The Bilingual Policy and Mandarin as a Commercial Asset: Comparison with Geneva and Hong Kong

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Geneva between three languages

Geneva's position is the mirror image of Singapore's. French is the main language of 79 % of the canton's residents. The cantonal Constitution of 2012 declares French the official language and charges the state with its defence. At the federal level German, the main language of some 62 % of the Swiss population, is the language of the majority, of the federal authorities in practice and of the Zurich financial centre. English is the working language of many institutions and the main language of about 12 % of Geneva's residents.[1] Geneva did not choose its languages. It inherited French and has to defend it against English, while it needs German to deal with the federal authorities.

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The contrast with Singapore lies in the role of the state. Switzerland protects the territorial languages and leaves the rest to the market. Singapore assigned functions to its languages and redesigned its population's speech within a generation. Geneva's French is a mother tongue that also serves a market of several hundred million speakers. Singapore's Mandarin is a "mother tongue" in the political sense and a learned language for many of its speakers. It serves the very large market of China and the Chinese diaspora. Both centres face the same pressure: English is gaining ground as the home language of the professional class, so that the second language must be maintained by deliberate effort.

Hong Kong: biliterate and trilingual

Hong Kong is Singapore's closest competitor for Chinese business. Its policy describes the aim as "biliterate and trilingual": written Chinese and English, spoken Cantonese, English and Putonghua. At the census of 2021, 88.2 % of residents aged five and over usually spoke Cantonese, 4.6 % English and 2.3 % Mandarin. The share able to speak English was 58.7 %, against 54.2 % for Mandarin.[2] Hong Kong's Chinese is its mother tongue in the ordinary sense, while its English is a learned language. In Singapore the reverse is increasingly true.

The result is a different profile of advantage. Hong Kong offers native Cantonese, traditional characters and direct proximity to Guangdong and to the mainland's legal and regulatory system. Singapore offers native English, simplified characters, a Mandarin learned at school and a legal system independent of China. For a mainland family choosing where to place its wealth, Hong Kong may feel closer and Singapore more neutral. Chapter III of Part K returns to that competition.

In figures

Bilingual policy: second language compulsory from 1966; English first language of the school system from 1987. Primary One enrolment in Chinese-medium schools: 33 % of the cohort (1967), 13.75 % (1977), under 1 % (1983); last Chinese-stream graduates 1986. Nanyang University: classes from 30 March 1956, last convocation 16 August 1980. Speak Mandarin Campaign: launched 7 September 1979. Bus survey of

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March 1979: Chinese passengers used dialect with Chinese conductors in 88.2 % of cases, Mandarin in 3.7 %. Chinese Primary One pupils speaking mainly Mandarin at home: 26 % (1980), 69 % (1989). Home language of Chinese residents in 2020: English 47.6 %, Mandarin 40.2 %, dialects 11.8 %. Home language of all residents aged five and over in 2020: English 48.3 %, Mandarin 29.9 %, Chinese dialects 8.7 %, Malay 9.2 %, Tamil 2.5 %. Residents with English as main home language in 2020: 1,735,242, of whom 973,515 named Mandarin as their second home language and 229,429 spoke English only.[3] Business China: launched 19 November 2007.

Notes

1. Ressos, *Genève, place financière internationale*, partie J, chapitre III, with the sources cited there: French main language of 79 % of Geneva residents (2020–2024), English 12 % (2024); German and Swiss German 62 % of the Swiss population; Art. 5 of the Constitution of the Republic and Canton of Geneva of 14 October 2012. ↩

2. Legislative Council Secretariat, Research Office, *Language policy in Singapore*, ISE21/14-15, 23 September 2015, legco.gov.hk (accessed November 2026), on Hong Kong's "biliterate and trilingual" language education policy; Wikipedia, "Languages of Hong Kong" (accessed November 2026), citing the 2021 census for residents aged five and over: usual spoken language Cantonese 88.2 %, English 4.6 %, Mandarin 2.3 %; ability to speak Cantonese 93.7 %, English 58.7 %, Mandarin 54.2 %. ↩

3. Department of Statistics Singapore, Census of Population 2020, "Resident Population Aged 5 Years and Over by Language Most / Second Most Frequently Spoken at Home, Type of Dwelling and Ethnic Group", data.gov.sg (accessed November 2026): total 3,596,284; English 1,735,242; English only 229,429; English and Mandarin 973,515; Mandarin 1,075,172. For the Chinese residents: data.gov.sg dataset d_68860ef451f948e62754a830b6ae5024, above. Wikipedia, "Languages of Singapore" (accessed November 2026), for the percentages of 2020: English 48.3 %, Mandarin 29.9 %, other Chinese 8.7 %, Malay 9.2 %, Tamil 2.5 %. ↩

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