



**“Chinese Language Requirements in the Hong Kong Job Market:
A Survey on Job Advertisements”**
Executive Summary

Language barrier often constitutes a major obstacle to non-Chinese speakers in Hong Kong with regards to their studies and employment opportunities. Hong Kong Unison conducted a research to investigate whether job seekers in Hong Kong who do not speak and/or write Chinese encounter difficulties in seeking local employment.

The research surveyed 1,500 internet job postings in April 2014 and December 2015 from 16 Hong Kong-based internet job search databases. Stratified random sampling methods were used to ensure different occupations are well-represented in this survey. There were 839 job ads that either did not mention spoken-Cantonese requirement or did not mention written-Chinese requirement; in order to clarify missing or ambiguous information on language requirements, researchers also called and successfully spoke to 82 employers whose job postings that did not explicitly mention their Chinese language requirement or preference.

Key Findings

(1) The majority of job ads required Chinese language abilities from applicants

Among the 1500 jobs surveyed, 49% (733) explicitly required spoken Cantonese; 51% (762) required written Chinese; and 26% (389) required spoken Putonghua. Only one out of the 1,500 job postings explicitly mentioned that speaking Cantonese is not a requirement for the position. When we exclude the job postings that did not include requirements on either spoken Cantonese or written Chinese, 97% required spoken Cantonese and 99% required written Chinese (see Table 1).

Table 1. Chinese language requirements stated in job ads

	Spoken Cantonese		Written Chinese		Spoken Putonghua	
	Total %	(excluding “Not mentioned”)	Total %	(excluding “Not mentioned”)	Total %	(excluding “Not mentioned”)
Required	49%	(97%)	51%	(99%)	26%	(79%)
Preferred	1%	(3%)	0%	(1%)	7%	(21%)
Not required	0%	(0%)	0%	(0%)	0%	(0%)
Not mentioned	50%	N/A	49%	N/A	67%	N/A
Total	1,500	755	1,500	769	1,500	493

(2) Spoken Cantonese and written Chinese are both highly valued by employers

The jobs that required spoken Cantonese and the jobs that required written Chinese largely overlap. Table 2 below shows that 43.1% of 1,500 surveyed job ads required both spoken Cantonese and written Chinese, while less than 0.5% of the surveyed job ads indicated either spoken Cantonese or written Chinese is not required or preferred.



Table 2. Requirements on spoken Cantonese and written Chinese in job ads

	Written required	Written preferred	Written not required	Written not mentioned
Cantonese required	43.1%	0.1%	0.0%	5.7%
Cantonese preferred	0.5%	0.4%	0.0%	0.5%
Cantonese not required	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
Cantonese not mentioned	7.2%	0.0%	0.0%	42.5%

(3) Most of the jobs that did not explicitly state Chinese language requirements still expected job seekers to have command of the Chinese language

Among the 82 telephone calls we made to clarify Chinese requirements, 66% (51) of the telephoned employers require job applicants to know spoken Cantonese, while only 12% (9) explained that they did not require Cantonese skills. Similarly, 67% (53) of employers that did not state their Chinese writing requirements clarified that they indeed require the skill; only 10% (8 employers) explained that they do not require Chinese writing skills. According to this trend, it may be deduced that although close to half of the surveyed job postings did not mention their Chinese language requirement, most of them still require Chinese speaking and writing skills, and simply took for granted that applicants from Hong Kong would speak Cantonese and write Chinese.

Table 1. Responses from phone calls to employers for jobs that did not mention spoken-Cantonese or written-Chinese requirements

	Spoken Cantonese	Written Chinese
Required	66%	67%
Preferred	9%	10%
Not required	12%	10%
Unable/ unwilling to clarify	13%	13%
Number of job ads that did not mention this language requirement	77	79

** Out of the 82 employers called, 77 did not mention spoken Cantonese requirement while 79 did not mention written Chinese requirement in their job posting. The percentages in this table are based on 77 and 79 respectively.*

(4) Many job ads are inaccessible to job seekers who cannot read Chinese

Among the 1500 job ads surveyed, 16% were written in Chinese only, while 22% were partially bilingual but had essential information written in Chinese only. When combined, 39% of the job ads surveyed was inaccessible to non-Chinese reading job seekers. 61% of the job ads were written entirely in English.



Table 4. Language in which the job posting was written

Language	Tally	Percentage
In Chinese only	245	16%
Some vital information in Chinese	337	22%
Entirely in English	918	61%

(5) Job seekers who do not know Chinese only has 19% of all advertised jobs available to them

Referring to the table below, if a job seeker can only read job ads that are written in entirely in English, and does not apply to any jobs that stated written Chinese, spoken Cantonese, and/or spoken Putonghua as a requirement or preference, then this job seeker essentially only has 19% of internet-advertised job vacancies available to him.

Table 5. Job leads from the sample that are available to job seekers who do not know Chinese

	Language in which the job posting was written			
	Can only read ads entirely in English		Can read ads in English and ads that have some information in Chinese	
Ads that are written in a language the job seeker can read	918	61%	1255	84%
Job seeker does not write Chinese	386	26%	577	38%
Job seeker also does not speak Cantonese	313	21%	495	33%
Job seeker also does not speak Putonghua	288	19%	461	31%

(6) The ability to speak other languages may not offset the disadvantage of not knowing Chinese

Among the 1,500 job ad surveyed, only 25 (less than 2%) listed a preference or requirement for a language other than English or Chinese. Among those 25 jobs, 13 (52%) also required or preferred the job seeker to speak Cantonese, while 17 (68%) of them also required or preferred the job seeker to speak Putonghua.

Table 6. Chinese language requirements among the 25 job ads that listed a preference or requirement for the ability to speak a language other than English or Chinese

Stated Chinese language requirements	Tally	%
Require or prefer Cantonese	13	52%
Require or prefer written Chinese	10	40%
Require or prefer Putonghua	17	68%
Did not mention Cantonese, written Chinese or Putonghua	5	20%
Not require any Chinese skills	0	0%



Conclusion

This survey concludes that non-Chinese speakers who do not have Chinese language proficiency have fewer opportunities in employment seeking in the local job market. Chinese language poses as a barrier to non-Chinese job seekers.

Policy Suggestions

(1) Labour Department

The Labour Department should develop an employment programme for ethnic minorities with reference to the “Employment Programme for the Middle-aged” and other similar measures. The programme should provide adequate support to ethnic minority job seekers to overcome language barriers and other difficulties, and provide encouragement and incentives for employers to hire ethnic minorities. The Labour Department should initiate such project at the department and be a role model to other employers.

The Labour Department should raise the awareness of employers on whether the job really requires Chinese proficiency when posting the vacancies. Employers should be reminded that they must be able to justify any language requirement or condition by showing that it is relevant to and not more demanding than what is required for doing the job as an unjustifiable requirement can lead to claims of indirect discrimination.

(2) Adult Chinese language classes

The government should enhance its efforts in providing accredited adult Chinese classes to residents who need them. Although some organizations (including the Employees Retraining Board, HAD-funded support service centres for ethnic minorities, and tertiary institutions) operate government-funded Chinese language classes, there is a lack of coordination between these courses. Classes provided by community centres are mostly beginners’ level, and the lack of coordination makes it difficult for learners to progress to advanced classes in other institutions. There are also few Cantonese-based Chinese classes in the private market.

(3) Chinese language learning in post-secondary education

The Education Bureau should encourage and support post-secondary education institutions to provide appropriate Chinese language learning opportunities to students to whom Chinese is a second language, in order to increase their competitiveness for the job market after graduation (bridge GCSE/GCE level to higher proficiency).

(4) Chinese language education for second-language learners

Many ethnic minority residents graduated from the public education system without adequate Chinese language skills because there has not been an effective Chinese as a second language policy. The government should implement an effective Chinese as a Second Language policy that includes appropriate curriculum, teaching materials, learning objectives, assessment tools and teacher training in order to help ethnic minority students access the full range of employment opportunities. The government should also study the level of Chinese needed to allow full access to economic opportunities and community life in Hong Kong, and design the Chinese-language curriculum accordingly.