

Singapore has almost wiped out its mother tongues

Sandy, a young Chinese Singaporean, is fluent in English and Mandarin, the official “mother tongue” of Chinese Singaporeans. Her grandmother spoke little of either.

Their language barrier was the product of decades of linguistic engineering. English has been the language of instruction in nearly all schools since 1987, to reinforce Singapore’s global competitive **edge**. But, depending on **ethnicity**, pupils study a second language—typically Mandarin, Malay or Tamil. In the case of Mandarin, its acquisition has been reinforced by the government’s annual “Speak Mandarin Campaign”, started in 1979.

edge 优势; 锋利

ethnicity 种族划分

So **dialects** — **Hokkien**, Cantonese and **Hakka** — were **disparaged**. In the early 1980s television and radio programming in these languages all but disappeared, cutting many people **adrift**. By the campaign’s own yardsticks, the success is **striking**. The use of Chinese vernaculars at home has collapsed, from 76% of Chinese households in 1980 to 16% in 2015. Over the same period, the use of Mandarin rose, from 13% of Chinese households to 46%.

dialect 方言

Hokkien 闽南语

Hakka 客家话

disparage 贬低; 诋毁

adrift 漂流的

striking 明显的; 惊人的; 打击的

In 2015, the 50th anniversary of the nation’s founding was accompanied by an outpouring of **sentimentality** over Singapore’s roots. These days officials are a bit readier to tolerate Singapore’s linguistic variety.

sentimentality 多愁善感

Meanwhile, younger Singaporeans are embracing former mother tongues. Ski Yeo and Eugene Lee were motivated to found LearnDialect.sg upon seeing an elderly Cantonese-speaker in a nursing home struggle to communicate that she was cold. Health workers have signed up to their courses, while others want to say the right things at family gatherings over the lunar new year.