

DISCIPLINING PREFERENCES: THE “CANTONESE QUESTION” IN SINGAPORE’S MASS MEDIA

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In contemporary Singapore, a government ban on all Chinese dialects except Mandarin on television and radio programs has been in force for more than three decades, a result of the nation-wide campaign to speak Mandarin that began in 1979.¹ The various restrictions on the use of dialects continue to be a contentious issue in Singapore. In 2009, Professor Ng Chin Bee of Nanyang Technological University sparked a debate when she said at a language seminar that Singaporeans were even more multilingual 40 years ago, noting that young Singaporeans are not speaking languages other than English and their native language and hence concluding that “all it takes is one generation for a language to die.” In response, former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew reiterated his stand against the use of Chinese dialects, saying that learning dialects consumes the “time and energy from mastering English and Mandarin” and that “if the government had left language habits to evolve undirected, Chinese Singaporeans would be speaking an adulterated Hokkien-Teochew dialect.”² Lee further opined that “the value of a language is its usefulness, not just in Singapore, but also in the wider world.”³ The terms in which the “dialect question” debate had been framed were fundamentally determined by the omnipresent government as an embrace or rejection of its leaders’ notion of progress and prosperity.

A vast corpus of literature exists to explain Singapore’s language beliefs, policies, and situation, and various studies have confirmed that despite Singapore’s high-handed language policies, Singapore remains a heterogeneous, plural society with a complicated linguistic make-up.⁴ Nevertheless, Singapore has undergone a drastic language shift as a result of its successful institutionalization of English and, to a lesser extent, Mandarin,

1 S. Gopinathan, “Language Policy Changes 1979-1997: Politics and Pedagogy,” in *Language, Society, and Education in Singapore: Issues and Trends* (2nd edition), eds. S. Gopinathan et. al. (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1998), pp. 19-44.

2 Goh Chin Lian, “Learning dialects ‘adds to burden’,” *The Straits Times* (Singapore), March 18, 2009.

3 *Ibid.*

4 Some relevant works include W. Bokhorst Heng, “Language Planning and Management in Singapore,” in *English in New Cultural Contexts: Reflections from Singapore*, eds. J. Foley et. al. (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1998); Antonio L. Rappa and Lionel Wee, *Language Policy and Modernity in Southeast Asia: Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand* (New York: Springer, 2006).

Malay, and Tamil over other languages and dialects. English started to displace Hokkien and Bazaar Malay as lingua franca from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, with 70% of Primary 1 children having English as a dominant language by 1990. According to a study, Mandarin displaced the other Chinese languages and dialects, becoming the language of choice for 35% of all Singaporeans in 2000.⁵ A sharp drop occurred in the use of Chinese dialects. According to Singapore's 2010 population census, the proportion of Chinese residents who speak mainly dialect at home plummeted from 30.7% in 2000 to 19.2% in 2010.⁶ In certain surveys, the percentage went below a dismal 2% for Chinese families who speak dialect at home.⁷ Referring to these figures, Lee Kuan Yew said that "they showed more parents preferred their children to focus on learning English and Mandarin well."⁸ From the state's perspective, the "language struggle" to bring about economic progress through access to English- and Mandarin-speaking societies has succeeded, and Chinese dialect groups have been united in their use of Mandarin as a common language in pursuit of a common objective to make Singapore successful.

The Singaporean state's essentialization of the language discourse, which forms coherent groups with identical interests, assumes that world-savvy citizens cannot hope to possess a high proficiency in multiple languages and should concentrate on learning the "useful" ones to remain economically competitive in the global marketplace. Lee Kuan Yew places a strong emphasis on learning English, arguing that "the deliberate stifling of a language which gives access to superior technology can be stifling beyond repair ...it is tantamount to blinding the next generation to the knowledge of the advanced countries," which he says are English-speaking countries.⁹ The then Minister for Education, Tony Tan (1986), says that "children must learn English so that they will have a window to the knowledge, technology, and expertise of the modern world. They must know their mother tongues [Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil] to...know what makes us what we are." English functions as the language of modernity, while the mother tongues are the cultural anchors that ground citizens to traditional values.¹⁰ When the Chinese dialects (save for Mandarin) are used, they are defined in a restricted way as "a symbol of in-group identity within certain subcultures in schools and among friends... for example, the *ah beng* and *ah lian* (Hokkien: delinquents) subculture."¹¹ Hence the "language struggle" is closely aligned to the state's attempt to become modern.

5 Lisa Lim, "Migrants and 'Mother Tongues': Extralinguistic Forces in the Ecology of English in Singapore, in *English in Singapore*, ed. Anne Pakir (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010), p. 30.

6 Boon Chan, "Speaking up for dialect in films," *The Straits Times*, May 23, 2012.

7 Goh, "Learning dialects 'adds to burden'."

8 *Ibid.*

9 Lee Kuan Yew, "The Twain Have Met," Dillingham Lecture, East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii, USA, November 11, 1970.

10 Rappa and Wee, *Language Policy and Modernity in Southeast Asia*, p. 84.

11 H.C. Yang, "Relating National and Language Ideologies: A Study of the Shift and Maintenance of Chinese Dialects in Singapore" (M.A. Thesis, National University of Singapore, 2008).

Table 1 Resident Population Aged 15 Years and Over by Language Most Frequently Spoken at Home. Source: Census of Population 2010 (Singapore)¹²

Language Most Frequently Spoken at Home	Total		
	Total	Males	Females
Total	2,928,178	1,427,810	1,500,368
English	871,374	433,060	438,314
Mandarin	1,064,157	512,043	552,113
Chinese Dialects	482,550	231,325	251,225
Hokkien	237,147	119,043	118,104
Teochew	93,811	43,995	49,816
Cantonese	119,143	54,085	65,057
Other Chinese Dialects	32,449	14,201	18,248

This paper explores the complicated issue of language in contemporary Singapore by investigating the “Cantonese question” in Singapore’s mass media. Past studies have established the relations between the state’s socio-economic goals, the state’s language policy, and their social impact on the average Singaporean. Elaborating on these studies, this paper regards modernity not in terms of the modernization theory but as a desired and imagined outcome of the language policy. Leaders of the Singaporean state have always envisaged modernity as one dictated by Euro-American hegemony, identifying modernity with the practices and values associated with a capitalist society. The state thus conflates economic success and modernity, where modernity encompasses many more approaches and sections than what it has defined. With reference to the perceptions by both the state and the Chinese community of Cantonese as a Chinese dialect, as well as to the restrictive use of Cantonese in the mass media, this paper argues that the “language struggle” in Singapore is far from over with a state victory, as individuals and segments of the Chinese community continue to invest the “struggle” with multiple meanings based on their social experiences. One durable form of resistance against the state hegemony over language issues appears in the broadcast mass media of film, radio, and television, where self-assured citizens and organizations have begun, in recent years, to challenge the state narrative of “language for use and modernity” and reclaim the relevance and validity of their own dialect or language in Singaporean society.

This paper is divided into three main sections. The first section analyzes the Cantonese Singaporeans’ reception of Cantonese films, opera, radio, and television programs from both Hong Kong and Singapore. The second section revisits sporadic calls from the Cantonese community for the state to bring all Chinese dialects back to

12 Singapore Department of Statistics website: http://www.singstat.gov.sg/publications/publications_and_papers/cop2010/census10_stat_release1.html (accessed January 31, 2014).

the airwaves in Singapore. The third section argues that the show of solidarity in the common goal of restoring Chinese dialects on local radio and television programs has revealed both the cultural skepticism (defined as mistrust of the state in cultural policies and belief that state leaders act in culture's best interest only when it is economically, political, or socially advantageous for them to do so) of the general public and, paradoxically, the people's identification of state objectives and tacit support for state policies. In this paper, unless otherwise stated, both Cantonese and Mandarin, along with Hokkien, Teochew, and others, are dialects of the Chinese language; "Chinese dialects" refers to all dialects except Mandarin, the official language of the ethnic Chinese in Singapore.

It may be instructive to first clarify the differences between dialect and language as well as those between "dialect" in English and "fangyan" in Chinese. "Dialect," to be sure, has not been an accurate translation of "fangyan." Premodern Chinese definitions of "fangyan" usually emphasize the crudity or non-standardness of its exemplars, and even late into the Qing Dynasty, Chinese officials and scholars identified languages such as Japanese, Korean, Manchu, Mongolian, Vietnamese, and even Western languages as "fangyan," which did not match the Western definition of "dialect"—one of two or more mutually intelligible varieties of a given language distinguished by vocabulary, idiom, and pronunciation. Victor H. Mair argues that the abuse of the word "fangyan" in its incorrect English translation as "dialect" has led to extensive misinformation concerning Chinese language(s) in the West. For one, against conventional wisdom, the vast majority of Chinese languages have never shared the same written language.¹³ Political and social considerations rather than linguistic ones determine what dialects and languages are. The official elevation of Northeastern Mandarin (with Peking pronunciation as the basis for the standard) as the current national language of China is a fairly recent phenomenon, which parallels the Singaporean state's designation of Mandarin as the lingua franca of all Chinese Singaporeans. Seen in this light, "dialect" becomes a smear word against the backdrop of the Mandarin "language," the latter of which is supported by modern legal-political institutions. "Mandarin," which is "the language of the officials"—"guanhua" or official speech—is not the only Chinese language, and the great discrepancies between the major Chinese "fangyan" in phonology, lexicon, orthography, and grammar make it impossible for a reader of one of them to make much sense of materials written in another of them. The standard mutual intelligibility test, albeit a sensible measure for determining whether two (or more) speech patterns in question are separate languages or are "fangyan" of one single language,¹⁴ is nevertheless subjected to national linguistic classifications. In China and Singapore, Hokkien and Teochew are both dialects of Southern Min sharing a reasonable degree of mutual intelligibility, while spoken Cantonese and spoken Mandarin are as

13 Victor H. Mair, "What Is a Chinese 'Dialect/Topolect'?" Reflections on Some Key Sino-English Linguistic Terms," *Sino-Platonic Papers* 29 (September 1991), pp. 1-31.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

different from each other as English and German.¹⁵ Although the translation of the word “fangyan” and the definition of “dialect” and “language” are seemingly simple and innocent issues, they are actually quite the opposite.

Cantonese Films, Opera, Radio, and Television Programs in Singapore

The Cantonese dialect, owing much to its prevalence in the Cantonese Chinese community in Singapore, offers this paper an obvious topic for discussion. Despite the drastic shift from various regional dialects to Mandarin in recent decades, dialects such as Hokkien and Cantonese are still fairly dominant in the ethnic Chinese home, ranking as the third and fourth most widely spoken languages at home after Mandarin and English. Among the Chinese dialect communities, Cantonese is still spoken by the Cantonese at home more frequently than Mandarin, even though there is an overall decrease in usage, contrasting with the Hokkien, Teochew, and other communities who speak much more Mandarin than their own dialect at home. In addition, as Lisa Lim puts it, a significant group of Cantonese Chinese from Hong Kong has brought about a paradigm shift in the Chinese population not only in terms of the demography of immigration patterns but subsequently of language use in the home, such that Cantonese is more dominant in the Chinese home in terms of the relative number of speakers and the amount of usage.¹⁶ Immigrants formed a larger proportion of the Cantonese community compared with the Hokkiens and Teochews, with proportionally more Cantonese born outside Singapore—22% against 12% for the other two dialect groups in 2000. The bulk of the Cantonese immigrants were born in Malaysia, Hong Kong, and China. A possible reason behind the strong retention of their dialect by the Cantonese could be attributed to the relatively high proportion of Cantonese born in either Malaysia or Hong Kong where Cantonese is still commonly spoken. Finally, although Cantopop (Cantonese pop music) and Cantonese (Hong Kong) cinema are no longer as popular as they were in the 1990s, the dominance of Cantonese songs and Hong Kong drama serials remains. The Mandarin-dubbed drama serials claimed as high as 50% of prime-time slots on the free-to-air Mandarin channels of Channel 8 and Channel U. Cantonese films and drama serials continue to be widely available on cable television and DVDs, with relevant retail and rental shops remaining in business despite three decades of the “Speak Mandarin Campaign.” The state also draws its inspiration for language policy from the perceived imperative for social reconstruction following the racial and intra-racial divisions of the postwar colonial period. The state’s call for a rational use of language and hence regulation of the mass media restricts the choices that the domestic audience can make in its consumption of popular culture. As a result, ardent and vocal segments of the Cantonese community easily turn into a source of cultural skepticism when it is increasingly apparent to them that the state restrictions have become obsolete.

15 Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for the comments on Chinese linguistics.

16 Lim, “Migrants and ‘Mother Tongues,’” pp. 44–48.

Chinese opera, often performed along the streets and in open areas, characterized as well by a temporary performance stage constructed out of timber poles and canvases, is known as *jiexi* in Mandarin, literally meaning “street show.” Performances of Chinese street opera often take place in a broader context of Chinese religious events and customs, such as the “Hungry Ghost Festival” and anniversaries and celebrations of temples.¹⁷ For Cantonese opera, a variant of Chinese opera, it is largely limited to large-scale festivals or to specific temples that are supported by the Cantonese community.¹⁸ It is difficult, if not impossible, to gauge the exact number of Chinese opera troupes in Singapore today, since many disbanded troupes do not de-register themselves with the relevant authorities.¹⁹ Whatever the number may be, Cantonese opera is now performed mainly by overseas troupes, such as those from Hong Kong.²⁰

Cantonese opera emerged as the most popular among the dialect forms in colonial Singapore by the 1920s, concentrating in Chinatown as a result of the strong presence of Cantonese immigrants and artisans there.²¹ Terence Chong explains that Cantonese opera had “localized” itself by thriving along prostitution, enjoying patronage from Cantonese clans, guild houses, and other communal associations, as well as connecting intimately to religion.²² The influx of Cantonese opera films from Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s further contributed to the popularity of Cantonese opera, entering the private realm of the audience to reassert the art form’s link to ethnicity and dialect identification in a highly intimate way. Both film and television during this period, instead of diverting attention from opera, actually boosted opera’s popularity.²³ The coming of cinema in Hong Kong had a profound effect on the nature of Cantonese opera performance. Cantonese opera stars crossed over regularly from the theater to the film genre, reinforcing the popularity of opera.²⁴ At Great World, a bygone amusement park which offered a diversified, multicultural variety of entertainment from the late 1940s to the 1970s, Cantonese and Mandarin films were the only Chinese-dialect films shown in the Qingtian (Blue Sky) Theater, the Globe Theater, and the Atlantic Theater.²⁵

17 Lee Tong Soon, “Chinese Street Opera Performance and the Shaping of Cultural Aesthetics in Contemporary Singapore,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 34 (2002), pp. 141-142.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 141.

19 Terence Chong, “Chinese Opera in Singapore: Negotiating Globalization, Consumerism, and National Culture,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 34, 3 (2003), p. 450.

20 Lee, “Chinese Street Opera Performance and the Shaping of Cultural Aesthetics in Contemporary Singapore,” p. 143.

21 Chong, “Chinese Opera in Singapore,” p. 453.

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 453-455.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 458-459.

24 Chong, “Chinese Opera in Singapore,” p. 458.

25 Chan Kwok-bun and Yung Sai-shing, “Chinese Entertainment, Ethnicity, and Pleasure,” *Visual Anthropology* 18 (2005), pp. 114-115.

Dialects were living languages among the Chinese Singaporeans, with Mandarin as the language of education in Chinese-language schools and spoken only by those had formal Chinese education.²⁶ According to Chua Beng Huat, the largely English-educated leaders of the Singaporean government, based on a “very serious misconception” that speakers of different Chinese dialects or languages were unable to communicate with one another, decided to ban Chinese dialects from broadcast media, which in turn was based on yet another “mistaken” assumption that Mandarin would unify the multi-tongued local Chinese population.²⁷ The language policy had been shaped by four main ideas: 1) the belief that linguistic diversity is an obstacle to nation-building; 2) in order to maintain harmony among Singapore’s ethnically diverse population, there must be respect and equal treatment accorded to each ethnic group; 3) the important role played by English in the world economy; 4) an “ideology of survival” or “ideology of pragmatism,” where political discourse from the government to the people tends to take the form of a crisis narrative where pressing problems are highlighted as needing to be addressed.²⁸ Seen in this light, the Chinese community posed a serious challenge because it is the largest ethnic community in Singapore, characterized by the presence of a large number of Chinese dialects. This offered the government the context to problematize the existence of the mutually unintelligible Chinese dialects. By pitting Mandarin against the other dialects, the Speak Mandarin Campaign determined that all dialects except Mandarin are “vulgar” and indicate a lack of education while Mandarin is refined; related to this was the claim that dialects possess no cultural value, as dialect speakers are claimed to be “less courteous” than Mandarin speakers.²⁹ In a drastic measure to reform the citizens and refashion their preferences in entertainment and mass media, all Chinese dialects except Mandarin were banned from the mass media.

The ban meant that dialect-speaking Singaporeans had no dialect programs on the radio and television. They could only watch Cantonese drama serials from Hong Kong that were dubbed in Mandarin.³⁰ Eventually, speakers of dialects became a minority, when obvious indicators such as Rediffusion, a dialect-based paid radio service, took a dip in its popularity from 120,000 subscribers in the 1950s and 1960s to 53,000 in

26 Chua Beng Huat, *Structure, Audience, and Soft Power in East Asian Pop Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), p. 72.

27 *Ibid.* Although the issue of whether speakers of different Chinese dialects in Singapore (and Malaysia) actually understand one another better than what the Singaporean government has claimed is debatable, it may be fair to hypothesize that at least a small proportion of the Chinese population in Singapore is able to conduct basic conversations in more than one dialect. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this point.

28 Rappa and Wee, *Language Policy and Modernity in Southeast Asia*, pp. 80-82.

29 *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

30 Promote Mandarin Council, *Mandarin: The Chinese Connection* (Singapore: Promote Mandarin Council, pp. 65-80.

the 1990s,³¹ and local television dramas in Mandarin had consistently garnered the highest ratings at the outset of their introduction in the 1980s.³² Back in the 1950s, Cantonese programs could be heard along the alleys and streets in Chinatown, and coffee shops would be full of listeners when the time came for Cantonese storytellers.³³ The Cantonese and the non-Cantonese who understood the dialect had not given up, however. Beginning in the 1980s, they were known not to look to Hong Kong but to Malaysia for their dose of Cantonese drama serials, now that Cantonese drama serials were required to be dubbed in Singapore before they could be broadcast on free-to-air television channels. Many people bought indoor television aerials so that they could tune in to Malaysian channels, which continued to show freewheeling Cantonese soap operas. Although government officials, in view of the trend, declared that it was “not the Government’s policy to facilitate the reception of foreign commercial television stations,” tenants fixed their aerials indoors when it was illegal to have the aerials outdoors, and discreet signs offering ultra-high frequency antennae continued to appear in the Chinese shops that sold them.³⁴ In fact, competition went so stiff for the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) against the Malaysian television stations that it had to engage Hong Kong scriptwriters to start new Mandarin drama serials. The government had come to realize that some of the only ways to capture the market share of Cantonese viewers was to produce local Mandarin drama serials that could at least match the quality of those from Hong Kong, as well as import Mandarin programs from China and Taiwan to fill the vacuum left by the dialect ones. The ambitious government had also entertained the possibility of making Singapore the “Hollywood of the East,” a goal that has remained elusive in the present.³⁵ In the 2000s, about thirty years after the Speak Mandarin Campaign had first started, discs and tapes of dialect films remain popular because they were in the original dialect.³⁶

The issue of modernity returned to the fore when critics and opponents of the discreet public spoke up, in forums and feedback sessions, against the Speak Mandarin Campaign. In 1990, Ow Chin Hock, a former Minister of Parliament, lambasted the critics when he declared that “the Chinese have the right and freedom to speak Mandarin,” adding that it is “natural and reasonable for the Chinese to speak Mandarin among themselves.” Ow was responding to strong public criticisms to dub the popular Cantonese popular series in the 1990s into Mandarin. For more people to accept the campaign, he suggested to SBC that it should: 1) provide English subtitles for high-

31 Guan Libing, “Rediffusion has big plans for its 45th year,” *The Straits Times*, January 3, 1994.

32 Chua, *Structure, Audience, and Soft Power in East Asian Pop Culture*, p. 69.

33 Chan and Yung, “Chinese Entertainment, Ethnicity, and Pleasure,” p. 129.

34 Paul Routledge, “Letter from Singapore: Locals lend an ear to foreign TV (582),” *The Times* (United Kingdom), January 2, 1986.

35 Jose Katigbak, “Singapore wants to be Hollywood East,” *Reuters News*, July 5, 1988.

36 Foong Woei Wan, “Let’s hear it for dialect,” *The Straits Times*, March 5, 2003.

quality Mandarin TV programs such as the weekly current affairs programs; 2) feature prominent bilingual personalities and publicize major achievements by Asians in science and technology; and 3) organize bilingual (Chinese and English) forums over television to discuss major policies with national leaders.³⁷ Ow's statement implies that the many criticisms mounted against the Speak Mandarin Campaign were the result of a widespread and "misguided" perception of the Chinese culture and language as "outdated," "backward," and "irrelevant," and the final success of the campaign had to rest on the eradication of such a perception. Defenders of Chinese dialects certainly do not feel the same. While other dialects have been suppressed by the exclusive use of Mandarin in all broadcast media, they have continued to survive in everyday transactions, particularly among the working-class Chinese and those above the age of fifty. In fact, snippets of these dialects are also often used by younger people, including students, as a conscious, pleasurable "resistance" to the official policy.³⁸ They understand the Chinese dialects and language for their intrinsic value, not having adopted a utilitarian approach to language practice and use. This is especially so for the Cantonese, who see their dialect in terms of "cultural prestige" over the other dialects.³⁹

This is not to say, however, that the cultural identification with Hong Kong has resulted in the dilution of the Cantonese Singaporean's sense of belonging to the country. Nothing in the 1980, 1990, and 2000 population censuses indicate an emigration trend of Cantonese Singaporeans to Hong Kong.⁴⁰ Neither does it show in broadcast mass media or online forums that the Cantonese, to place the context in its extreme, want to secede from Singapore to form a Cantonese political entity. Hong Kong may have produced the best speakers of Cantonese as well as the best Cantonese entertainment programs, but its influence has been incidental in the political realm.

Although elderly Cantonese lament the decline of Cantonese opera and the loss of their dialect from the radio and television programs that they could otherwise enjoy, they have not resisted state policies at social integration and reconstruction. They are proud of their culture and dialect while identifying with the official notion that such measures are both important and necessary. Ultimately, it is left to the young Cantonese to contest and re-negotiate the necessity and rhetoric of language uniformity. Cognizant of their own dilemma as both a Cantonese Chinese and a Singaporean citizen, young Cantonese have begun to contest and re-negotiate the terms of their country's language policy.

37 Author unknown, "Mr. Ow unhappy with 3 groups of people for rapping Speak Mandarin campaign," *The Straits Times*, November 2, 1990.

38 Chua, *Structure, Audience, and Soft Power in East Asian Pop Culture*, p. 67.

39 Lim, "Migrants and 'Mother Tongues'," p. 44.

40 See http://www.singstat.gov.sg/statistics/browse_by_theme/population.html (accessed July 31, 2013).

Cantonese—"The Bite of Real Meat"

Former Director of News of SBC, Ananda Perera, recalled how painful it was for famous comedians, Wong Sa and Ya Fong, to learn and perform in Mandarin instead of their usual Cantonese. The Speak Mandarin Campaign had forced Wong and Ya to do their Cantonese routines in Hong Kong and perform in Mandarin in Singapore. Wong and Ya called Mandarin "vegetarian meat," as compared to the Cantonese "bite of real meat," suggesting that as performers, they could deliver their lines "with more punch and relish" in Cantonese than in Mandarin.⁴¹ Although Perera advocated caution against interfering with the language policy of Singapore, he understood the emotive touch of dialects. One surprising consequence of the Speak Mandarin Campaign is that some of the younger Chinese Singaporeans, who have never been directly exposed to Cantonese cinema, opera, radio, and television programs, understand it too.

Many reasons could explain the phenomenon. For one, Chinese dialects continue to be widely used in church services in Singapore, and dialect-speaking members of the congregation communicate with the younger ones in dialect. The widespread popularity of East Asian popular culture has also piqued the interest of the younger generation of Chinese Singaporeans, who desire to watch Hong Kong drama serials in their original form or in dual sound, similar to what they would desire for the Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese programs.⁴² The most important reason, perhaps, is that the older Chinese still cling onto their respective dialects, rendering the transmission possible. This stresses the importance of the private sphere in language transmission.

Gary Ho, a Cantonese Singaporean, wrote from Australia to *The Straits Times* in 2002, "I grew in the age when all [Cantonese movies and television drama serials] from Hong Kong were dubbed in Mandarin. Nothing beats a movie shown in its original language. Many people like me avoid going to Hong Kong movies screened at cinemas [in Singapore] because the dubbing can spoil the jokes. I believe that airing Cantonese shows will not affect the Government's effort to promote Mandarin [in Singapore]."⁴³ In response to Ho's letter, Lee Nam Chong said that Ho's suggestion "will erode the efforts of the Government to promote cohesiveness among the Chinese," adding that "in the case of national television, it also has the responsibility of bringing about national unity."⁴⁴ On the other hand, another contributor, Liew Kai Khiun, supported Ho by arguing that the Singaporean audience was ready for dialect diversity in media. As a Chinese Singaporean from a Cantonese-speaking background, Liew saw Lee's sentiments as "a legacy of the Speak Mandarin Campaign," noting that "the issue here is not just about Cantonese entertainment, but also the systematic denial of the linguistic

41 Ananda Perera, "Be wary of opening dialect 'can of worms'," *The Straits Times*, February 19, 2002.

42 Rappa and Wee, *Language Policy and Modernity in Southeast Asia*, pp. 93-94.

43 Gary Ho, "Retain Cantonese in HK shows here," *The Straits Times*, February 12, 2002.

44 Lee Nam Choon, "Cantonese TV shows could erode unity," *The Straits Times*, February 14, 2002.

heritage and identity of the dialect groups by those eager to engineer a standardized version of being Chinese, in the name of ‘unity.’” Liew concluded by stating that “the fear of a flood of demands from competing groups [Cantonese, Hokkiens, Teochews, etc.] may be exaggerated,” as he did not see Chinese Singaporeans “locking themselves into strict dialect sub-categories since they are exposed to a multiplicity of cultures.”⁴⁵

Seemingly in response to meet the growing demands of a more discerning public, the Programme Advisory Committee, in its eighth annual report in 2003, mentioned that “Singaporeans are ready for the use of more dialects on television.” In fact, shortly before the release of the report, the restriction on the use of dialects had already been relaxed on cable television, with entertainment channels such as TVBJ and VV Entertainment (both from Hong Kong) being allowed to broadcast up to half of their total air-time in dialect. The Committee rooted for dialect programming such as the black-and-white Cantonese classic movies during non-prime hours so as to serve the needs of older viewers “who are not conversant in either English or Mandarin.”⁴⁶ A number of Members of Parliament and other Singaporeans had backed the Committee’s recommendation to allow dialects again into free-to-air television, saying that it would not hamper the drive of the “Speak Mandarin Campaign.” The Cantonese Singaporeans also welcomed the recommendation. In one particular survey of Cantonese Singaporeans, some respondents said that they had never liked the idea of having any Hong Kong drama dubbed in Mandarin, no matter how moving it might be; some missed the time when they could watch Cantonese dramas on television, or listen to Cantonese stories and plays on Rediffusion.⁴⁷ For a while in the past, the Cantonese storyteller on Rediffusion, Lee Dai Soh, was one of the most popular storytellers of his time; as a result of his radio persona, most Chinese families, including those of the dominant Hokkien community, preferred the Cantonese programs.⁴⁸ Amid the debate and recommendation, however, the government decided to retain the ban, and dialects continued to appear only on paid cable television, which only affluent, middle-class Singaporeans could afford. In its zealous quest for bilingualism over four decades, the Singaporean state had excised Chinese dialects not just from formal settings, but also the entertainment diet of Singaporeans.⁴⁹

45 Liew Kai Khiun, “Audiences ready for dialect diversity in media,” *The Straits Times*, February 18, 2002.

46 Samuel Lee, “TV stations ticked off,” *The Straits Times*, February 27, 2003.

47 Foong, “Let’s hear it for dialect.”

48 Chan and Yung, “Chinese Entertainment, Ethnicity, and Pleasure,” p. 131.

49 Peh Shing Huei, “Bring dialects back on TV for older folk,” *The Straits Times*, September 21, 2007.

Unity in Diversity

The Cantonese community has not struck at Singapore's language policy strictly on the grounds of geography (Guangdong origins) and language (Cantonese dialect). In reality, they have touched on several conflating, if not conflicting, issues that pertain as well to other dialect groups or Singapore as a whole.

Advocates of dialect programs argue that to an old man, "the Internet is alien to him and even the trusty radio and TV feel somewhat distant."⁵⁰ To them, allowing even a small re-entry of dialects into television programs could offer the elderly some form of entertainment, as well as a sense of comfort and security. Speaking in the same vein for the elderly, Chinese clan associations and their leaders have also expressed their concerns over the paucity of Chinese dialect content on local radio and television, arguing that many among the elderly could not afford paid content on cable television and so are deprived of their dose of dialect programs, having to depend on the more limited free-to-air options.⁵¹ Although clan associations have conducted Mandarin tuition classes in support of the Speak Mandarin Campaign,⁵² clan leaders, regardless of their own dialect affiliations, would always raise their dialect-related concerns in the dialogue sessions with government officials, who have time and again rejected the Censorship Review Committee's recommendation to ease existing restrictions on dialect content in the mass media. In recent years, with the relaxation of the state restrictions on the use of dialects in the public domain, some clan associations, such as the Kwangtung Hui Kuan for the Cantonese, have begun offering dialect-speaking lessons and the response and enrolment has been encouraging. In the Kwangtung Hui Kuan alone, at least 600 students (many of whom are youngsters) had registered for Cantonese (and Shanghaiese) classes in 2009.⁵³ In 2013, the Kwangtung Hui Kuan, with the assistance of two Chinese Studies professors, also published *The Anthology of Chinese Dialect Nursery Rhymes in Singapore* in order to "conserve the precious folk culture in Singapore." One of the professors, Dr. Kang Ger Wen, recounts that in the process of compiling the anthology, he has found extremely few people who can remember their dialect and nursery rhymes, and most of the contributors to the book were recommended by clan associations.⁵⁴

Another group of advocates is more concerned with the erosion of familial ties due to the loss of dialect in the younger generation of Chinese Singaporeans. Wong Chin Soon, a grassroots historian, points out that the most heartbreaking aspect of the dialect policy is that it broke the emotional ties between young and old; communication between

50 *Ibid.*

51 Elgin Toh, "Dialect: Government aware of clan leaders' views," *The Straits Times*, October 13, 2010.

52 Grace Mo-Ai Chong, "The Chinese Clan Associations in Singapore: Survival or Demise?" (B.A. Thesis, National University of Singapore, 1991).

53 Clarissa Oon, "Dialects draw more new learners," *The Straits Times*, April 9, 2009.

54 Lisabel Ting, "50 nursery rhymes in 5 dialects," *The Straits Times*, January 23, 2014.

children and their grandparents is now reduced to simple greetings, facial expressions, and affectionate pats that can never match the quality of the relationships enjoyed in the past.⁵⁵ There is a trend of grandparents—who are most dependent on dialects—turning to English and Mandarin to communicate with their grandchildren, and the English courses at Singapore’s community centers are usually full. According to critics of Singapore’s language policy, the elderly exhibit not the spirit of lifelong learning but the vain attempt of closing their communicative gap with their family members. This is family tragedy in its most subtle form, in which men and women in their twilight years have failed to relate to the people dearest to them. The Cantonese community, proud as it is of its culture and tradition, has not been spared from this trend. Out of fear of their children “losing out in the future due to poor English,” many Cantonese parents have been known to emphasize English over the other languages in their child’s education.⁵⁶

Finally, there are advocates who argue for the return of dialect programs in the mass media on cultural terms. According to these advocates, the generation gap impedes cultural transmission, such that cultural values, attributing to gaps in language use and language proficiency, cannot be effectively transmitted from one generation to another.⁵⁷ The strongest and most vocal advocates in this camp hail from the fine arts and film industry, such as Tan Pin Pin, Jack Neo, and Royston Tan. Jack Neo and Royston Tan are famous in Singapore for producing films that appeal to the dialect-speaking audience, while Tan Pin Pin, another filmmaker, once coined the Speak Mandarin Campaign “a kind of linguistic genocide.”⁵⁸ To many filmmakers, “language in a film reflects culture and can also be integral to the storyline.”⁵⁹ When the Media Development Authority (MDA) refused to screen the Hong Kong film *Love in the Buff* in original Cantonese in 2012, the film’s director Pang Ho Cheung appealed to the Singaporean authorities that “Cantonese has nine tones and it most closely resembles classical Chinese in terms of pronunciation,” adding that “the changes in tone are also able to indicate subtleties of character.”⁶⁰ The MDA responded by reiterating the official stand—“To support the Government’s efforts in the Speak Mandarin Campaign, film distributors are encouraged to screen Mandarin versions of Chinese films.”⁶¹

In response to MDA’s statement, Royston Tan retorted, “If we are talking about trying to preserve our heritage, we should also preserve our languages. Dialect is part of

55 Tan Hui Yee, “The ST Interview: Keep the traditions that matter,” *The Straits Times*, January 25, 2012.

56 Ong, “Cantonese in Singapore,” p. 10.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 2; Anne Pakir, “Two Tongues Tied: Bilingualism in Singapore,” *Journal of Multilingualism and Multicultural Development* 14, 1 & 2 (1993), pp. 81-84.

58 Pei, “Bring dialects back on TV for older folk.”

59 Boon Chan, “Speaking up for dialect in films,” *The Straits Times*, May 23, 2012.

60 *Ibid.*

61 *Ibid.*

our culture and it is not just about vulgarities; there is also true beauty in it.”⁶² Another filmmaker, Kelvin Tong, thought that the Singaporean quota on the proportion of dialect in film content (30-50%) was “anachronistic and useless,” stating that “nobody is at risk of abandoning English and Mandarin for dialect just because of a handful of local dialect films.”⁶³ Film professor, Stephen Teo, pointed out that if Singaporeans could watch films in their original French, Japanese, Korean, Thai, and other languages, it would be “highly artificial” to watch dialect films dubbed in Mandarin.⁶⁴ Many Singaporeans share the sentiments of these filmmakers that the restrictions are obsolete and should be subject to review or abolition.

In July 2013, Miss World Singapore contestant Jeraldine Phneah, who spoke conversational Hokkien, started a petition to bring dialects back on local television and radio programs, planning to submit the petition to MDA once she has received 1,000 signatures.⁶⁵ Citing her interaction with multilingual contestants from all over the world in the Miss World pageant as her inspiration, Phneah said that because her grandmother did not speak Mandarin, she could not fully enjoy the programs that she listened to and watched.⁶⁶ One of the signatories of the petition and founder-chef of a restaurant chain, Benny Se Teo, remembered watching black-and-white Cantonese soap operas as a child in the 1960s when he said, “When you watch a movie in Cantonese, it is totally different. The language is beautiful and it can express certain feelings I find very difficult to describe in English or Mandarin.”⁶⁷ Here, many Singaporeans, both Cantonese and non-Cantonese, were keenly aware of the essential quality of dialects and heritage languages in allowing people to understand their own culture and history.

Conclusion

A suggestion was made: “Mandarin is well-established among the population now. Let us go back to dialects so the old can enjoy dramas.” I objected, pointing out that I had, as prime minister, paid a heavy price getting the dialect programmes suppressed and encouraging people to speak Mandarin. So why backtrack? I had antagonized an entire generation of Chinese, who found their favourite dialect programmes cut off. There was one very good narrator of stories called Lee Dai Sor on Rediffusion, and we just switched off his show. What should I allow Cantonese or Hokkien to infect the next

62 *Ibid.*

63 *Ibid.*

64 *Ibid.*

65 Jennani Durai, “Students speak up for dialects,” *The Straits Times*, July 13, 2013.

66 *Ibid.*

67 *Ibid.*

generation? If you bring it back, you will find portions of the older generation beginning to speak in dialects to their children and grandchildren. It will creep back, slowly but surely.⁶⁸

—Lee Kuan Yew

One Man's View of the World

In Singapore, we may approach Chinese dialects other than Mandarin as an “anti-language,” with the Speak Mandarin Campaign as a form of socialization that enables the individual citizen to forge “strong affective identification” with significant others.⁶⁹ Michael Halliday defines anti-language as “nobody’s mother tongue” which exists solely in the context of resocialization, arguing that the reality that anti-language creates is inherently an alternative form of reality, one that is constructed precisely in order to function in alteration.⁷⁰ This paper has shown how Cantonese speakers in particular and dialect speakers in general have, after 1979, drawn boundaries around mainstream society to retain their dialect at home if not at work, in school, or elsewhere. The removal of Cantonese programs from state-controlled radio and television stations, the dubbing of the programs in Mandarin, and the exclusion of Cantonese theme songs and soundtracks were imposed much to the displeasure of even the non-Cantonese. Although they are proud of their culture and heritage, elderly Cantonese accept the state policies because they “did not wish to go back to a time when the different dialect groups were divided linguistically and were disunited,”⁷¹ understanding the necessity of communicating with the Chinese in China and hence accessing the opportunities there.⁷² Young Chinese Singaporeans, on the other hand, are more critical of Singapore’s language policy. Liew Kai Khiun, a professor at Nanyang Technological University, argues that “the language policies of the Singapore government represent a haunting replication of the perennial attempts by central authorities in China to impose a more standardized linguistic and cultural identity on its dialect-speaking peripheries.”⁷³

The Singaporean state, however, also faces a dilemma in its language policy. To a fair extent, it recognizes the importance of culture and heritage in the fabric of the nation while implementing pragmatic strategies that may undermine traditional values. Former minister George Yeo says, “We cannot cut ourselves off from our ancestral roots because that will make us a weak people. But these roots can also pull us apart

68 Lee Kuan Yew, *One Man's View of the World* (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2013), pp. 296-97.

69 Michael Halliday, “Anti-Languages,” *American Anthropologist* 78 (1976), p. 575.

70 *Ibid.*

71 Foong, “Let’s hear it for dialect.”

72 Toh, “Dialect: Government aware of clan leaders’ views.”

73 Liew Kai Khiun, “Limited Pidgin-Type Patois? Policy, Language, Technology, Identity, and the Experience of Canto-Pop in Singapore,” *Popular Music* 22, 2 (2003), pp. 217-233.

as a people and weaken our sense of being Singaporean...About 75 per cent of TV viewers turn to the Chinese channel instead of the English channel...Roughly two-thirds of cinema-goers watch Chinese movies...they are all in Mandarin because we do not allow dialects in cinemas...In the video-rental shops, the most popular videos are the Cantonese ones from Hong Kong.” Yeo concludes that he is “optimistic from a historical viewpoint that modernization will not lead to westernization” and that Singaporeans “will remain Eastern” in essence.⁷⁴ Seen in this light, the state is in tacit acknowledgement that dialects remain an important mode of communication for the elderly Chinese and that any form of overt sanction may be deemed too harsh and insensitive.⁷⁵ One obvious indicator of such state endorsement is the use of dialects by politicians of the ruling party, the People’s Action Party, in parliamentary speeches and election campaigns to connect better with the people and voters.⁷⁶

Modernization has always been a state objective. George Yeo said, “We want to be an advanced society but we do not want to become Europeans or Americans because we are not.”⁷⁷ Enthusiasts of the Singapore’s language policy have even argued that “the traditional culture plays very little part in our daily life, except during festivals, religious, and ceremonial occasions,” and that “modern Singapore culture is rooted [instead] in Western scientific, technical, political, economic, and legal cultures modified to suit Singapore’s needs.”⁷⁸ Increasingly, however, such rhetoric has been under close scrutiny and heavy criticism by the more educated and discerning members of the public. The rising appeal for dialects to return to broadcast mass media can be seen as an expression of the contradictions and tensions characteristic of the modernity narrative wrapped in the language policy of the state. The state would have to find more convincing arguments to support its ban of dialects from the mass media, now that different groups and segments of society have so many reasons to reject the ban. Current challenges that the state faces in relaxing its restrictions on Chinese dialects include the possibility that the Indian and Malay communities may also demand that their own dialects be given prominence, hence compounding the issue, as well as the imperative of justifying its revision or lifting of the ban without compromising the credibility and legitimacy of past leaders who had either supported or implemented the language policy.

The warm reception in the Cantonese community of Cantonese opera, films, and drama serials from Hong Kong despite the dialect ban has resulted in sporadic calls from the Cantonese community for the state to bring Chinese dialects back to the airwaves in Singapore. The show of solidarity between both Cantonese and non-Cantonese in the

74 George Yeo, “Eastern roots, Western winds,” *The Straits Times*, September 6, 1992.

75 Liew, “Limited Pidgin-Type Patois?” p. 222.

76 Peh, “Bring dialects back on TV for older folk.”

77 Yeo, “Eastern roots, Western winds.”

78 Author unknown, “Whatever happened to Singaporean Singapore?” *The Straits Times*, March 13, 1990.

common goal of restoring these dialects on local radio and television programs reveals both the cultural skepticism and the identification of state objectives and tacit support for state policies of the general Chinese population. The case of the “Cantonese question” in Singapore’s mass media problematizes theories of language use and policy, as well as proposes ways in which language use and policy can be related to overt support, covert resistance, and transnational influence with respect to the state. The state has, to a certain extent, failed to discipline the private entertainment diet of many citizens. Its linguistic imperialism, which erected a false notion of “traditional” society and shored up adherents to the Speak Mandarin Campaign against socio-political changes, has not enjoyed a full victory in condemning “dialects” to a frozen, fragmented, and inferior existence—“the exotic remains of an immobile past.”⁷⁹

Biographical note

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79 This statement on linguistic imperialism is inspired by John Darwin’s notion of cultural imperialism. See John Darwin, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), pp. 5-6.

