CHAPTER 9

They Might as Well Be Speaking Chinese:
The Changing Chinese Linguistic Situation
in Suriname under New Migration

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1 Introduction

This chapter presents one of the most obvious local examples, to the
Surinamese public at least, of the link between mobility, language, and iden-
tity: current Chinese migration. These ‘New Chinese’ migrants since the 1990s
were linguistically quite different from the established Hakkas in Suriname,
and were the cause of an upsurge in anti-Chinese sentiments. It will be argued
that the aforementioned link is constructed in the Surinamese imagination in
the context of ethnic and civic discourse to reproduce the image of a mono-
lithic, undifferentiated, Chinese migrant group, despite increasing variety and
change within the Chinese segment of Surinamese society. The point will also
be made that the Chinese stereotype affects the way demographic and linguist-
ic data relating to Chinese are produced by government institutions. We will
present a historic overview of the Chinese presence in Suriname, a brief eth-
nographic description of Chinese migrant cohorts, followed by some data on
written Chinese in Suriname. Finally we present the available data on Chinese
ethnicity and language from the Surinamese General Bureau of Statistics (ABS).

An ethnic Chinese segment has existed in Surinamese society since the
middle of the nineteenth century, as a consequence of Dutch colonial policy
to import Asian indentured labour as a substitute for African slave labour.
Indentured labourers from Hakka villages in the Fuitungon Region (particu-
larly Dongguan and Baoan)\(^1\) in the second half of the nineteenth century made
way for entrepreneurial chain migrants up to the first half of the twentieth

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\(^1\) The established Hakka migrants in Suriname refer to the area as fui\(^5\)tung\(^1\)on\(^1\) (惠東安),
which is an anagram of the Kejia pronunciation of the names of the three counties where the
‘Old Chinese’ migrant cohorts in Suriname come from: fui\(^5\)jong\(^2\) (惠陽 Putonghua: huiyáng),
tung\(^1\)kon\(^1\) (東莞 PTH: dōngguǎn), and pau\(^3\)on\(^1\) (寶安 PTH: bāoān). For the informants
in Suriname the term referred to the nineteenth century districts of Dongguan, Huiyang
and Xin’an in the Hong Kong periphery, currently corresponding to areas in Dongguan
century, who developed an ethnic ownership economy based on retail trade and their own adaptive institutions. Using T’sou’s definition of a ‘Chinese language community’, a thriving Chinese-speaking group was in existence in Suriname by the early twentieth century; there were Chinese cemeteries (implying that Chinese script was used on gravestones and Chinese was spoken during funeral ceremonies), commercial and socio-cultural associations, Chinese religious institutions, Chinese-language education (taught in Kejia), Chinese-language media, and at least two consecutive generations with a basic knowledge of the ancestral dialect (T’sou 1987: B-16a). Assimilation produced a generational cleavage within the community between those born in China (Tong’ap) and those born in Suriname or of mixed heritage (Laiap). In the 1960s acculturated Fuitungon Hakka chain migrants came via Hong Kong, while the latest migrant cohorts arrived since the 1990s after the People’s Republic of China (PRC) instituted economic reforms and eased restrictions on emigration.

By the start of the 1990s Chinese migration to Suriname sharply increased, and the impact of the ‘New Chinese’ in a society where ethnic Chinese had

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Municipality, Huiyang County, Baoan County, Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, and the New Territories in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

Note on transcriptions: For convenience in reading, Hanyu pinyin without tonal marking is used for names. Full pinyin is used wherever the sound of Putonghua matters, or where the language plays a role. Similarly, Kejia names are transcribed according to the Fuitungon Kejia pronunciation dictionary (Chin-a-Woeng 2008).

2 This chapter is about the Sinitic languages in Suriname, and so the non-Han component of Chinese migration to Suriname will not be considered. In any case, the Chinese Koreans are the only substantial group of ‘ethnic minority overseas Chinese’ (少数民族華僑華人, a political term used in the People’s Republic of China to gain some measure of State control over the transnational links of non-Han migrants from the PRC and their foreign coethnics) in Suriname. Ethnic Koreans are one of the 56 Minority Nationalities recognised by the PRC, and the majority live in Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture in Jilin Province, situated within the territories of the early medieval kingdoms of Goguryeo and Barhae. Originally forestry workers, they link up with the South Korean fishermen in Suriname and the South Korean migration network in South America (especially to the Southern Cone region). But as PRC citizens who are fully competent in Chinese spoken and written language, to Surinamese they are generally indistinguishable from other Northeastern Chinese migrants.

3 The word Laiap (lai2ap7 泥鴨/泥鴨, lit.: ‘Mud Duck’) derives from the Kejia name of an old duck breed in Guangdong Province, the offspring of a male fan1ap7 (番鴨, lit.: ‘foreign duck’ and a female of a local pond duck breed referred to as tong2ap7 (唐鴨, lit.: ‘Chinese duck’, i.e. local duck breed). Early on, the local-born children of Chinese migrants were often born of Creole mothers; local-born eventually became synonymous with mixed ancestry. Laiap is considered something of a racist slur by Kejia-speakers.