

Will the Qiang Language Survive?¹

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ABSTRACT

Speakers of the Qiang language are decreasing in number. This is true for speakers of both the southern and northern dialects. Native speakers of the language, educational authorities and linguists agree that the language's ability to survive this century is in doubt. Although the Chinese government has made an effort to develop the language, several factors beyond its control are contributing to the demise of language.

At the present time, a Qiang practical transcription and two books have been developed. Of these two books, one has been used for adult literacy while the second has been used for children's education. As language development is taking place, however, it struggles against a backdrop of opposing conditions. Each decade, the number of Qiang children receiving an education in Han Chinese increases. Simultaneously, technological innovations such as satellite receivers make Chinese television programming available in remote areas, while Qiang cultural traditions such as dancing, singing and storytelling fall by the wayside.

This paper addresses the question, "Will the Qiang language survive?" The language's future is considered from three standpoints: cultural factors, language policy and sociolinguistic issues. The authors also undertook a small-scale survey in the village of Hexi (河西), Qugu (曲谷) township to determine the extent to which the Qiang language is being passed on to children. Our findings lead us to believe that the Qiang language is in danger of extinction. If the language is to survive, vigorous efforts at language development must be made, with an emphasis on the creation and use of Qiang language literacy

¹ This paper is the fruit of cooperative efforts between the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, The Language Work Office Committee of Chengdu, Sichuan and The Summer Institute of Linguistics. Special thanks to Professor 孙宏开 (Sun Hongkai) and Assistant Director 周发成 (Zhou Facheng) for their help. Stuart Milliken's comments on an earlier version of this paper are much appreciated. All shortcomings are ours alone.

material and literature. We see the need for more research, especially in the form of a language use survey to determine the people's attitudes toward the use of Qiang and Han Chinese.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Qiang people, who refer to themselves as /zme/, live mainly in, Beichuan, Heishui², Li, Mao, Songpan and Wenchuan counties in the northwestern region of Sichuan province, the People's Republic of China. The language is classified in the Sino-Tibetan phylum, the Tibeto-Burman family, the Qiangic branch. There are about 290,000 ethnic Qiang, less than half of whom still speak one of the Qiang dialects. Qiang is an SOV language with a rich segmental inventory.

There are three views put forth as to the historical existence of a Qiang written language. A Qiang legend says that the Qiang once had written language kept in a set of sacred books; however, during their migration from central to western China these books were eaten by a goat. Thus their written language disappeared. Another thought which some scholars propose is that the now extinct Xixia language, which had a written form, is actually related to the modern day Qiang spoken language. Finally, there is the idea that Qiang has never had a written language. In any case, Qiang has not had a written form for the past several centuries, and this has only changed very recently with the development of a practical transcription system. This long-standing lack of a writing system has had an impact on how the people themselves view their language.

This paper concerns itself with the future of the Qiang language: Will it survive? Section two discusses the changes within Qiang culture and the the resulting impact on the language. Section three contains a synopsis of the implications of language policy for the Qiang and their language. Finally, section four delineates sociolinguistic variables that factor into the equation.

2.0 CULTURAL FACTORS

As is the case within all cultures, the passing of time inevitably leads to change. Comparing the present day Qiang culture with that of 50 or 100 years ago reveals that the people are changing. These changes are altering the values of the Qiang people and are affecting their attitudes toward the Qiang language. Specifically, the domains of demographics, education, entertainment, marriage and religion will be examined more closely.

2.1 DEMOGRAPHICS

According to 1999 census statistics, the Qiang population in the five

² A small number of a Tibetan subgroup in Heishui actually speak Qiang although they are Tibetan ethnically.

counties of Wenchuan, Li, Mao, Songpan and Heishui, is 290,000³. The 1982 and 1990 census statistics record the total population at 102,768 and 198,000 respectively. An educated guess is that a little more than 150,000 people still speak the language, although, there are no exact statistics available in this category. In Mao county, the main locus of Qiang-speaking people, the overall population is 101,137. This figure includes Tibetan, Hui, Han and Qiang ethnic groups. Here the Qiang comprise the majority of the population with 93,000 plus people, and of these, roughly 45,300 still speak Qiang.

Population factors such as birthrate, infant mortality, death rate, immigration and emigration have changed over the past twenty years. One of China's national family planning provisions is that ethnic minorities are permitted to have two children, instead of the "one-child" limit which the majority of the population must adhere to. The Qiang that live in farming regions often take advantage of this provision. Infant mortality has decreased and life expectancy has increased through improved nutrition and access to medical care. These factors have resulted in an overall increase in the Qiang population⁴. As with most rural areas of the world, Qiang emigration is greater than immigration. Despite this trend, the Qiang population is increasing, however, the number of people who can speak the language seem to be decreasing.

2.2 EDUCATION

Since Qiang has never been used as a language of medium for formal education, Han Chinese has dominated this realm. This is apparent when one considers townships such as Sanlong (三龙) in Mao county. In the 1950's this township still supported a healthy Qiang-speaking population. In 1951, the village established an elementary school using the Chinese language as the medium of education. During the 1970's a road linking the Heishui river valley and the township of Sanlong was completed. The construction of this road opened up Sanlong to the rest of Mao county and effectively to the rest of the world. This township is presently largely a Han Chinese speaking domain. Education and access to education or outside news has made it difficult for Qiang language maintenance to be sustained.

We are not the first to make this observation. Graham (1961), who conducted his research intermittently from 1925-1948, offers a similar opinion, "In more recent years the Chinese have established primary schools among the Ch'iang [Qiang], and a normal school for Ch'iang and Chinese at Wei-chou [Weizhou]. These schools are a very efficient means of absorption. There are those who believe that it is only a matter of time when the Ch'iang will be completely absorbed by the Chinese. Whatever the final results may be, the

³ A small number of people from Beichuan are not included in this figure.

⁴ Given that some Qiang have migrated to urban centers, this figure refers to the Qiang population of the five counties of Heishui, Li, Mao Songpan and Wenchuan, not the total Qiang population in the Peoples' Republic of China.

present is a time of rapid changes, and many old ideas and customs are passing away.”

2.3 ENTERTAINMENT

More recently, since the early 1990's, the domain of Qiang traditional entertainment has seen changes. Even remote Qiang villages have fairly reliable hydroelectric power supply for at least 4-6 hours per day. With the widespread availability of electrical power, various electrical appliances such as television, stereos and other imported forms of entertainment are rapidly replacing the Qiang traditional forms of entertainment such as story-telling, singing and dancing. The latter forms of entertainment all employ the use of the Qiang language. However, with television broadcasts completely using Chinese and with access to Chinese music via radio and stereo, the domain of entertainment is losing its Qiang language component. Typically, while watching a Chinese television program, the older members of the family will still discuss aspects of the program in Qiang. However, if the older members of the family ask the children about the program in Qiang, the children will usually answer back in Chinese. A wave of television satellite receivers during the 1990's has brought Chinese television broadcasts into most homes on a daily basis. Even more remote Qiang townships, like Qugu (曲谷), have a plethora of satellite dishes allowing approximately 90 percent of homes to access Chinese broadcasting programs regularly.

Furthermore, the 1990's has seen the importation of activities such as the playing of Majiang, a traditional Chinese game, cards, and weddings that are being held outside of the home in bigger cities where the entertainment is “more interesting”. When playing Majiang and card games, both Qiang and Chinese can be heard, not necessarily one or the other.

2.4 MARRIAGE

From an anthropological perspective, the Qiang have no restrictions on inter-marriage with members of other ethnic groups. The authors are acquainted with Qiang who are married to Han Chinese, Tibetan and Hui. Because Qiang is seldom spoken in mixed marriages, the increase in those marrying out-group members is slowly diminishing the pool of Qiang speakers. This is likely due to Han Chinese being the language of prestige and wider communication. The offspring of Qiang mixed marriages rarely learn to speak Qiang rather the whole family tends to speak Chinese together. More to the point, many ethnically Qiang speakers often marry other ethnic Qiang who are unable to speak Qiang. Here again, a Han Chinese environment tends to dominate family life resulting in children who are unable to speak Qiang⁵. Examples of this situation abound, the first listed author's daughter is but one of

⁵ It is a well demonstrated fact that in circumstances where the mother speaks one language and the father another language children are quite capable of learning both languages. However, the authors do not know of any children who have learned Qiang from one parent and Chinese from the other.

many.

Traditionally, weddings were held in the home and a Qiang priest officiated, giving blessings and prayers that were derived from the Qiang “sacred scriptures”. This is seldom the case anymore. Now, when someone is married at home, they have a very simple ceremony, drink barley-corn alcohol and someone will say something to mark the occasion in less elaborate Qiang. But the complexities of the old traditional blessing and ceremony delivered by a priest have almost completely disappeared.

2.5 RELIGION

The Qiang seem to be people who willingly believed in whatever gods could meet their important needs. However, the Qiang seldom made images of the gods they worshipped. As with other domains, the Qiang religious practices have changed and with it a corresponding impact on the Qiang language.

The Qiang priests actually had two types of “sacred books”. One type consisted of books which contained many pictures and were used for divination. In Chinese, one of these books was called tiě suàn pān (铁算盘) or “iron abacus”. These books had no writing or printing in them. It is unknown if any of these still exist. The other type of “sacred book” consisted of the memorized scriptures and chants which the revered Qiang priests knew.

Historically, Qiang priests were able to chant these traditional scriptures at significant events such as the birth of a child, weddings, funerals and their traditional holiday ceremonies. These scriptures were orally passed on from one generation to the next. Either they were passed down orally from father to son or from teacher to student. Now it is very difficult to find anyone who knows and is able to chant these traditional scriptures. As a result, for important rites of passage, the Qiang are turning more to Chinese customs and incorporating the Chinese language as well. Here in the domain of religion, Qiang language use is also dying out.

Despite this trend, recently on the sixth day of the sixth month of the lunar calendar, (July 7th, 2000) a festival⁶ for offering sacrifices to the mountain god was held in Songping Valley, a forested area in northern Mao county. The officiating priests from Goukou (沟口) and Heihu (黑虎) townships are the only Qiang priests known by the authors who can still perform the traditional scriptures in Qiang. They are in their 60s and 70s and it is unknown whether they are passing this ability on to their sons or other students as was customary.

By way of contrast, we can look at the Tibetan language/religious situation and see how their use of language in the religious sphere actually helps to maintain their language. To be Tibetan implies that one is Buddhist. There are strong cultural links between being Tibetan and using the Tibetan language in Buddhist worship. Unlike their near neighbors though, currently, to be Qiang does not imply any strong religious affiliation. Presently, when a young

⁶ It should be noted that this event was organized and supported by the county tourism office.

Qiang person is asked "what they believe in", they will sometimes respond with a quite "Chinese" answer: "I believe in myself", or "I believe in science". These answers reflect an absorption into the Chinese educational channels. Traditionally, all the Qiang believed in gods or spirits and there was no indigenous value of believing in "self" or "science". Thus the present state of the Qiang religion, offers little means or incentive for the people to maintain their language.

3.0 LANGUAGE POLICY

Language and political issues are often closely interwoven. The Qiang situation is no exception to this. Factors such as laws and language policies, prestige, economics and traditions all affect language use.

3.1 OFFICIAL STATUS

In the People's Republic of China, languages (written form) must be approved by the National Minority Affairs Commission before they can be commonly used by the average person. Up until that time, only branches of the government associated with language development have the authority to publish material using an ethnic language orthography. Therefore, at the moment the lack of official approval keeps the average Qiang person from being involved in the maintenance of his written language. In other words, presently, vehicles that would promote written language use among the average person like calendars, newspapers and non-educational materials do not exist.

In approving a written form of a language, the first and foremost consideration is whether the orthography is usable and needs no further refinement. A recently developed orthography must weather a test period of undetermined length without any difficulties in terms of usability. Further considerations arise if an orthography proves viable. For instance, the Qiang written representation has proven reliable, however, presently there is little or no demand for its use by the Qiang-speaking population. Therefore, when weighed against current demand, the government has little incentive to underwrite an approval. The consideration of economics also comes into play. If an ethnic language's orthography is formally and officially approved then, by law, there are certain official documents, publicly displayed signs e.g. that must be translated into that language. This last consideration has potentially costly ramifications particularly in any country with very many diverse ethnic languages, like China.

3.2 IMPLEMENTATION OF POLICY

In Sichuan province, the majority of the governing posts are filled by Han Chinese with Tibetan, Yi, Qiang and Hui following in that order. In Qiang areas, the county level positions and below are often held by capable Qiang officials, however, the Qiang have fewer opportunities for affecting policy at higher levels of government.

The Communist Party, much to its credit, has had a supportive policy of

minority language development for many years. The obvious reason for this support is promotion of effective communication, which not only allows the party to better communicate with the people it is governing, but also helps ethnic groups to develop culturally, educationally and economically.

In the late 1990's, monetary issues came to bear directly upon the implementation of language policy. A milestone was the Asian economic crisis which wreaked havoc throughout the region during the closing months of 1997. At this point, the need to feed people and maintain a stable economy superseded the requests from the social science field for funding. Henceforth, government willingness to carry out language work and the personnel have often been present, but funding has become scarce. This is exemplified by the fate of the Rrmea Lehhrr (Zhou, Zhang & Wang 1993) and a Chinese-Qiang dictionary (Zhou 1994). The Rrmea Lehhrr, a book used for teaching the Qiang language, is out of print. Thus no textbook presently exists for Qiang language instruction. The Chinese-Qiang dictionary has remained in rough draft form for more than five years due to the lack of funds.

Another aspect of policy which was put into practice was the Qiang Teacher Training Program. This program was begun to train teachers to be able to teach the experimental written form of the Qiang language. Beginning in 1994, this program was responsible for training a total of 86 teachers. However, it was disbanded in 1996. The students of the Qiang Language Program were ethnically Qiang and Tibetan with the exception of one ethnically Yi student. They came from the counties of Beichuan, Heishui, Li, Mao, Songpan and Wenchuan. Although the students came from many different dialect areas, they were all able to become competent enough in using standard northern Qiang pronunciation to be able to teach first and second grade Qiang language classes. After graduation, most of these trained teachers were allocated to jobs in Qiang district primary schools where they taught Qiang language classes. In the schools where Qiang was taught, it was taught for two periods a week, which amounted to about two hours total per week.

3.3 STANDARDIZATION

During the 1950's the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, previously *Academica Sinica*, conducted Qiang linguistic research in Mawo township of Heishui county. Initially, this area was designated as the "standard" Qiang variety. However, a large majority of the people in Heishui who speak Qiang claim Tibetan ethnicity. So when their area was said to represent the "standard" variety of the Qiang language, this caused quite a debate since folks who claimed to be Tibetan did not want to be mistakenly classified as Qiang, ethnically. Accordingly, in 1990 the locale designated as the standard was revised by the Sichuan Minority Affairs Commission Language Work Committee to that of Qugu township of Chibusu district in Mao county.

This is a fascinating example of the interaction between ethnic identity and language. If a person using Han Chinese as a language of medium asks an individual residing in Heishui claiming to be of Tibetan ethnicity if he is Qiang

the answer most certainly would be “no”. On the other hand, if one uses Qiang as a language of medium and asks the same individual if he is Qiang \zme\ the answer is often “yes”! This is significant because if one is asked in Han Chinese if he is Qiang or not, the implication is that you can only belong to the Qiang ethnic group. However, the Qiang language is different. It allows for people belonging to both the Tibetan and Qiang ethnic groups to be referred to as \zme\.

4.0 SOCIOLOGICAL ISSUES

Written records documenting Qiang interaction with Han Chinese show that the Qiang have been effectively bilingual in Han Chinese for over 2,000 years. So the natural question arises: “Is this bilingualism stable, or has it become a factor in language shift?” This is where a discussion of language maintenance and shift becomes necessary. We must look at the reasons why the Qiang people might collectively choose to speak only Chinese in the future.

4.1 STATE OF THE LANGUAGE

According to Ralph Fasold, “Language shift and, the other side of the coin, language maintenance are really the long-term, collective results of language choice.” Language shift occurs when a community gives up a language completely in favor of another one. As Fasold states, “Almost all cases of societal language shift come about through intergenerational switching (Lieberson 1972,1980).” However, in a language maintenance scenario, the community collectively decides to continue using the language or languages which it has traditionally used. According to several studies of the phenomenon of language shift, there tend to be certain conditions associated with this change (Tabouret-Keller 1968, 1972; Dressler and Wodak-Leodolter 1977; Lieberson and McCabe 1978; Gal 1979; Kahane and Kahane 1979; Huffines 1980; Timm 1980; Dorian 1981). These conditions include: societal bilingualism, migration, industrialization and other economic changes, school language and other government pressures, urbanization, higher prestige for the language being shifted to, and a smaller population of speakers of the language being shifted from. Despite these conditions being present in a language community, there has still been very little success in using them to be able to predict when shift will occur.

The current Qiang language situation exhibits many of the conditions associated with language shift. The Qiang, as previously noted, have been bilingual as a society for many years. There are more and more Qiang young people who are being sent to the county seats to attend kindergarten, primary school, junior high and high school in order to get a better quality education with the hopes of making a better living in the future. The junior high and high schools tend to be boarding schools which usually put the Qiang student in a completely Chinese environment.

The language of education as well as the written language which has

popularly been used is that of Han Chinese. Han Chinese is also the preferred written language of local, prefectural, provincial, national government and business. In addition, many students feel a strong need to learn English as a second language. The systematic teaching of English begins in junior high school in Aba Prefecture. A ubiquitous attitude among many parents of school age children is that it is much more valuable for their children to spend their time learning a useful language like Han Chinese and/or English rather than to waste their time studying Qiang which in their minds has little redeeming benefit. While English will not directly affect Qiang's viability, people's attitude toward English may indirectly discourage the maintenance and/or development of Qiang.

Although much of China's population is still rural, the country, as a whole, has experienced rapid industrialization, development and the trend toward urbanization. Many Qiang young people go to the bigger cities to find work which will give them and their families some much-needed disposable income. Once a young person leaves his or her village to go to work, they seldom return except for the purpose of visiting their families. Instead, after the young person marries and has a child, sometimes, the grandparents will also move away from the village to live with one of their children. The grandparents typically move away from the main Qiang-speaking areas in order to help care for the grandchild or grandchildren while the parents are at work. In these cases, often the grandparents are able to speak both Qiang and Chinese, but they have had very little formal education. Usually, their children are also able to speak both Qiang and Chinese. However, their command of Chinese is better than that of the grandparents and usually they have at least a primary school education level, if not higher. The grandchildren, in turn, tend to communicate in Chinese and understand, but do not speak Qiang.

4.2 ATTITUDES

The attitudes or convictions the Qiang people hold toward their language can be summed up in two important points. One, a phrase often heard is, "Our language has no usefulness." The Qiang tend to hold their language in low regard, because it can do little for them. Since they cannot use it beyond their own community and homes, they do not assign much value to it.

The second important attitude the authors have heard repeatedly is, "Our language is disappearing." Whether it is based on fact or not, many Qiang believe that their language is moving toward extinction. It is generally accepted among linguists that language death and language shift are very difficult linguistic phenomenon to measure. However, a prevailing conviction among the average Qiang speaker is that their language is like a ship sinking at sea. It is only a matter of time before it is gone.

4.3 SURVEY

Although the Qiang have been bilingual in Qiang and Han Chinese for hundreds of years, the authors suspect that its bilingualism and/or diglossia are

in a state of flux. Formally stated, this phenomenon is known as “Reduced intergenerational transfer of traditional language”. In other words, the authors believe that the younger generations of Qiang are speaking Han Chinese with increasing frequency and Qiang with decreasing frequency. To test this hypothesis the authors conducted a small scale survey in Hexi village, Qugu Township, Chibusu District, Mao county, (approximately 103 degrees 30 minutes longitude east and 31 degrees 50 minutes north). Qiang was used as the language medium for the survey questions in both written and oral forms. Two criteria were used in selecting people for the survey. One, they had to reside in Qugu and be 18 years of age or older. The following eight questions were asked:

1. Sex: Male/Female
2. Name: ?⁷
3. What ethnicity are you?
4. What ethnicity is your spouse?
5. In which situations do you speak Qiang?
6. In which situations do you speak Han Chinese?
7. Which language do you use with your child/children?
8. How old are you?

A total of 56 people were surveyed representing 46 different households. As of July 2000, the population of the township of Qugu was 2503 people⁸. This means that the 56 people queried represent a two percent sample of the population. Similarly, the 46 families represent nine percent of all households. For complete survey results, see the appendixes. Because the survey results indicate the language medium in adult-child conversations is progressively becoming Han Chinese in all contexts, we suspect that language shift may be in progress. In other words, the Qiang people seem to be consciously choosing to speak Han Chinese rather than Qiang.

The authors notice an inconsistency in the participants’ answers. In answering question number three all participants said that they speak Qiang in Qugu, i.e. in their homes. However, when asked to respond to question number five the majority of the younger generation (39 years and below) said they preferred Han Chinese when talking to their children. While in Qugu conducting the survey, the authors also consciously spent several hours watching children speaking with children and adults speaking with children. In addition, the first named author, using Qiang (his mother tongue), engaged all the children he had the opportunity to speak with to determine if they could respond in Qiang or not. The authors conclude that the majority (as much as 80%) of the children in the families interviewed, are either passively bilingual,

⁷ Names were gathered so the authors could determine how many households were surveyed.

⁸ Population statistics courtesy of the Qugu township government.

i.e. understand Qiang and Han Chinese but only speak Han Chinese, or only speak and understand Han Chinese.

5 CONCLUSION

From this review of Qiang cultural, sociolinguistic and policy issues, we suspect that the Qiang people are shifting to another language: Han Chinese. Of course, this is still a tentative conclusion that needs further support from additional research. This does not suggest that, given incentive, funding and technical support, the potential for language shift might be arrested or reversed.

The common thread through much of the discussion involving Qiang language shift and language development is money. From an economic standpoint, Qiang language use and development is not viewed by native speakers or others as a worthwhile investment of time or funds. The next decade may be the most crucial one in the history of the Qiang language. Whether Qiang continues being spoken then may well depend on a prompt response to the current situation by the Qiang people, linguists and policy makers.

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Appendix 1: Survey Questions

1. Ji \ zi?
2. Umn nyiggi rrmu na?
3. Umn Rrmea vhunn na mavhunn na?
4. Unnj zaembbea/zhang-gguixxji lea Rrmea vhunn vhua?
5. Unn jila xxi sda Rrmearr wu gebu na?
6. Unn jila xxi sda Vverr wu gebu na?
7. Unn unnj jumi da nyiggi dhuwu wu gebu na?
8. Umn Shusd nyi leayiu na?

Appendix 2: Survey Questions (English translation)

1. Sex: Male/Female
2. Name: ?⁹
3. What ethnicity are you?
4. What ethnicity is your spouse?
5. In which situations do you speak Qiang?
6. In which situations do you speak Han Chinese?
7. Which language(s) do you use with your child/children?
8. How old are you?

⁹ Names were gathered so the authors could determine how many households were surveyed.

Appendix 3: Survey Questions Results as of 2000.7.15.

1. Total: 54 individuals
Males: 42 and Female:14
The 54 individuals represent a total of 46 different households.
2. Names vary per individual.
3. All 54 (100%) individuals queried claimed Qiang ethnicity.
4. 50 of the 54 (94%) individuals queried were married. Of the 50 that were married, 48 (96%) had Qiang spouses.
5. All 54 (100%) individuals queried responded with answers like: Qiang is used in the homes of Qiang speaking residents of Qugu or with Qiang people outside of the Qugu area.
6. All 54 (100%) individuals queried said that Han Chinese was the default language of use outside of Qugu, unless it was determined that the individual being engaged was able to speak Qiang.
7. Results of language spoken with children listed by age category:

Age:	Qiang (only)	Qiang and Chinese	Chinese (only)	No children
60-above	60%	40%	0%	---
50-59	50%	40%	10%	---
40-49	78%	22%	0%	---
30-39	28%	36%	36%	---
29-below	5%	28%	50%	17%

Results of language spoken with children listed by age and sex:

		Male:	Female:
60 and above	Qiang (only)	50%	100%
	Qiang and Chinese	50%	0%
	Chinese (only)	0%	0%
50-59	Qiang (only)	44%	100%
	Qiang and Chinese	44%	0%
	Chinese (only)	12%	0%
40-49	Qiang (only)	100%	80%
	Qiang and Chinese	0%	20%
	Chinese (only)	0%	0%
30-39	Qiang (only)	31%	0%
	Qiang and Chinese	31%	100%
	Chinese (only)	38%	0%
29 and below	Qiang (only)	8%	0%
	Qiang and Chinese	25%	34%
	Chinese (only)	65%	33%
	No children	8%	33%

8. Age:

Average male age: 38 years. Oldest - 68 and youngest - 18.

Average female age: 37 years. Oldest - 60 and youngest - 18

Distribution by age and sex :

Age:	Male	Female	Total:
60 and above	4	1	5
50 - 59	9	1	10
41 - 49	4	5	9
30 - 39	13	1	14
29 and under	12	6	18
Total:	42	14	56