The Speak Mandarin Campaign

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The launch of 7 September 1979

The campaign followed directly from the Goh Report. Lee Kuan Yew's diagnosis was practical. Children who spoke dialect at home and learned English and Mandarin at school carried three languages, a load that only the best could bear. After twenty years of bilingual schooling, he said, few children could manage two languages plus a dialect, "certainly not much more than the 12% that make it to junior colleges". Because a quarter of the population was not Chinese, English would be the common language between communities. If the Chinese kept their dialects, he warned, English would also become the common language between Chinese of different dialect groups, leaving Mandarin without a function.[1]

The speech rested on evidence that the government had collected for the purpose. A survey of 116 bus trips in March 1979 found that Chinese passengers addressed Chinese conductors in a dialect in 88.2 % of cases, in Hokkien alone in 75 %, and in Mandarin in only 3.7 %. A survey of 295 hawkers in nine markets and food centres in April 1979 found that 89.4 % of hawkers answered their customers in a dialect and 1.2 % in Mandarin.[2] The same tables showed how Malay and Indian passengers spoke to Chinese conductors, mostly in Malay. Bazaar Malay was still the street language between communities in 1979.

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The launch set two targets. Within five years Chinese pupils should use dialect less and Mandarin more. Within ten years Mandarin should replace the dialects as the everyday spoken language of the Chinese community. A Committee to Promote the Use of Mandarin was formed under Ow Chin Hock, then Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Culture. It was renamed the Promote Mandarin Council in 1998.[3] The body now operates as the Singapore Mandarin Council and describes the campaign as Singapore's longest-running social campaign.[4]

Administrative support: broadcasting, counters and names

Lee Kuan Yew announced in his speech that the government would take administrative action once parents had shown that they wanted Mandarin for their children. Government officers, including those at hospital counters, would be instructed to speak Mandarin except to people over sixty, while taxi drivers, bus conductors and hawkers could be required to pass an oral Mandarin test or attend classes. The measure that changed daily life most was the withdrawal of dialects from broadcasting. Dialect advertisements on television were phased out from July 1978. Dialect programmes disappeared from television in 1981, and from radio on 1 January 1983.[5]

The popular Hong Kong serials that Singaporeans had watched in Cantonese were dubbed into Mandarin from the end of October 1979. In 1985 the government discouraged viewing of the Malaysian channel TV3 and declined to adapt the antennas of public housing blocks to receive it. From 1 January 1981 schools addressed Chinese pupils by the Hanyu Pinyin form of their names, while companies were encouraged to use Pinyin names when registering.[6] The effect is still visible on identity cards, where an older generation carries dialect romanisations such as Tan, Lim or Ng and many younger Singaporeans carry Pinyin given names.

Few governments in Western Europe would have attempted measures of this kind. They were nonetheless accepted with limited resistance, because the government framed them as relief for children and because the alternative it described, a Chinese community speaking English and dialect without a common Chinese language,

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struck many parents as a loss. Singapore's willingness to regulate the language of broadcasting reflects the same confidence in administrative design that Part C traces in the economic strategy of the early years.

Phases, audiences and slogans

The campaign moved through distinct phases. From 1979 to 1981 it addressed the Chinese community at large. From 1982 it encouraged the use of Mandarin in particular settings, with the workplace as the theme in 1982 and hawker centres and markets in 1983. Between 1983 and 1987 a telephone service offered Mandarin lessons and received, at peak hours, an average of some 40,000 calls.[7]

The turning point came in the 1990s, when the campaign recognised that its main problem was no longer the dialects. More and more Chinese Singaporeans used English as their main language. From 1991 the campaign addressed English-educated Chinese, from 1994 English-educated Chinese and business professionals. It presented Mandarin as economically valuable at a time when China was rising as a business partner.[8] The slogans trace the shift: "Speak More Mandarin, Speak Less Dialects" in 1979, "Mandarin In, Dialects Out" in 1983, "Speak Mandarin? No Problem!" in 2000 and, since 2019, "Speak Mandarin? Yes, I Can." The first bilingual slogan, "Huayu Cool", appeared in 2004 and was itself a concession to the English-speaking young.[9]

The campaign's current purpose is defensive. Its organisers acknowledge that English has become the dominant language in many Chinese homes and that promoting Mandarin through the campaign alone is "not enough".[10] The emphasis has moved from replacing dialects to keeping Mandarin in daily use, to the culture of Chinese Singaporeans and to the distinctive vocabulary of Singapore Mandarin.

Measurable results

The first decade produced a result that few language campaigns have matched. Among Chinese pupils entering Primary One, the share speaking mainly Mandarin at home rose from 26 % in 1980 to 69 % in 1989, while the share from

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predominantly dialect-speaking homes fell from 64 % to 7 %.[11] Across the Chinese resident population the proportion using a dialect as the main home language fell from 76.2 % in 1980 to 19.2 % in 2010, having stood at 97 % in 1957.[12]

The long series shows that the campaign succeeded twice, the second time in a direction its founders did not intend. Mandarin replaced the dialects. English then overtook Mandarin. Among Chinese residents aged five and over, Mandarin was the most frequent home language for 47.7 % in 2010 and for 40.2 % in 2020, while English rose from 32.6 % to 47.6 %. The generational split is sharp. In 2020 a dialect was the main home language of 31.6 % of Chinese residents aged sixty and over, against 1.4 % of those aged five to thirty-four.[13]

Common misconception

It is often assumed that most Chinese Singaporeans speak Mandarin at home and that a Singaporean Chinese adviser can therefore be expected to work fluently in Mandarin. The census of 2020 shows that English had become the most frequent home language of Chinese residents, at 47.6 % against 40.2 % for Mandarin. Most English-speaking households still use Mandarin as their second home language, which means that Mandarin is widely understood. Fluency in written Chinese and in the technical vocabulary of finance, law and tax is a different matter, which an institution should test before relying on it.

Notes

1. Lee Kuan Yew, Address of 7 September 1979, above, p. 1; Lee Kuan Yew, Address of 7 September 1979, above, p. 1: “Because Singapore is 25% non-Chinese, English will be the common language between different ethnic Singaporeans. And if we continue to use dialects, then English will tend to become the common language between Chinese of different dialect groups.”. ↩
2. Lee Kuan Yew, Address of 7 September 1979, above, annex tables: Singapore Bus Service survey of March 1979 on 116 bus trips (Chinese passengers to

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Chinese conductors: dialects 88.2 %, Hokkien 75.0 %, Mandarin 3.7 %); Ministry of the Environment survey of April 1979 covering 295 hawkers in nine markets and food centres (hawkers to customers: dialects 89.4 %, Mandarin 1.2 %). ↩

3. Culturepaedia, "The Speak Mandarin Campaign" (accessed November 2026): long-term targets set at launch, namely less dialect and more Mandarin among students within five years and Mandarin replacing dialects as the everyday spoken language within ten years; Culturepaedia, "The Speak Mandarin Campaign", above: Ow Chin Hock was the first chairman; the committee was renamed the Promote Mandarin Council in 1998. ↩
4. Singapore Mandarin Council, Speak Mandarin Campaign website, mandarin.languagecouncils.sg (accessed November 2026): the campaign described as Singapore's longest social campaign; site copyright of the Singapore Mandarin Council. ↩
5. Lee Kuan Yew, Address of 7 September 1979, above, p. 2: government officers "will be instructed to speak Mandarin except to the old, those over sixty"; taxi-drivers, bus conductors and hawkers "can and will be required to pass an oral Mandarin test, or to attend Mandarin classes"; Culturepaedia, "The Speak Mandarin Campaign", above: dialect advertisements on television phased out from July 1978; complete ban on dialect television programmes in 1981; radio stopped broadcasting dialect programmes on 1 January 1983. ↩
6. Wikipedia, "Speak Mandarin Campaign" (accessed November 2026): in 1985 the government discouraged viewing of the Malaysian channel TV3 and refused to upgrade HDB antennas to receive it; Culturepaedia, "The Speak Mandarin Campaign", above: first Mandarin-dubbed Hong Kong drama launched at the end of October 1979; Culturepaedia, "The Speak Mandarin Campaign", above: from 1 January 1981 Ministry of Education schools began using the Hanyu Pinyin versions of ethnic Chinese students' names; companies were encouraged to use Hanyu Pinyin names when registering. ↩
7. Culturepaedia, "The Speak Mandarin Campaign", above: phase 1 (1979–1981) targeted the Chinese community at large; phase 2 from 1982; focus on

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Mandarin in the workplace in 1982 and on hawker centres and wet markets in 1983; Wikipedia, "Speak Mandarin Campaign" (accessed November 2026): the "Dial for Mandarin Lessons" service ran from 1983 to 1987, with peak-hour calls averaging about 40,000. ↩

8. Wikipedia, "Speak Mandarin Campaign" (accessed November 2026): target audiences of 1991 (English-educated Chinese Singaporeans) and 1994 (English-educated Chinese and business professionals); the campaign framed Mandarin as "economically valuable" as China rose in business; Culturepaedia, "The Speak Mandarin Campaign", above, on 1994 as the turning point. ↩
9. Wikipedia, "Speak Mandarin Campaign" (accessed November 2026), list of slogans for 1979, 1983 and 2000; Culturepaedia, "The Speak Mandarin Campaign", above: slogan since 2019 "Speak Mandarin? Yes, I Can."; Culturepaedia, "The Speak Mandarin Campaign", above: in 2004 the campaign launched its first bilingual slogan, "Huayu Cool". ↩
10. Culturepaedia, "The Speak Mandarin Campaign", above: English has become the dominant language in many Chinese homes, so promoting Mandarin through the campaign alone is "not enough"; recent focus on daily use, Singapore Chinese culture and the uniqueness of Singapore Mandarin. ↩
11. Culturepaedia, "The Speak Mandarin Campaign", above: among ethnic Chinese Primary One students, those who mainly spoke Mandarin at home rose from 26 % (1980) to 69 % (1989); those from predominantly dialect-speaking families fell from 64 % to 7 %. ↩
12. Wikipedia, "Speak Mandarin Campaign" (accessed November 2026), table of home languages of the Chinese resident population: non-Mandarin varieties 97 % (1957), 76.2 % (1980), 46.2 % (1990), 19.2 % (2010). ↩
13. Department of Statistics Singapore, Census of Population 2020, resident Chinese population aged 5 years and over by language most frequently spoken at home and age group, data.gov.sg, dataset d_68860ef451f948e62754a830b6ae5024 (accessed November 2026): total 2,658,378; English 1,266,460 (47.6 %); Mandarin 1,069,450 (40.2 %); Chinese dialects 312,671 (11.8 %); dialects 31.6 % of those aged 60 and over and 1.4 % of

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those aged 5 to 34 (own calculation from the age columns); Culturepaedia, “Mandarin in Singapore” (accessed November 2026), for Mandarin at 47.7 % (2010); Wikipedia, “Languages of Singapore” (accessed November 2026), for English at 32.6 % and dialects at 19.2 % in 2010. The table of Wikipedia, “Speak Mandarin Campaign”, gives the all-resident figures of 48.3 % and 29.9 % for 2020 in a column labelled as Chinese residents. ↩

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