken in Mauritius

#### 4.1. Hokkien

If they have not switched to Creole, Fukien people in Mauritius speak Fukien language, also known as Hokkien or Min dialect<sup>7</sup>. However, it is difficult to precisely tell what variety the first immigrants from Fujian spoke as the name ‘Hokkien’ itself is an umbrella grouping several dialects and varieties such as Chinchew (泉州) spoken mainly in Quanzhou, Amoy (廈門) spoken mainly in Xiamen, and Chiangchew (漳州) spoken mainly in Zhangzhou.

Although they are all part of the same main dialect (Minnan 閩南 or south Min) and are all mutually intelligible, they show several linguistic differences (Chappell & Peyraube: 2006). Hokkien is not only spoken in the South-western part of Fujian province but also in Taiwan (see map 1) and by most of the Chinese diaspora in South-east Asia. As the first

<sup>7</sup> For a description of the Hokkien dialect, see for example Li & Yao: 2008.

immigrants of Mauritius from Fujian mainly came from Xiamen, they most probably spoke this variety. Fukien features at least 7 tones, unique lexical and syntactic particularities which including archaisms and which makes it unintelligible with other dialects (Chapell: Forthcoming).

As described, the Fukien people migrated during times where Chinese women were not allowed to come to Mauritius and therefore, intermarriages with other ethnic groups were frequent. Hence, language transmission was lost quite rapidly as mothers did not speak any Chinese and language shift to creole was the rule most of the time. However, there are a few families where Hokkien is still spoken, mainly because the women directly migrated from China mainland and Taiwan and transmitted the language to their children. The main variety spoken in Mauritius is Amoy, and possibly taiwanese Hokkien which is a very close form of the later. From my observations, there are at least about 5 to 10 families of with parents both born in Fujian province (mostly Xiamen region) and who came to Mauritius to set up import export business and factories in the late 1990's early 2000's. Their home language is Hokkien and their children are multi-linguals in Hokkien, Standard Mandarin, English, French and Creole. It is possible that a revival of the Hokkien language will happen in Mauritius in the future years if this new network of Fukienese migration continues to develop.

#### **4.2 Cantonese**

Cantonese is a variety spoken in the city of Canton (Guangzhou), Hong Kong and Macao in southern China which is used as a generic term by the westerners for the Yue dialect branch (粤语). The latter includes many other dialects (Yuehai 粤海, Siyi 四邑, Gao-Lei 高陽, Qin-Lian 钦廉 etc.) of which Cantonese is often seen as the prestigious variety (Yuan: 1962). Cantonese is also the lingua franca of the Cantonese Chinese diaspora in the world and the main variety spoken in Mauritius. Cantonese features 9 different tones and several syntactic particularities which makes it sometimes closer to Middle Chinese than to Standard Chinese or Hakka. In Mauritius, it seems that Cantonese families have shifted to creole quite rapidly and sometimes within the turn of the first or second generation born in Mauritius. For example, one of my informants told me that her grandfather was a trader from Canton who came to establish his business in Mauritius in the 1920's. His son (the informant's father) was born in Mauritius and their home language remained Cantonese as the mother could not speak any other language and never learnt any other language.

The son later went to China in the 1940's to marry a Cantonese woman and brought her back to Mauritius. They had 8 children born between the 1940's and the 1960's, and their main home communication language was described as Cantonese. However, the use of Cantonese was limited to communication with their parents and the 8 siblings always spoke creole together. Their knowledge of Cantonese became more and more passive with limited fluency as they grow up. This situation is not rare in Mauritius and can be partly explained by the lack of education available in Cantonese and the smaller number of speakers. On the other hand, it is important to note that Cantonese influence used to be stronger than it is today. The main reason is that, between 1949 and until its retrocession to the People's Republic of China in 1997, Hong Kong was the one of main point of communication and reference for Chinese trade and culture of overseas Cantonese. Therefore, the use of Cantonese in the work context was not rare in Mauritius for people working with the Chinese world. Songs in Cantonese also spread to Mauritius and have influenced the Chinese language to a lesser or greater extent. Today, families where Cantonese is spoken often includes a member from mainland China or Hong Kong, which is often the mother.

#### **4.3 Hakka**

Hakka is one of the major branches of the Chinese language along with Min, Yue and Mandarin. It is spoken in Southern China, mainly in the province of Guangdong, Jiangxi (江西) and Fujian but also outside mainland China, in Taiwan where it is recognized as a national language since 2007, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore by the overseas Hakka community (see map 1). There are many different varieties of the Hakka dialect and some of those are not mutually intelligible. Many studies on Hakka varieties spoken in China and in the world have been conducted, though the Mauritian variety of Hakka remains to be described. The main variety which is referred to as Standard Hakka in mainland China is the variety of Meixian<sup>8</sup>, which is also the main variety spoken in Mauritius<sup>9</sup>.

It is commonly believed that Hakka people were Han from the Central plains that migrated from northern China during the Song dynasty and brought their language with them. Hence, some linguistic features that resemble ancient-middle Chinese have disappeared

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<sup>8</sup> For a description of Meixian Hakka, see for example Sagart & Chappell: 2001

<sup>9</sup> Some of the first migrants from Fujian may have also spoken Fujienese Hakka, a closely related variety to Meixian and Taiwanese Hakka (see Luo: 2012), but this fact has not been attested yet.

in other dialects, but some other features are common with Northern Chinese dialects. As from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Meixian Hakka has also been influenced by Cantonese, as the latter was used as the lingua franca of the Guangdong Province and in the Southern region in general, leading to bilingualism in the Hakka community of Meixian. Meixian Hakka is the main source-dialect of the Hakka variety spoken in Mauritius.

Although many Hakka speakers of Mauritius have shifted to creole as a home language, Hakka is still probably the most widely spoken variety of Chinese language spoken in Chinese families. It is due to the fact that education in this variety was available to the Chinese community until the 1970's (see section 3) but also because of strong Hakka nationalism (Sagart & Chappell: 2001) and will to preserve and pass on the language to the new generations. Although Hakka vitality has declined during the 1950's to 1980's period, it is during that period that Hakka women from Taiwan migrated to Mauritius with their husbands. At that time, Sino-Mauritians who wanted education in Chinese language were restricted to study in Hong Kong or Taiwan. As the main vehicular language of Hong Kong was Cantonese, many have turned to Taiwan where a variety of Hakka similar to Meixian Hakka (Wen: 2012) is also spoken, and where Standard Mandarin is the official language, the standard variety taught at schools and the main teaching tool. Hence, some Sino-Mauritians went to study in Taiwan and brought back their spouses.

It is important to note that, during the period where contacts with Mainland China were restricted, a variety of Hakka specific to Mauritius has been developed, while the mainland variety has been more and more influenced first by Cantonese and then by Standard Chinese. Meixian Hakka and Mauritian Hakka feature common linguistic specificities such as middle Chinese archaisms, common core lexicon and syntactic characteristics but they also have linguistic differences. Mauritian Hakka has preserved features (sometimes seen as archaism by Mainland China speakers) and a 'way of speaking' (old turn of phrases or idiomatic expressions) that have been abandoned or have evolved differently in the mainland China variety. In the meantime, through contact with other language (mainly creole and French), it has developed new features and innovations that remain to be described in detail.

Since the 1990's, the network of Chinese women from Meixian has been put back in place, reinvigorating the Hakka language vitality in Mauritius. Even though these women have been educated in Mandarin, they tend to mainly speak Hakka at home with their spouses

and children, as the men (usually Sino-Mauritians), do not speak any other variety of Chinese.

#### 4.4 Mandarin

Standard Chinese, also known as *Standard Mandarin*, *Putonghua* (普通话 - literally the common language) in Mainland China and *Guoyu* (国语 or National language) in Taiwan is the official language in the People's Republic of China, Taiwan and Singapore. It is wrongly called 'Mandarin' in Mauritius, which refers to the branch of Chinese spoken in most parts of North and Southwest China, and should be differentiated from Standard Mandarin, which is the standardised variety of Chinese. Standard Mandarin is largely inspired by the northern dialects, especially the Beijing one, although many differences exist between these varieties (Zhou: 2002). As mentioned, Standard Mandarin is the language taught in schools as the ancestral language of the Chinese community. As most of Sino-Mauritian's ancestors were originally from the southern parts of China, Standard Mandarin was not the mother tongue of any Chinese speaker in Mauritius.

However, the community of speakers of Standard Mandarin can be considered as the most lively and the most potentially growing one in Mauritius. Indeed, with the increasing influence of the People's Republic of China, a fresh craze for Standard Chinese learning has arisen in Mauritius. Some Sino-Mauritian families have even shifted to this variety or use it at home in parallel with other Chinese varieties and creole. From the 1970's up to the mid-2000, Standard Chinese learning was restricted to the Chinese community who would learn it as their ancestral language (see above) but often only had a very basic proficiency in the language and no real communication competency. More recently, many young people have started to learn standard Chinese while their parents and sometimes grandparents would not talk any variety of Chinese.

Standard Mandarin has no real vernacular function in Mauritius as it is spoken mostly in official and formal contexts such as education and media, and by sociocultural institutions sponsored by China (Chinese Embassy, China Cultural Center etc.). It is often considered as the prestigious variety of Chinese and as a vehicular function.

More recently, Mauritian of non-Chinese origin also started to learn Standard Mandarin<sup>10</sup> for the same reasons and more and more students choose the People's Republic of China for their university studies. Some of them have bring back spouses and their home language is Standard Chinese. Also, many elders born between in the 1950's and the 1960's whose families have shifted from Chinese to Creole have started to learn Standard Mandarin to try to 'fill their cultural gap' and recover their Chinese identity. As proficiency of these speakers is often limited, the Standard variety of Mandarin does not replace the original home language.

## 5. Conclusion

As described, the community of speakers of Chinese languages in Mauritius is highly heterogeneous and mirrors the Chinese migration history to Mauritius. It is very rare to have families who speak only one variety, and most of the time, code-mixing is the rule. This situation is true for any language spoken in Mauritius, in my opinion. The challenge to classify the speakers and the varieties they speak lies in the fact that the families where Chinese languages are spoken are often mixes of Sino-Mauritians and Chinese mainlanders. The variety of Chinese transmitted in Mauritius and the one the imported family member, without being completely different in their linguistic features, are different on a more subjective level, i.e. their way of speaking (see above section 4) using terms and expressions that may sound archaic to a speaker from Mainland China or neologisms and loanwords that would not be found in Mainland China's counterpart.

However, a tentative preliminary classification of the different of speakers of Chinese languages can be made as follow:

1. Speakers of Hakka: Meixian Hakka (Guangdong Province) based variety and Taiwanese Hakka based variety (Taiwan);
2. Speakers of Fujian (Hokkien) based variety (Fujian & Taiwan Province);
3. Speakers of Cantonese (Guangdong Province);

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<sup>10</sup> There are currently are about 3000 students studying Standard Chinese in the 30 primary schools and 15 secondary schools providing this subject. The main tertiary institutions in Mauritius (e.g The Confucius Institute at the University of Mauritius, the Vatel International Business School etc.) provide courses in Standard Chinese.

4. Speakers of Standard Mandarin: Sino-Mauritian families whose one of the principal members is a speaker of Mandarin or a related dialect who has emigrated directly from China, or mixed couples of non Sino-Mauritian and Mainland Chinese.

The three first categories of speakers are varieties that have been transmitted in Mauritius and which most of time involved that one of the principal member of the family (usually the mother) who was, at some point of the transmission process, originally from China mainland. As Fokien, Hakka and Cantonese were the varieties spoken in Mauritius since earliest times and constitute the vast majority of the Sino-Mauritian community, those can be considered as the ancestral transmitted varieties. Standard Mandarin on the other hand, has been introduced to Mauritius only since the last third of the 20th century and does not have any vernacular function yet and so, can be considered as an imported variety of Chinese.

There is a great disparity among the different generations of Sino-Mauritians which allows to associate the speakers of different varieties by age. Hence, elders born before the 1950's often speak a Chinese variety (i.e. Hokkien, Hakka, Cantonese) and not Standard Mandarin. Middle-aged Sino-Mauritians born between the 1950's and the 1990's have switched to Creole and/or French and learn Mandarin as an elective subject. Youngers born after the 1990's have started to learn Standard Mandarin mainly because it is considered a 'useful language'.

The vitality of the Chinese languages spoken in Mauritius also varies greatly from one variety to another. Fukien transmission has been almost lost in Mauritius, and language maintenance is only possible because whole families come from Mainland China to establish their businesses. It is too early to predict how the vitality of Fukien could evolved. Cantonese families have had the tendency to switch more rapidly and abandon their ancestral language than Moyen Hakka Speakers and switch to either Standard Mandarin or Creole. Hence, it can be considered as an engendered language of Mauritius. Although its number of speakers has drastically decreased between the 1950's and the 1990's, Hakka is still a vernacular language which has been stimulated by the almost constant arrival of Hakka women from Mainland China. Due to the growing influence of the People's Republic of China internationally, this variety is, in my opinion, one of the most developing ones in Mauritius. It is obvious that in one or two generations, younger ones will be more proficient in mandarin than in any other variety.

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