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Perceived Threat of a Linguistic Community and Context Effect on Attitude toward Immigration in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Typically grounded in a discussion of contact vs. threat theory, much research has examined the impact of the presence of ethnic minorities in residential contexts on people's attitude toward immigration. Yet, there has not been much evidence regarding whether the presence of a linguistically-defined minority can create similar impact under specific political conditions. This article examines Hong Kong, where the arrival of immigrants from mainland China has aroused controversies. The presence of Mandarin speakers, under the contemporary conditions, could be perceived as representing the cultural threat posed by China onto the city. Data from representative surveys were combined with district-level census data. The analysis shows that people living in a district with higher proportions of residents using Mandarin as the usual spoken language indeed favored more restrictive immigration policies. Contextual presence of Mandarin speakers also moderated the impact of tolerance and holding of negative stereotypes on attitude toward immigration.

Keywords

attitude toward immigration – residential context effect – perceived cultural threat – language – tolerance – Hong Kong

How people react to and interact with immigrants has become a core concern around the world in the recent decade and has given rise to rightist populist

leaders and public sentiments in many countries (e.g., Maier, 2017; Nowicka, 2018). In Hong Kong, due to the rise in conflicts with mainland China, the city has also witnessed the emergence of a form of “anti-Chinese populist localism” since the early 2010s (Chen and Szeto, 2015; Lo, 2018; So and Ip, 2019). This has led to concerns about the growth of exclusionary and discriminatory attitudes toward new immigrants, especially those coming from mainland China.

Against this background, a few recent studies have examined the impact of several individual-level factors on Hong Kong people’s attitudes toward immigrants from the mainland (e.g., Lee and Chou, 2018). But there have not been recent studies examining attitudes toward immigration policies in general. There have also been a lack of studies on residential context effects or, more specifically, whether the presence of immigrants or minority groups in the residential environment could lead people to favour stricter or more open immigration policies, as well as whether this contextual factor can moderate the influence of individual-level factors on people’s attitudes.

Internationally, the study of the effect of the contextual presence of minorities is often framed in terms of a contrast between contact theory and conflict or threat theory. Studies have shown that the impact of the presence of immigrants or minorities in one’s living environment can depend on various conditions (e.g., Bilodeau and Fadol, 2011; Weber, 2015). This study contributes to the literature in two ways. First, it examines a case where the minority group and the dominant majority share the same ethnicity, but the minority is linguistically distinctive. The article, thus, examines the possibility that a linguistically defined minority may, under specific political conditions, be perceived as representing a broader cultural threat. Second, this article examines how residential context moderates the impact of two individual-level factors, namely tolerance and negative stereotype of migrants.

The following begins by reviewing the extant literature and constructing the theoretical arguments guiding the analysis. It is followed by a discussion of the case of Hong Kong. Specific research hypotheses are then set up. Method description and data analysis follow. Implications of the findings are discussed at the end.

1 Literature Review

1.1 *Individual-Level Determinants of Attitudes toward Immigration*

Scholars on public attitudes toward immigration have put forward several major explanations of such attitudes. The economic explanation highlights the

possibility for immigrants to be seen as threatening people's job security or creating a burden to the welfare system. Perceived economic threats, therefore, are often found to relate to negative attitudes toward immigration (Ackermann and Freitag, 2015; Han, 2017). However, there are also studies showing a lack of impact of economic factors (e.g., Hainmueller et al., 2015). The mixed findings might be due to the mitigating influence of factors such as risk perceptions (Shim and Lee, 2018) and personality (Dinesen et al., 2016).

Meanwhile, scholars emphasising the cultural and symbolic bases of attitude toward immigration have shown that negativity toward immigrants can be grounded in factors such as nationalism, ethnocentrism, general social and political tolerance, social trust, perceived threats to cultural life, and negative stereotypes about migrants (e.g., Ackermann and Freitag, 2015; Chang and Kang, 2017; Jeong, 2016; Lee, Ng and Chou, 2016). Since people can form perceptions of immigrants based on media images, characteristics of media coverage and public discourses also shape citizens' views toward immigrants (e.g., Hellwig and Kweon, 2016; van Kingeren et al., 2015).

More pertinent to this study, other researchers have examined the impact of contact with migrants and/or ethnic minorities on attitudes toward immigration. Contact theory is rooted in Allport's (1954) classic work on intergroup interactions. He emphasised the common humanity among people of different origins. Interactions in the pursuit of common goals can generate trust and combat negative stereotypes. As Jolly and DiGiusto (2014) put it, "Interaction reveals inter-group similarities, overcoming the differences and skepticism that engender conflict and violence" (p. 465).

Empirical research has generated a substantial body of evidence of the benefits of contact (Ackermann and Freitag, 2015; Eisnecker, 2019; Ellison et al., 2011, Han, 2017; Shim and Lee, 2018; Ross and Rouse, 2015). Nevertheless, the realisation of the positive impact of contact requires the presence of certain conditions. Allport's (1954) classic theorisation highlighted the significance of equal status, common goals, cooperation, and the presence of authoritative support (Wilson-Daily and Kimmelmeier, 2018).

Moreover, the quality of the interactions matters. Social psychologists have differentiated between positive and negative intergroup contact. The latter can heighten the salience of group membership and reinforce negative stereotypes (e.g., Kotzur et al., 2018). Negative contact can also condition the impact of further superficial contact, i.e., after experiencing negative contact with outgroup members, further contact with outgroup members could lead to negative results even when the further contact is superficial in character (Thomsen and Rafiqi, 2018). Empirically, Lee and Chou (2016) found that, in Hong Kong, citizens who had more friends and colleagues who were new arrivals from China

actually held more negative attitudes toward new immigrants from the mainland. In other words, under specific conditions, contact may heighten hostility and distrust.

1.2 *Residential Context Effect: The Influence of the Presence of Minorities or Migrants*

Besides individual-level variables, research has also addressed contextual influences on people's attitude toward immigration. The more commonly examined contextual factors include economic conditions (Meuleman et al., 2009; Wilkes et al., 2008) and the presence of minorities or migrants. This study focuses on the latter.

Studies on the impact of the presence of minorities or migrants typically contrasted contact theory with conflict or threat theory. From the contact perspective, the presence of minorities is seen as providing opportunities for interactions. Given the possible positive impact of contact, people living in such environments are expected to hold more positive views toward immigration. Indeed, Ross and Rouse (2015) showed that Americans living in a border state held more positive views toward immigrants. Jolly and DiGiusto (2014) found that French citizens living in localities with larger proportions of foreigners were less xenophobic (also see Green et al., 2018).

However, there are also findings of context effects in the opposite direction. Martinez-I-Coma and Smith (2018) found that, in Australia, white citizens living in electoral districts with higher proportions of non-white immigrants are more likely to support immigration restrictions. Hangartner, Dinas et al. (2019) found that, in Greece, residents living in islands experiencing huge influxes of refugees held more negative attitude toward asylum seekers and immigrants. In addition to the possibility of negative contact, these findings can also be explained by conflict or threat theory. As Hjerme (2007:1254) explained, group threat theory assumes that individuals see themselves as members of a group. The diverse or even competing interests of various groups can generate conflict and, thereby, negative attitudes toward each other. In threat theory, the size of the minority group matters because the presence of a more sizable minority group implies the presence of stronger competition for resources. The size of the minority group might also be taken as an indicator of the minority group's capability of engaging in collective actions (Quillian, 1996).

Contact is not necessary in the mechanism proposed by threat theory. People might feel threatened as long as they perceive the presence of a large number of outgroup members. In some cases, such perceptions might be based on media coverage instead of everyday living experiences (Weber, 2015).

Nonetheless, the present study remains focused on the impact of the characteristics of residential contexts.

Researchers have examined other conditions that might shape the residential context effect. For instance, Bilodeau and Fadol (2011) showed that, in Australia, the presence of migrants led to positive attitudes toward immigration only in areas with high percentages of highly-educated residents. More pertinent to this study, people react to the presence of various migrant groups differently. Ha (2010) showed that, for white Americans, proximity to Asians correlated with positive attitudes toward immigrants, but proximity to Hispanics was associated with more negative views. Obviously, not all minority or migrant groups are seen by the dominant majority as threatening. Researchers have pinpointed several factors that could affect whether a migrant group would be seen as a threat. These factors include whether members of the migrant group are mainly high- or low-skill workers (Fietkau and Hansen, 2018), whether they are physically distinguishable (Fietkau and Hansen, 2018), and whether they are willing to be assimilated into the host society (Ostfeld, 2017).

In addition to directly shaping people's attitude, characteristics of the residential context may also moderate the impact of individual-level factors. Gravelle (2016) found that, in the U.S., the impact of political partisanship on attitude toward immigration is stronger among people living closer to the border or in counties with larger numbers of Hispanics. Similarly, Karreth et al. (2015) found that, in three European countries, increase in proportions of foreigners living in one's region has a negative impact on attitudes toward immigration only among natives on the political right. Yet, this interaction effect can also be interpreted as showing that the impact of political ideology on attitudes toward immigration is stronger when the proportion of foreigners increases.

In Gravelle (2016) and Karreth et al. (2015), the presence of foreigners in one's living environment enlarged the gap between people who are already predisposed toward accepting immigrants and those who are already predisposed toward rejecting them. In other words, the presence of outgroup members can trigger the predisposition already held by individuals. The following analysis will also examine possible cross-level interaction effects.

2 The Case of Hong Kong and Research Hypotheses

Hong Kong developed into a migrant society after the Second World War. The city's population grew from 600,000 in 1945 to 3.63 million by 1966 as mainlanders fled the civil war and subsequent chaos in China. Early migrants treated the city as "borrowed time, borrowed place" (Hughes, 1968). But identification

with the local society rose over time, especially since the 1970s. Into the 1990s, there was even a tendency for Hong Kong people to define themselves by their differences from mainland Chinese (Ma, 1999; Mathews, 1996).

After the transfer of sovereignty in 1997, the majority of mainland migrants came to Hong Kong through the so-called “one-way permit scheme.”¹ As of today, the scheme has granted up to 150 mainlanders the right of abode in Hong Kong for family reunion. Other migration routes include the government’s quality migrant admission scheme and students coming to the city to study and then work. If children with two mainland parents yet born in Hong Kong are also counted, 1.5 million new citizens from the mainland have arrived in Hong Kong between 1997 and 2017 (O’Neill, 2017).

There was a controversy in year 2000 surrounding the right of abode of children to mainland parents. But immigration from the mainland became a hot issue mainly since the early 2010s as Hong-Kong-China conflicts intensified. The conflicts have multiple roots, e.g., the huge number of mainland tourists adversely affected citizens’ everyday life, mainland migrants and visitors were perceived to be heavy consumers of public resources, and democratisation remained stagnant due to obstruction by China (So, 2017). Young people’s national identity declined substantially (Steinhardt et al., 2018), and a discourse of “anti-China populist localism” emerged (Chen and Szeto, 2015; So and Ip, 2019). This discourse centres on the idea that Hong Kong people form a distinctive ethnic group. Integration with the mainland is seen as Beijing’s annexation of Hong Kong (Lo, 2018).

Given the situation, recent studies have documented Hong Kong citizens’ negative attitudes toward mainland migrants (Fong and Guo, 2017; Lee et al., 2017). Lee and Chou (2018) showed that dissatisfaction with the economy, negative evaluation of personal financial situation, threat perceptions, negative stereotypes of migrants, and a strong Hong Konger identity were associated with more negative attitudes toward newly arriving mainlanders. Lee et al. (2016) showed similar findings about citizens’ attitude toward the allocation of welfare benefits to Chinese immigrants.

The present study adds to current knowledge by examining the impact of residential context. The empirical focus will be on the presence of minority groups (instead of migrants). This is partly because of the nature of the available official statistics and partly because, in everyday life, it is difficult for citizens to ascertain whether a person of a different race or speaking a different

1 The permit is officially called People’s Republic of China Permit to Proceeding to Hong Kong and Macao.

language is a migrant or not. This study also differs from the research cited in the previous paragraph in that it focuses on people's attitude toward immigration from multiple origins. The concern is people's attitude toward immigration in general.

More specifically, this study is concerned with the impact of the presence of Mandarin speakers in people's living environment. It should be noted that the case of Hong Kong provides a unique situation in which we can discern if language itself can signify a cultural threat and trigger threat perception. In the literature on attitudes toward immigration, Hopkins et al. (2014) found in an experimental study that among Americans who often hear Spanish in everyday life, exposure to written Spanish could trigger anti-immigration attitudes. That is, language itself can signify a perceived cultural threat in some cases. However, since the differences between two ethnic groups are typically constituted by language difference together with other differences, it is difficult to examine if the presence of a "purely linguistically defined" minority in one's residential context can trigger negative attitudes toward immigration. The case of Mandarin-speaking mainland Chinese in Hong Kong arguably provide an opportunity for such an analysis.

Specifically, people using Mandarin as their everyday language constitute a linguistically discernible minority in Hong Kong. Members of the Cantonese-speaking majority may take the Mandarin speakers' language choice as a sign of their unwillingness to assimilate. More importantly, Mandarin is the official language of China. The Hong Kong government's promotion of Mandarin in education and other social arena was taken by some citizens as an attempt to marginalise Cantonese and, thus, undermine Hong Kong's distinctive local culture. In fact, a movement to protect Cantonese arose not only in Hong Kong, but also in the neighbouring Canton province since the early 2010s (Lau, 2014). Against this background, the presence of a substantial number of Mandarin speakers could be taken by members of the Cantonese-speaking majority in Hong Kong as a cultural threat. Hence, we put forward our first hypothesis following the threat perspective:

H₁: Hong Kong citizens living in a district with a higher proportion of everyday Mandarin speakers hold more negative attitude toward immigration.

Beside Mandarin, migrants from different parts of China might speak specific Chinese dialects in everyday life. Although people using other Chinese dialects might also be seen as not having assimilated into the local society, members of the Cantonese-speaking majority may not react to specific Chinese dialects as negatively because the dialects are not the official language and are, therefore,

less likely to be seen as threatening. Meanwhile, as a former British colony and a global city, Hong Kong has a diverse range of non-Chinese residents. Local Chinese might hold stereotypical views about specific ethnic groups, such as the South Asians (Erni and Leung, 2014). But when taken as a whole, the non-Chinese residents were unlikely to be seen as a threat. Following contact theory, the presence of people with diverse racial background might even lead to more positive views toward immigration. However, since this study focuses primarily on the impact of the presence of Mandarin-speakers, we posit the next hypothesis as follows:

H2: The impact of proportion of non-Chinese and proportion of other Chinese dialect speakers in a district differs from the impact of proportion of Mandarin speakers.

In addition, we expect the presence of Mandarin speakers to moderate the impact of certain individual-level factors. As discussed earlier, the presence of a threatening group may trigger or strengthen the impact of individual-level negative predispositions (Gravelle, 2016). However, partisanship or left-right ideology may not be the most pertinent in Hong Kong when attitude toward immigration is concerned. The following analysis will examine whether residential context moderates the influence of (in)tolerance and negative stereotypes. Tolerance refers to a general willingness to accept or even embrace people of different backgrounds (Walzer, 1997). It should relate positively to attitude toward immigration (Kehrberg, 2007). The flip side is that general intolerance could lead to rejection of immigrants. The presence of Mandarin speakers in the residential context is expected to strengthen the influence of (in)tolerance:

H3: At the individual level, tolerance relates positively to attitudes toward immigration.

H4: The relationship stipulated in *H3* is stronger in districts with higher proportions of residents using Mandarin as their usual language.

Meanwhile, some Hong Kong people may hold the negative perception that many new immigrants abuse social welfare. People subscribing to the negative stereotype should hold more negative attitudes toward immigration, and the presence of Mandarin speakers in one's residential context may strengthen the impact of the "social welfare abuser" stereotype:

H5: Individuals who perceive immigrants to be social welfare abusers hold more negative attitudes toward immigration.

H6: The relationship stipulated in *H5* is stronger in districts with higher proportions of residents using Mandarin as their usual language.

3 Method and Data

3.1 *Survey Method and Sampling*

Data analysed below came from three telephone surveys conducted in late May and June 2012, June and July 2014, and May 2016, respectively, by a research centre at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Target respondents were Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong residents aged 18 or above. For all three surveys, numbers from the residential directories of 2005, 2007, and 2009 were compiled. The last two digits of the numbers were replaced by the full set of double digits from 00 to 99. This created a database including non-listed numbers. Specific numbers were then randomly drawn by computers. The target respondent from a household was selected by the most recent birthday method.² The sample sizes are 806, 800, and 801 for the three surveys. The response rates were 38%, 34%, and 34%, respectively, following American Association of Public Opinion Research response rate formula.³ The samples do not differ from each other in age, gender, and educational level. Family income was higher in 2016 due to increases in people's nominal salaries over the years. Compared to the population, people with high levels of income and education were oversampled. The data were weighted according to the age \times gender \times education distribution of the population.⁴

3.2 *Operationalisation of Individual-Level Factors*

Attitude toward immigration was measured following the approach of the World Values Survey. Respondents were asked "which policy Hong Kong should adopt to handle migrants from": (1) mainland China, (2) poor countries, and (3) developed countries. The answers were: 1 = allow anyone to enter Hong Kong;

2 Sampling was therefore based only on residential phone numbers. Despite concerns with the rising number of households without fixed lines, Chiu and Jiang (2017) showed that, in the mid-2010s in Hong Kong, survey samples derived from residential numbers remained more representative of the population than samples derived from mobile numbers.

3 Response Rate 3 took partly into account cases of unknown eligibility in the calculation. In any case, the response rates are typical of telephone surveys in contemporary Hong Kong.

4 The sample was not weighted according to family income because of a lack of information about the age \times family income and gender \times family income distributions of the population. Weighting the samples by education should have alleviated the sample-population discrepancies in family income.

2 = only allow those who can find jobs to come; 3 = only allow a limited number to come; 4 = forbid all to enter Hong Kong. The items were presented in two orders (China first or developed countries first). Respondents were randomly assigned to one of the two. There was no substantial order effect though. Descriptive statistics and index formation are discussed in the analysis section.

Tolerance was differentiated into social and political tolerance (Lee, 2014). For social tolerance, the respondents were asked if they minded being neighbours with: (1) people of a different race, (2) rehabilitated mental patients, (3) homosexuals, (4) sex workers, and (5) political radicals. Answers were registered with a three-point scale (1 = mind; 2 = a little; 3 = don't mind) and averaged for an index ($M = 2.24$, $S.D. = 0.49$, $\alpha = .63$). The respondents were then asked if they would be offended if the groups publicly strived for their rights. Answers ranged from 1 = very offended to 4 = not offended at all and were averaged for another index ($M = 3.41$, $S.D. = 0.59$, $\alpha = .67$). Social and political tolerance were correlated at $r = .50$. For parsimony, they were standardised and then averaged for a single index on tolerance.

Negative stereotype was measured by asking the respondents if they agreed that "people who come from other places to live in Hong Kong often abuse local social welfare." Answers were registered with a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). This item represents negative stereotype about immigrants ($M = 2.89$, $S.D. = 1.42$).

Control variables include several individual-level predictors of attitudes toward immigration. *Trust in strangers* is the average of the respondents' trust toward (1) people whom they meet for the first time, and (2) people of a different nationality (answers registered with a five-point scale with 1 = completely don't trust to 5 = completely trust, $M = 3.43$, $S.D. = 0.74$, $r = .53$). *Perceived fairness of society* is the average of the respondents' agreement, with four statements (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree, statements omitted here due to space constraints, $M = 3.33$, $S.D. = 0.72$, $\alpha = .70$). *Pessimism about the future* is the average of the respondents' estimation of whether four things will improve or deteriorate in the next five years: (1) the rich-poor gap, (2) the fairness of the society, (3) chances for upward mobility, and (4) their family's living situation. The three-point scaled items (3 = the answer for deterioration, 1 = the answer for improvement) were averaged for an index ($M = 2.25$, $S.D. = 0.52$, $\alpha = .70$). *Appreciation of diversity* was represented by whether the respondents agreed "having people from different places to come to Hong Kong and live could make the society more diverse" (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree, $M = 3.36$, $S.D. = 1.14$).

Demographics to be controlled include sex, age, educational level, family income, whether the respondent was born in Hong Kong, and whether the respondent had lived for more than one year in a foreign country.

3.3 *Operationalisation of District Level Factors*

The survey asked the respondents to indicate the district where they lived. The respondents were then categorised into living in one of the 18 “District Council districts” in Hong Kong. District-level data were derived from the 2016 by-census,⁵ which included information about people’s “usual spoken language,” defined as language spoken at home. Across the territory, 88.9% of citizens aged five or above used Cantonese, 1.86% used Mandarin, and 3.14% used one of the other Chinese dialects. At the district level, percentages of residents using Mandarin as their usual language ranged from 0.90% to 4.20%, whereas percentages of residents using another Chinese dialect ranged from 1.31% to 5.30%.

Language spoken at home is not equivalent to language spoken in other everyday life settings. Ideally, a measure of language used in public settings is preferable, but there is no relevant data. Language spoken at home should be a relevant surrogate indicator though. When a person speaks a “minority language” at home, there is at least a higher chance that the person also speaks the language in public. When a district has more people speaking a minority language at home, the language should also be relatively more conspicuous in the district. We will return to this measurement issue in the concluding discussion.

The by-census also has information about ethnicity. 92.0% of Hong Kong residents were Chinese. More prominent minority groups include Filipinos (2.51%) and Indonesians (2.09%) due to the presence of large numbers of domestic helpers from these two countries. Percentages of people belonging to various ethnic groups in different districts can be correlated. The inclusion of data about multiple specific ethnic groups can lead to substantial levels of multicollinearity. For the present study, it should be adequate to use a single variable to represent the percentage of all non-Chinese in a district. The figures varied from 3.45% to 22.11%. Lastly, district-level median income was also controlled.

4 Analysis and Results

4.1 *Hong Kong Citizens’ Attitudes toward Immigration*

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the three items about attitudes toward immigration. Only 5.8% of the respondents preferred allowing anyone from mainland China to migrate to Hong Kong. About one-third preferred

5 The findings are available at: <https://www.by-census2016.gov.hk/en/bc-dp.html>.

TABLE 1 Attitudes toward immigrants of different origins

	Mainland	Poor countries	Developed countries
Allow anyone	5.8%	4.2%	14.2%
Only job-holders	36.9%	44.6%	42.5%
Small number	42.2%	33.4%	34.5%
Not allow anyone	11.0%	14.2%	4.4%
Mean on three-point scale	1.95	1.90	2.10

Percentages do not add up to 100% because of "don't know" answers.

allowing only job-holders to come, whereas 42.2% preferred allowing only a small number of mainlanders. Only 11.0% preferred not allowing any mainlanders to migrate to Hong Kong. It is difficult to determine if the second or third option is more "restrictive." For a more efficient and concise main analysis, we turned the item into having a three-point scale for index construction. The second and third options were combined. The mean score for attitude toward immigration from mainland China is 1.95 ($S.D. = 0.41$).

Although recent studies have emphasised Hong Kong people's negative attitude toward mainland migrants, the respondents were even more concerned about migrants from "poor countries." Only 4.2% of the respondents preferred allowing anyone from such countries to migrate to Hong Kong, whereas 14.2% preferred a complete ban. The mean score of the item significantly differs from that of attitude toward mainland immigrants in a paired-samples t-test ($t = 5.11$, $p < .001$). The respondents were less concerned with immigrants from developed countries, probably because such immigrants were less likely to be perceived as an economic threat. The mean score of the item is significantly higher than the mean scores of the other two items ($t = 14.8$ and 20.0 respectively, $p < .001$ in both cases).

Attitudes toward immigration from the three sources were positively correlated with each other (r ranges from .29 to .38). The Cronbach's α for the three items is 0.60. Since α is sensitive to number of items involved, the coefficient should be adequate for treating the three items as measuring an underlying tendency. We, therefore, averaged the items for an overall index of immigrant acceptance ($M = 1.98$, $S.D. = 0.31$). However, we also conducted additional analysis using the original nominal scale to check the robustness of our conclusion.

Table 2 shows that the relationship between several demographic variables with immigrant acceptance at the bivariate level. Younger people were rela-

TABLE 2 Demographics and immigrant acceptance

	Mainland	Poor countries	Developed countries	Index
Age				
18 to 29	1.92	2.00	2.12	2.02
30 to 54	1.97	1.92	2.11	2.00
55 or above	1.93	1.82	2.07	1.94
χ^2	2.63	28.53***	2.17	10.47***
Education				
Others	1.95	1.88	2.01	1.98
Tertiary	1.95	1.95	2.08	1.99
t-value	-0.05	4.24***	-1.62	1.14
Income				
Low	1.93	1.82	2.09	1.95
High	1.95	1.93	2.10	1.99
t-value	0.62	5.16***	0.90	3.03*
Born in HK				
No	1.99	1.86	2.12	1.99
Yes	1.93	1.92	2.09	1.98
t-value	-3.55***	3.11**	-1.75	-0.83

Entries are mean scores on the three-point scale. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$.

tively more positive toward immigration in general. But when the three groups were separated from each other, younger people were relatively less negative than older citizens only toward migrants from poor countries. Similarly, respondents with higher socio-economic status held less negative attitude only toward immigration from poor countries. While income relates to the overall index significantly, there is no significant difference between tertiary and non-tertiary educated citizens on the overall index. More interestingly, locally-born respondents were less negative than respondents born outside the city toward immigration from poor countries, but they were more negative toward immigration from the mainland.

4.2 *Predicting Attitude toward Immigration*

We can now test the various hypotheses. Multilevel linear regression was conducted because of the presence of individual-level and district-level factors in the same model. We took away respondents who were themselves relatively new immigrants to Hong Kong from the multivariate analysis (i.e., people who have arrived at Hong Kong within 10 years prior to the survey). This is because the present study is concerned with how the societal majority reacts to the cultural threat represented by a minority group, and many of the new immigrants might actually belong to the minority group in question.⁶

The independent variables include all the controls, tolerance, holding of negative stereotype, percentages of non-Chinese, Mandarin users, and Chinese dialect users in the district, district level median income, and two cross-level interaction terms. Table 3 summarises the results. When overall attitude toward immigration is concerned, females were less open to having more immigrants coming to Hong Kong. People holding more negative views regarding the fairness of the society and people more pessimistic about the future were more negative toward immigration. People who trusted strangers to larger extents and those who appreciated the diversity brought by migrants were more open toward immigrants.

Among the district level factors, district median income does not relate to the dependent variable. More importantly, percentage of district residents using Mandarin as the usual spoken language has a significant negative relationship with migrant acceptance ($p < .02$). This supports *H1*. In contrast, percentage of district residents using another Chinese dialect as their usual spoken language does not relate to migrant acceptance significantly. Percentage of non-Chinese district residents even has a positive, though non-significant, coefficient. Further analysis shows that the coefficient of percentage of Mandarin speakers indeed differs significantly from the coefficient of percentage of Chinese dialect speakers ($Z = -2.47, p < 0.02$) and that of percentage of non-Chinese residents ($Z = -2.13, p < 0.02$). *H2* is supported.

6 Only 3.8% of the respondents were removed. Additional analysis shows that not removing new immigrants from the sample does not alter the substantive findings. Percentage of people speaking Mandarin as their usual language still affects overall migrant acceptance significantly ($b = -7.03, p < .001$), while the interaction between tolerance and percent of people speaking Mandarin is also significant in the same three columns ($b = -3.52, p < .001$ for overall acceptance of immigrants; $b = -3.69, p < .01$ for acceptance of mainland migrants; $b = -4.27, p < .001$ for acceptance of migrants from developed countries). But we presented the results of the analysis with the new immigrants removed due to our conceptual focus on how the local majority reacts to the presence of a specific minority group.

TABLE 3 Predicting immigrant acceptance

	Overall attitude	Mainland	Poor countries	Developed countries
Intercept	1.91***	2.22***	1.83***	2.02***
Individual level				
Year 2012	0.00	-0.01	0.00	0.01
Year 2014	0.02	-0.02	0.03	0.05**
Sex (F = 2)	-0.04***	-0.04**	-0.03	-0.05**
Age: 18-29	0.00	-0.05	0.04	0.01
Age: 30-49	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Age: 50 or above (reference)				
HK born	-0.03	-0.06***	0.02	-0.04
Lived in foreign country	-0.01	0.00	-0.02	0.00
Education	0.00	0.00	0.00	-0.01
Family income	0.00	-0.00	0.01	-0.00
Perceived fairness of society	0.04***	0.04***	0.04**	0.03
Pessimism toward future	-0.06***	-0.07***	-0.05**	-0.06***
Trust	0.02*	0.02	0.03**	0.00
Appreciate diversity	0.06***	0.06***	0.06***	0.06***
Tolerance	0.11***	0.09**	0.12***	0.13***
Negative stereotype	-0.03*	-0.03	-0.03	-0.03
District level				
Median income	0.00	-0.00	0.00	0.00
% Mandarin	-7.59*	-2.69	-8.92	-6.31
% Chinese dialect	-0.22	0.52	0.28	-0.15
% non-Chinese	0.52	0.35	0.45	0.60
Cross-level interactions				
% Mandarin × tolerance	-3.41***	-3.54**	-1.82	-4.52***
% Mandarin × stereotype	1.10	0.90	1.78	0.80
Random effects				
σ^2	0.0810	0.1496	0.1496	0.1630
Intercept	0.0018	0.0018	0.0121	0.0009
Tolerance	0.0005	0.0008	0.0007	0.0007
Stereotype	0.0001	0.0008	0.0017	0.0000

TABLE 3 Predicting immigrant acceptance (*cont.*)

	Overall attitude	Mainland	Poor countries	Developed countries
Conditional R ²	0.152	0.102	0.134	0.074
Observations	2281	2281	2281	2281

Entries are unstandardised regression coefficients derived from multilevel linear modeling.

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .02$.

At the individual level, tolerance has a highly significant positive relationship with attitude toward immigration. This is consistent with H_3 . More importantly, percentage of Mandarin speakers in a district and tolerance had a significant interaction effect. But the pattern is opposite to H_4 . As Figure 1 shows, individuals with higher levels of tolerance always held more positive attitude toward immigration. But the gap between people with high and low levels of tolerance became smaller, instead of larger, when percentage of district residents using Mandarin as their usual language increased.

Regarding H_5 , people holding the belief that immigrants often abuse social welfare tended to favour more restrictive immigration policies. The interaction between percentage of Mandarin speakers in a district and holding of negative stereotype has a positive coefficient that falls just short of the conventional level of statistical significance ($p = 0.056$). The pattern of interaction shows that the negative impact of negative stereotype would be weaker when percentage of district residents speaking Mandarin increased. This is, similar to the result regarding tolerance, contrary to the hypothesis.

The second to fourth columns of Table 2 show the results when the three items on attitude toward specific groups of immigrants were used as the dependent variables. Percentage of district residents using Mandarin as the usual language does not obtain a significant coefficient in all three columns, but all three coefficients are negative in sign. However, the absence of a significant relationship between the key independent variable and attitude toward mainland immigrants should not be taken as evidence against the hypothesis, which posits that the presence of a cultural threat could influence attitude toward immigrants in general. Besides, when used as individual items, the three attitude toward immigrants variables have the limitation of a lack of variance: About 80% of the respondents took up the middle score of the three-point scale on each of the three variables. Therefore, the pattern of findings can be understood as showing that: (1) percentage of district residents using Mandarin

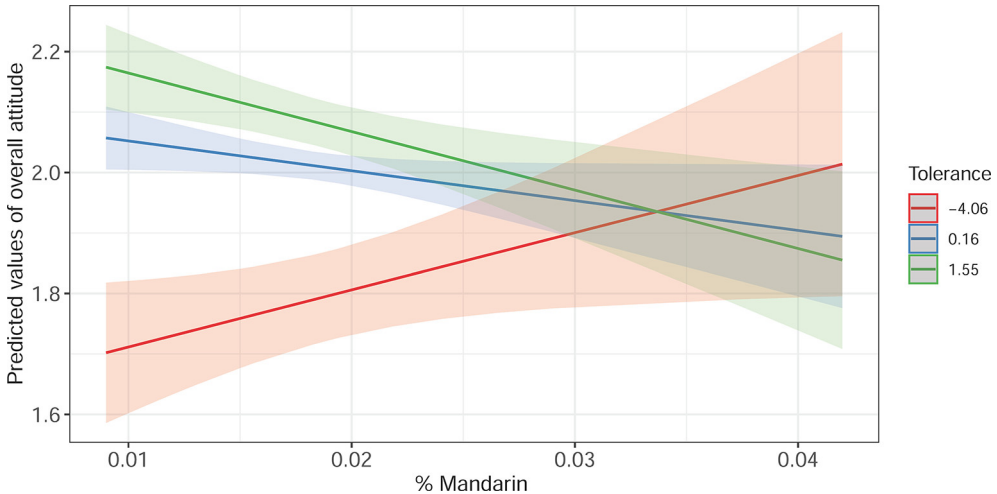


FIGURE 1 Interaction effect between percentage of Mandarin speakers and tolerance

influences attitude toward immigration in general instead of attitude toward a specific type of immigrants, and (2) the influence is more clearly discernible only when the individual items were combined to form a more differentiating overall index.

Meanwhile, we conducted additional multinomial regression analysis using the same model but with the three original items. The results showed that people living in districts with higher percentage of Mandarin speakers were more likely to favour “forbid all mainland immigrants to enter Hong Kong,” as compared to “only allow a limited number of mainland immigrants to come” ($b = -56.2, p < .05$). Besides, people living in districts with higher percentage of Mandarin speakers were also more likely to favour “forbid all immigrants from poor country to come,” as compared to “only allow those who immigrants from poor countries who found jobs to come” ($b = -64.9, p < .02$). The number of significant findings is limited, but both are in line with the overall hypothesis that presence of more people speaking Mandarin as a usual language could lead to lower levels of acceptance of immigrants.

5 Conclusion

Recent studies have noted Hong Kong citizens' negative attitudes toward immigrants from China (Fong and Guo, 2018; Lee et al., 2017). The core finding of our analysis points toward the Cantonese-speaking majority's negative reactions toward the presence of mainlanders in their daily lives, especially when the mainlanders formed a linguistically distinctive group. Our analysis found a residential context effect such that people who were surrounded by fellow residents who used Mandarin as their usual language were more likely to favour restricting immigration. Threat theory (Hjerm, 2007) provides a highly plausible explanation of the finding. In Hong Kong, during the years of the surveys, Mandarin could be perceived by members of the local majority as representing a threat to the local language Cantonese and thereby symbolising the cultural threat at large posed by China onto the city.

The analysis compares the impact of the presence of Mandarin speakers to that of the presence of speakers of other Chinese dialects and of non-Chinese. Taking the findings together, this study suggests that assimilation by itself does not determine the dominant majority's reaction toward an out-group. While Mandarin speakers might be taken by Cantonese-speaking citizens as unwilling to adapt to Hong Kong, speakers of other Chinese dialects could also be similarly perceived. But the presence of speakers of other dialects did not have the same impact on immigrant acceptance.

From the threat perspective, there are two notable differences between Mandarin and other Chinese dialects. First, Mandarin is the official language of China. Hence, it can be taken as a symbol of the dominant political power. Second, "other Chinese dialects" include a range of specific languages (and "non-Chinese" includes a range of ethnicities). Speakers of "other Chinese dialects" (and non-Chinese) are less likely to be seen as one single sizable minority capable of presenting threats to the dominant majority.

This study provides another case in which the specific characteristics of a minority group shape the reactions of citizens of the host society (Ha, 2010). More importantly, the minority group is defined "purely" linguistically. That is, while a minority group is usually marked by a mixture of linguistic, physical, and possibly other differences, mainland migrants in Hong Kong are supposedly not different from Hong Kong Chinese ethnically and culturally, but they can be linguistically marked as an outgroup. To the author's knowledge, although there have been studies about how foreign language can trigger negative attitudes toward immigration (Hopkins et al., 2014), this study is the first to demonstrate a residential context effect based on the presence of a purely linguistically defined minority. The case of mainland Chinese in Hong Kong

illustrates that, under certain conditions, a difference in language by itself can trigger certain negative consequences.

It should be acknowledged that we have singled out Mandarin speakers in the analysis, whereas many ethnic groups were combined into “non-Chinese.” Yet, Hong Kong citizens might respond differently to specific non-Chinese ethnic groups. For instance, South Asians might constitute another target of prejudice in Hong Kong (Erni and Leung, 2014). This study does not examine multiple specific ethnic groups because of methodological concerns and the need to retain a sharp analytical focus. Future research can examine if the presence of South Asians or other ethnic groups could influence Hong Kong people’s attitudes and values.

The impact of the presence of Mandarin speakers does not affect only attitude toward immigration from China. The context effect is significant only when the three attitude-toward-immigration items were combined. A methodological explanation is that the three-point scaled items, when used alone, were not effective enough to capture the variance in individuals’ attitude toward immigration. This study adopts the measurement scale employed in the World Values Survey, but future research can adopt other measurement scales to overcome the lack of variance issue. Conceptually, the finding simply means that the presence of a cultural threat might affect attitude toward immigration in general. That is, when people feel the presence of a threatening immigrant group, they may become more likely to favour restricting immigration from all sources (notably, the descriptive statistics showed that Hong Kong citizens were most likely to favour restricting immigration from poor countries, and this is likely to be because of the perceived socio-economic status of such immigrants. However, there is no theoretical reason why the contextual presence of Mandarin speakers would affect people’s attitude toward low-SES migrants in particular).

The finding in this study is consistent with Lee and Chou’s (2018) individual-level finding that having friends and colleagues who are newly-arrived migrants from China was associated with more negative attitudes toward immigrants. Lee and Chou (2018) explained their finding in terms of negative contact. Indeed, negative intergroup contact (Kotzur et al., 2018) might also lead to the present district-level finding. Admittedly, this study cannot empirically differentiate between effects based on negative contact and effects based on threat perceptions. However, it is unclear why the experience of interacting with Mandarin speakers—and not interacting with other Chinese dialect speakers—would be particularly “negative” if Mandarin speakers are not perceived as threatening. On the whole, the most plausible situation is that the Cantonese-speaking local citizens perceived Mandarin speakers as a cultural threat, and this perception could enhance the likelihood of “negative contact.”

Beyond main effects, this study shows that residential context also conditions the influence of individual-level factors. Although the interaction effect between presence of Mandarin speakers and the holding of negative stereotypes is non-significant, the consistency in direction of the two interaction effects is remarkable. Yet, the findings are contrary to expectation. Instead of enlarging the gap caused by individual-level predispositions (e.g., Gravelle, 2016; Karreth et al., 2015), the influences of tolerance and negative stereotypes were weaker in districts with higher proportions of Mandarin speakers.

One plausible explanation is that the relative conspicuity of a specific group taken as a cultural threat could undermine the influence of generalised values and stereotypes on one's attitude. That is, without the presence of a perceived threat, when a person believes in the abstract value of being open and receptive toward people of different backgrounds, the person should be more open toward immigration in general. But when a perceived threat exists, people's attitude toward immigration may become tied to the beliefs about and/or affective responses toward the perceived threat. An abstract valuation of openness or a generalised belief in a stereotype about migrants could become *relatively* less influential. In any case, more research is needed to achieve a better understanding of when the relative conspicuity of an outgroup could trigger the influence of one's predispositions, and when the relative conspicuity of an outgroup could undermine the influence of generalised values and beliefs.

Another limitation of the study to mention is that the independent variable captures people's language spoken at home. There can be discrepancies between language spoken at home and language spoken in other more public settings in everyday life, and presumably the latter should be more directly pertinent to the perceived presence or absence of a cultural threat. While the authors are restricted by the availability of relevant census data, the weakness of the independent variable could be another methodological reason why the impact of the key independent variable is discernable only when the overall index of attitude toward immigration is used.

In conclusion, this study suggests that, under specific conditions, a linguistically defined group may be taken as signifying a cultural threat to the majority of the local public. It also provides new evidence regarding how the contextual presence of specific migrant groups can influence not only people's attitude toward immigration but also the power of some of the determinants of such attitudes. For Hong Kong, this study presents further evidence about the intractable conflicts between "local citizens" and "mainlanders." It is certainly problematic to suggest that mainland migrants must abandon their language in order to assimilate into the local society, but simply calling for tolerance and appreciation of diversity could also be criticised for being negligent of the

arguably real political and cultural threat posed by China. Whether local citizens will continue to treat Mandarin as a signifier of a cultural and political threat will depend on the continual evolution of state-society relationship.

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