

## **The future of Cantonese in Hong Kong: Issues on planning and policy**

Thomas Hun-tak Lee

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

To understand the status of Cantonese today, it would be instructive to examine the changes in its societal functions since the colonial era, when English was the dominant language in government discourse, the courts and the schools (Lord and Tsou 1985, Tsou 1997). It is an indisputable fact that Cantonese has expanded its domains of use in significant ways since the change of sovereignty (Chen 2013; Evans 2011, 2014). Accompanying the growing prominence of Cantonese in the last two decades is, however, a deeply felt anxiety about the vitality of the language, to the extent that public outcries about the endangerment of the language are often heard. The present study assesses the reality of these perceptions of Cantonese, based on a survey of native speakers across an age spectrum. It will be shown that while the paradoxical anxiety about the future of the language is quite real and reflects underlying concerns about the changing status of Putonghua in the community, the claim about Cantonese being seen as endangered is unsupported. Clear age differences can be found with respect to their perceptions of the strength of Cantonese, the use of Putonghua as the medium of instruction for teaching Chinese, and the potential social impact of a weakened mother tongue.