Dialects, Mandarin and identity

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A community divided by speech

The Chinese who came to Singapore in the nineteenth century spoke the languages of their districts in Fujian and Guangdong. By the middle of the twentieth century at least twelve dialects were in use. Hokkien was the largest. In 1881 about 28.8 % of a Chinese population of some 86,000 spoke it, whereas by 1970 the share had risen to 42.2 % of 1.579 million.[1] The census still records dialect group as a matter of descent. In 2020, 39.3 % of Chinese residents were classified as Hokkien, 19.4 % as Teochew, 14.3 % as Cantonese, 8.6 % as Hakka and 6.1 % as Hainanese.[2]

Dialect was more than speech. Chapter V of Part A showed how clan associations, temples and kongsi organised the Chinese community along dialect lines and how credit, employment and trade followed the same divisions. Hokkien merchants dominated shipping, rubber and banking, Teochew merchants the produce trade, Cantonese artisans and Hakka pawnbrokers their own niches. The Chinese banks described in Chapter III of Part B began as dialect institutions. A shared dialect created trust between merchant and lender, between employer and worker, and between Singapore and the home district in China.

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That is why the founding generation of the independent state saw the dialects as an obstacle. Lee Kuan Yew wrote later that "dialects were not only interfering with bilingual education, they were also dividing the Chinese community".[3] Mandarin was meant to replace a set of sub-communities with a single Chinese community within a multiracial nation. English was meant to bind that community to the Malays, Indians and others. In both respects language policy was nation-building policy.

The price of the shift

The shift had costs that its architects recognised. Grandparents who spoke only Hokkien or Teochew found it difficult to talk with grandchildren who spoke English and Mandarin. Dialect opera, storytelling on the Rediffusion cable radio and popular song lost their audiences. Community members lamented the decline of a culture that had formed the everyday life of Chinese Singapore for a century.[4] Lee Kuan Yew himself called Mandarin a "stepmother tongue" and the dialect the "real mother tongue", a phrase that his critics have often quoted against the policy.

Some Chinese Singaporean critics have compared the campaign to deliberate "language elimination". Malay and Indian Singaporeans have at times argued that the promotion of Mandarin weakens English as the neutral common language and risks marginalising minority groups.[5] The second concern is the more relevant one for a financial centre. A requirement that staff speak Mandarin can serve a legitimate business need, such as serving clients from China. It can also exclude Malay and Indian Singaporeans from positions for which the language is not truly necessary. The section on practical consequences returns to this tension.

Singapore Mandarin as a local variety

The Mandarin that Singapore adopted has become a variety of its own. Its pronunciation follows the standard of Beijing and is written in Hanyu Pinyin, but it tends to drop the neutral tone and the retroflex *erhua* and borrows words from

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Hokkien, Malay and English.[6] A dictionary of contemporary Singapore Mandarin vocabulary published in 1999 listed 1,560 words used only in Singapore. Among them are the terms for public housing flats and for taxis.

The written language followed mainland China. Singapore produced its own list of simplified characters in 1969 and adopted the mainland Chinese simplified characters in full in 1976. Between 1949 and 1979, when Singapore had little contact with the People's Republic, its Chinese publications came mostly from Taiwan and Hong Kong. Since the 1990s closer contact with China and immigration from the mainland have brought more Putonghua vocabulary into local use.[7]

For business the result is a population that reads the characters of the mainland, writes in the Pinyin of the mainland and understands the vocabulary of the mainland, while speaking with a recognisable local accent. A Singaporean banker can read a Chinese company's documents without the conversion problem that a Hong Kong or Taiwanese colleague trained in traditional characters faces. In the other direction, documents from Taiwan, Hong Kong or the older Chinese diaspora of Southeast Asia, often handwritten or in traditional characters, can cause difficulties for younger Singaporeans.

The return of the dialects in a smaller register

The dialects have not disappeared. In 2016 free-to-air television broadcast dialect programmes again for the first time in more than three decades, with series aimed at older viewers.[8] The government does not prohibit the learning or use of dialects, which have become above all the language of older Singaporeans.[9]

These developments do not reverse the policy. They show that the dialects have moved from the sphere of daily life into those of heritage and care. For the financial centre the dialects keep a residual value in two areas. They remain the language of some older clients from Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia who built family businesses in Hokkien, Teochew or Cantonese. They also remain a key to Hong Kong and Guangdong, where Cantonese is the language of daily business, and to parts of Fujian and Taiwan, where Hokkien is still widely spoken.

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Notes

1. Culturepaedia, “Chinese dialects in Singapore” (accessed November 2026): by the mid-20th century at least 12 Chinese dialects were spoken; Culturepaedia, “The Hokkien dialect in Singapore” (accessed November 2026): 28.8 % of about 86,000 Chinese in 1881; about 666,000 (42.2 %) of 1.579 million Chinese in 1970. ↩
2. Culturepaedia, “Chinese dialects in Singapore”, above, Table 1 (after Kuo and Luo, *Diversity and Unity*): Hokkien 39.3 %, Teochew 19.4 %, Cantonese 14.3 %, Hakka 8.6 %, Hainanese 6.1 %, others 12.3 % of the Chinese population in 2020. ↩
3. Culturepaedia, “Chinese dialects in Singapore”, above, quoting Lee Kuan Yew, *My Lifelong Challenge: Singapore’s Bilingual Journey* (2011), p. 146. ↩
4. Culturepaedia, “Chinese dialects in Singapore”, above: dialects underpinned Hokkien gezai opera, Teochew opera, Hakka folk songs and Cantonese opera and Rediffusion storytelling; policymakers saw dialect diversity as an obstacle to a common national identity, while community members lamented the decline. ↩
5. Wikipedia, “Speak Mandarin Campaign” (accessed November 2026): Lee Kuan Yew called Mandarin a “stepmother tongue” and the native variety the “real mother tongue”; Wikipedia, “Speak Mandarin Campaign” (accessed November 2026), section on criticism: comparisons with Russification and intentional “language elimination”; Malay and Indian communities argued that promoting Mandarin weakens English as the lingua franca and “risks marginalising minority groups”. ↩
6. Culturepaedia, “Mandarin in Singapore” (accessed November 2026): Singapore Mandarin is a regional variant of Standard Mandarin, follows hanyu pinyin, tends to drop neutral tones, has reduced erhua and less retroflexion, and borrows words such as *basha* (pasar) and *ganbang* (kampung). ↩

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7. Wikipedia, "Singaporean Mandarin" (accessed November 2026): the *Dictionary of Contemporary Singaporean Mandarin Vocabulary* (1999) listed 1,560 uniquely local words, including 组屋 (HDB flat) and 德士 (taxi); Wikipedia, "Singaporean Mandarin" (accessed November 2026): the Ministry of Education produced its own simplified characters between 1969 and 1976, and Singapore fully adopted mainland China's simplified characters in 1976; Wikipedia, "Singaporean Mandarin" (accessed November 2026): between 1949 and 1979 Taiwanese media and publications were the main influence; from the 1990s greater interaction with mainland China and migration brought more Putonghua vocabulary. ↩
8. Wikipedia, "Speak Mandarin Campaign" (accessed November 2026): in 2016 the programmes *Eat Already?* and *Happy Can Already!* marked the return of dialect programming to free-to-air television after more than three decades. ↩
9. Culturepaedia, "Chinese dialects in Singapore", above: after the restrictions on dialect broadcasting, dialects came to be used mainly by older people; the government does not prohibit learning or using dialects today. ↩

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