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Menu

CHINA

## *Will Mandarin be the next global language?*

China's future is by no means certain; whatever happens will have implications for the global linguistic order

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A woman walks by Chinese language advertisements for Australian property in Sydney's Chinatown on June 21, 2017. Photo: AFP/William West

English became the global language because of the power and influence of English speakers and English-speaking countries in modern times. In a nutshell, Britain was the leading colonial power during the 17th and 18th centuries, and the originator of the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century, while the United States was the world's leading economic, political, military, scientific and cultural power throughout the 20th century and into the early 21st century. English is therefore the language most associated with how the modern world operates, or, in other words, the international system.

Some scholars have predicted that this situation will last well into the future, such as John Honey, who [says](#) “English is the world language – at least for the next 500 years, or until the Martians arrive.”

He's probably being facetious when he talks about a Martian landing, but his point is it would take a monumental event to dislodge English as the global language. But when we look around the world today, we do see events that could be described as monumental, not the least of which is China's rise.

This has prompted much interest in learning China's official language, Modern Standard Chinese, commonly referred to as Mandarin. There may now be as many as [100 million people trying to acquire it around the world](#).

However, China's future is by no means certain: It could become a superpower, a major power, or a threat, or even go into decline. Whatever happens will have implications for the global linguistic order.

There are three possible scenarios.

## **Continuation**

The first scenario is continuation, in which English remains the global language.

China faces an array of political, economic, environmental and social problems that could overwhelm it. Because the attraction of Mandarin is based primarily on China's political importance and its economy, if its development were to stagnate or even go backwards, people will be less interested in learning Mandarin.

If China is a threat to the current international system, or is perceived as such, it's likely to create resistance to learning Mandarin and to the very idea of Mandarin as a global language. When I talk with my students about the future of English, Southeast Asians in particular seem not to want Mandarin to become the global language.

Something else that could lead to resistance is the language's association with the People's Republic of China and its Communist government. Anders Corr, publisher of the Journal of Political Risk, recently called for a boycott of the PRC variety of Mandarin, [describing it](#) as “a medium for authoritarian influence from a political party that some compare to dictatorship, totalitarianism and fascism,” and “[a tool of CCP power](#).” If people don't accept Mandarin they will not learn it or use it in their lives.

Mandarin would still be learned by military and intelligence-service personnel for security reasons, but to be global a language must have a much broader appeal.

In both cases, Mandarin would not be as appealing and attractive as English, and English would remain the global language.

## **Co-existence**

The second scenario is co-existence, in which English and Mandarin are both global languages.

China could be one of a number of powerful and important countries, but not powerful enough to dominate the world. In such circumstances, English won't be the only language that's seen as important, and Mandarin would likely increase its use and status. There are already signs this is happening.

[African students](#) are increasingly interested in learning Mandarin because of job opportunities created by China's investment in African countries, the ease of getting study visas after restrictions put in place by the US and Europe, and cheaper tuition fees at Chinese universities. In English-speaking countries, more [bilingual Mandarin/English](#) schools are opening in response to the growing perception that acquiring Mandarin will be important in the future.

## Replacement

The third scenario is replacement, in which Mandarin becomes the global language instead of English.

If China becomes the world's most powerful country, or superpower, it would be able to use its power to shape the international system, much as the US did after World War II. This included establishing important international organizations like the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and sponsoring redevelopment through the Marshall Plan.

One notable Chinese phenomenon in this vein is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is about connecting China to the rest of the world through roads, railways and ports, and involves substantial amounts of investment across the world.

China is also attempting to position itself as a leader on global issues at the same time as the US retreats from them. These include free trade and globalization, climate change and space exploration. This is another similarity to English, which was helped in becoming the global language because of its association with the inventions of the Industrial Revolution and then later on by its association with developments in science and technology in the US.

If China's initiatives are successful, Mandarin will be the language associated with new developments and ideas, and consequently have great appeal and attraction to people.

Equally important, as its power grows, China is also likely to want to have Mandarin used more on the global stage as a matter of national pride.

Alternatively, if there were a confrontation between China and the US and its allies, and China won, it would also mean China would be in a position to establish a new international system under its leadership, and Mandarin would be the language most associated with that system. This would likely be accompanied by at least some degree of resistance, however.

Any change to the global status of English might seem very unlikely at present. However, [David Crystal](#) reminds us that in the Middle Ages the idea that Latin wouldn't be the language of education and scholarship would have seemed ridiculous, and in the 18th century the idea that French would cease to be the language of culture and diplomacy would also have seemed ridiculous. Yet both of those things did indeed happen.

The fact that Chinese uses a character-based script instead of an alphabetic one is often seen as a reason Mandarin won't be the future global language, regardless of how powerful China becomes. This view is based on flawed assumptions about how a global language is used, does not account for how

technology makes learning and using characters easier, ignores this historical use of characters beyond China and ascribes too much weight to the purely linguistic properties of Chinese, as I've argued [elsewhere](#).

We shouldn't be too hasty in dismissing the possibility of Mandarin as the future global language.

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