

An evolving Singapore Chinese identity

Journey to the West – and now, the East



Lawyer Michael Chia, 46, with his parents, Madam Yee Sook Meng, 79, and Mr Chia Kee Chong, 79, at their home in Woodlands. ST PHOTO: JONATHAN CHOO

When lawyer Michael Chia, 46, was a student at Hua Yi Secondary School in the 1980s, its main language of instruction had just switched from Chinese to English.

This was in contrast with the experience of his father, an alumnus of Nanyang University, or Nantah, which, in his time, was prized by the Chinese-speaking community as the only Chinese-language tertiary institution outside China. Mr Chia was drawn to cowboy westerns and movies from Hong Kong and Taiwan, which were considered "trendy".

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While growing up, Mr Chia spoke Mandarin and Teochew dialect with his father. Today, he speaks English with his four children, aged eight to 18.

When Mr Chia was in primary school, China was undergoing extensive economic reforms and industrialisation after opening up following the Cultural Revolution. And now, it has become a force to be reckoned with on the world stage.

This is reflected in Mr Chia's own language journey. He now watches programmes and movies from China such as *The Voice of China*, which he says are almost indistinguishable in quality from Hong Kong and Taiwan ones. His friends marvel at how the Singapore-based children of prominent American investor Jim Rogers speak fluent Mandarin, and urge their own children to improve their grasp of the Chinese language.

While politicians and academics used to draw neat lines through the Chinese community – English-educated who are outgoing and racially integrated; Chinese-educated introverted and hardworking; working-class heartlanders or bilingual cosmopolitans – what defines a Chinese Singaporean today has become complex and fluid.

The linguistic landscape has shifted. While in 1957, less than 2 per cent of Singapore households cited English as their most-used language at home, the figure has soared to 36.9 per cent in 2015, according to the General Household Survey.

As for dialects, their use fell amid the rise of Mandarin. After the launch of the Speak Mandarin Campaign in 1979, the share of those who spoke Mandarin at home grew from 0.1 per cent in 1957 to 34.9 per cent in 2015. The number of dialect speakers – Hokkien (30 per cent), Teochew (17 per cent) and Cantonese (15 per cent) – dropped to an overall 12.2 per cent in 2015.

The Chinese Singaporean of today continues to indulge in local hawker fare, like Hainanese chicken rice, and mark Chinese New Year by tossing yusheng (raw fish salad). But he also finds himself at the crossroads of a global power shift from West to East; a revival of interest in dialects and the mother tongue; and increased awareness of the need for candid conversations about race relations.

Has the Chinese Singaporean identity evolved into a completely different entity? Insight investigates.

A rising China brings new cultural anxieties



Yuen Sin

When poet Alvin Pang, 45, flipped through Chinese teaching material being used at his 12-year-old daughter's school last year, he was surprised to see "ba sha" – the local Chinese term for market, similar to the Malay "pasar" – replaced by "shi chang", the term that is used in mainland China.

"We have our own flavour of the culture and language. I'm very disturbed to see it disappearing, because it belongs to us," says Mr Pang, a member of the Promote Mandarin Council.

As China's economic star rises, Singapore's business and cultural ties with it have also deepened, leading to more Singaporeans adopting elements of its culture that are not common here.

But that has also triggered new anxieties among Singaporeans like Mr Pang, who fear this could dilute the unique Chinese culture found in multicultural Singapore. Others fear that deepening ties and a sense of cultural affinity between the two countries could splinter the loyalties of Chinese Singaporeans and draw them closer to the mainland.

For the past five years, China has been Singapore's top trading partner, according to International Enterprise Singapore. It is also the largest destination market for Singapore's foreign investments, totalling \$123.5 billion in 2016.

Among students, China is an increasingly popular destination. At the National University of Singapore (NUS), the number who headed there annually for work-study stints, exchanges and other short-term programmes more than doubled to about 400 as of last August from 2012. At the Singapore Management University (SMU), 20 per cent of students who go to Asian universities on semester exchanges studied in China in 2015, compared with 9 per cent in 2012.

Meanwhile, China has been attempting to pull at the "cultural heartstrings" of overseas Chinese, says SMU associate professor Eugene Tan, who has written papers on the Chinese Singaporean identity. The \$4.4 million China Cultural Centre (CCC), for example, is one of more than 20 China has erected globally to promote its culture.

And at Confucius Institute at Nanyang Technological University (CI-NTU), enrolment in its courses, has grown to close to 7,000 a year from around 200 in 2007. It is one of more than 500 such institutes around the world, which analysts say help project Chinese soft power.

The head of StarHub's content business unit, Ms Lee Soo Hui, also says TV programmes from China



Dr Neo Peng Fu, the Singaporean director of the Confucius Institute at NTU, with pre-school material featuring content that is locally relevant, designed by the institute's teaching resource team. ST PHOTO: LEE JIA WEN

are "rapidly gaining momentum" here. Last year, Chinese variety shows dominated seven spots on its top 10 list of most-watched programmes on channel Hub E City.

Last month, China announced a relaxation of visa rules that will allow foreigners of Chinese origin to apply for visas valid for multiple entries over five years, up from one year previously. This move, analysts have said, is so that Beijing can tap the non-mainland ethnic Chinese outside China for support in its bid to realise its potential as a new superpower.

"The China factor looms larger and larger, particularly with the change in policy towards overseas Chinese," notes NTU Emeritus Professor Eddie Kuo, 77, who is also adviser to the Singapore University of Social Sciences' Centre for Chinese Studies. This may have sparked worries about its cultural influence that may lead to "situational shifts in identity" among Singaporeans, particularly mainland Chinese immigrants who have become citizens.

Leaders here, meanwhile, have emphasised the uniqueness of a Chinese Singaporean cultural identity that is distinct from a greater Chinese culture.

The need for such an emphasis is felt even as most Chinese Singa-

pooreans connect with the Singaporean identity. Over four in five of the 1,000-plus Chinese survey respondents in a study on ethnic identity by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and Channel News Asia last November said they either identified more with their Singaporean identity or with both their ethnic and Singaporean identity.

At the opening of the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre (SCCC) last year, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong noted that more than 50 years after independence, Singaporeans can speak of a Singaporean Chinese culture, just as how there is a Singaporean Malay culture and a Singaporean Indian culture.

He also sketched out a definition of what this distinctiveness entails: While a Chinese Singaporean may be proud of being a Chinese, he is also "increasingly conscious" that his "Chineseness" is different from the Chineseness of the Malaysian and Indonesian Chinese, or the Chineseness of the people in China or Hong Kong or Taiwan.

Prof Tan notes that while there are no signs of overt competition between the CCC and SCCC, there may still be uneasiness if they were to collaborate on programmes together. "I wonder if both sides feel that they might be putting them-

selves down. (For instance, are we saying that we are not confident of our own culture, and we need to rely on the CCC?)

But Dr Neo Peng Fu, 56, the Singaporean director of CI-NTU, believes that the Chinese influence can strengthen Chinese Singaporeans' ethnic identity if handled properly. Prof Kuo agrees, saying: "If you objectively look at what China has achieved, it can also lead to a sense of pride, or at least a (greater) sense of identity because of our cultural affinity with them."

After all, it is difficult to draw a clear line between Singaporean Chinese culture and the greater Chinese culture, says Dr Neo. While his institute offers classes in ink painting, for example, Singapore also has a rich heritage of such paintings done in the local Nanyang style. "So would you say that this is our culture or their culture? It's not so black and white."

THE KEY IS ENGAGEMENT

Still, some may raise their eyebrows at the presence of the Confucius Institute here. But Dr Neo believes that actively engaging China is a far better approach than being confrontational or ignoring developments. CI-NTU, he adds, has autonomy over how it runs and designs programmes, and 80 per cent of its operating expenses is funded from its own revenue.

Parliamentary Secretary for Culture, Community and Youth Baey Yam Keng, who has researched China's cultural diplomacy, says engaging with a globalising China can allow it and the rest of the world to better understand Singapore's multilingual, multicultural context.

Local jazz singer Nathan Hartono's participation in popular Chinese variety show *Sing! China* in 2016, for example, has shed light in China on the cultural background of Singaporeans. Mr Baey says although younger Singaporeans speak Mandarin and sing Chinese songs, the way they process their thoughts and express themselves is still predominantly in English.

Trainee lawyer Clement Lin, 26, who spent 2016 on a work-study stint in Shanghai, says while he used to regard Chinese nationals in Singapore as "culturally distinct", his time in China made him realise the differences are not as clear-cut. "The city had a growing middle class that was starting to resemble Singaporeans in the sense they are very comfortable with their own lifestyles, and they also chase after the same things as us. In terms of how we view the world, it felt like we were converging."

He thinks such interactions can dispel the sense of mistrust between citizens of the two countries that he sometimes sees played out online. "There is a lot of misunderstanding, and some Singaporeans may have a bit of a superiority complex when it comes to relating to mainland Chinese."

Maintaining the right balance between this sense of cultural affinity with China and a multicultural Singapore identity is almost an art, says Prof Kuo. "If we associate closer with mainland Chinese and alienate our fellow Singaporeans of other racial groups, then we are in trouble. But it is also not pragmatic for us to detach and say we are merely Singaporeans. Culture is not a zero-sum game."

"We slip into Mandarin sometimes, but most of us are not fluent enough in the language," says CHS student Lucas Tham, 13. Some alumni of SAP schools – like Mr Lin Wei Liang, 50, immediate

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A translation class in progress at Dunman High School. A long-standing concern about SAP schools is whether they tend to become exclusive bubbles – as they admit only students who take Chinese as their mother tongue. SAP schools have sought to address these concerns. DHS, for example, has made a concerted push to provide opportunities for students to engage meaningfully with other racial communities and better understand Singapore's multicultural context. ST PHOTO: LEE JIA WEN

SAP schools: Adapting to new realities

With English being Singapore's lingua franca today, the linguistic landscape of SAP schools – set up in 1979, before the eventual demise of vernacular schools in the 1980s – has undergone a seismic shift from when Mandarin was the dominant language among the students.

At Dunman High School (DHS), one of the 26 SAP (Special Assistance Plan) schools here which allow students to pursue both English and Chinese as first languages – and which preserve the heritage and history of former Chinese medium schools – the sight of students chattering in English is now a common one.

It is a similar situation at other SAP schools such as Catholic High School (CHS) and Chung Cheng High School (Main), where students tell Insight that they prefer to speak in English among friends.

"We slip into Mandarin sometimes, but most of us are not fluent enough in the language," says CHS student Lucas Tham, 13. Some alumni of SAP schools – like Mr Lin Wei Liang, 50, immediate

past president of Hwa Chong Junior College Alumni Association – miss the Mandarin-speaking environment of the schools they grew up in.

"The language gives you a nostalgic, sentimental feeling," says Mr Lin. But he remains proud of how his alma mater – now known as Hwa Chong Institution (HCI) – continues to retain its Chinese values and traditions, such as marking major cultural festivals like the Mid-Autumn Festival.

Others, such as mother-of-three Isabelle Loo, 45, doubt whether SAP schools indeed provide the best environment for learning Mandarin.

Her 18-year-old son, who studies at HCI, was admitted into the school via the Direct School Admission scheme on account of being in the Gifted Education Programme. She said: "He found learning Mandarin a struggle because language standards were set too high in the classroom. He found it discouraging."

But past and present leaders of SAP schools say that their efforts at promoting bilingualism and immersing students in an environ-

ment where the Chinese language and culture are emphasised have become all the more important in today's context.

Dr Hon Chiew Weng, 61, who retired last year as principal of HCI after 35 years, says that the issue of English-speaking students "appears to be a problem, but it's not a problem at all".

While students may seldom use the Chinese language in school, it gives them a strong foundation later in life, he says. "Each time I speak with these alumni who work in China, they always thank the school for making Higher Chinese compulsory," he says.

DHS principal Tony Low, 52, says the school's immersive environment can give those who may not be interested in Chinese in the first place an added impetus to pick up the language, even if they joined the school more for its reputation than its Chinese heritage.

(It may be an uphill battle for them, but I think we have enough passionate teachers and students around to influence them. That posi-

sibly leaves them better off than if they had studied in a different environment," he says.

A long-standing concern about SAP schools is whether they tend to become exclusive bubbles – as they admit only students who take Chinese as their mother tongue. SAP schools have sought to address these concerns.

DHS, for example, has made a concerted push to provide opportunities for students to engage meaningfully with other racial communities and better understand Singapore's multicultural context. Since 2016, the school's Year 4 cohort has been visiting students at Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah over two days as part of an annual learning journey, where they can interact and learn about the students' school life.

Its National Education subject head Noorizan Beevi, 39, who teaches conversational Malay – compulsory for all students at the Secondary 1 and 2 levels – also conducts dialogues in class where students can ask questions about the Malay culture and Islam which they may be

BENEFICIAL

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DR HON CHIEW WENG, who retired last year as principal of Hwa Chong Institution, on how the Chinese language gives students a strong foundation later in life.

shy to broach with others. "They asked questions that are commonly discussed at other dialogues on race and religion, such as the difference between halal dishes and those with no pork or no lard. Some hear of the term 'Allahu Akbar'

on social media and ask me what it means. Common misconceptions can be addressed this way," she says. In response to queries from Insight about whether the role of SAP schools should be relooked, Ministry of Education deputy director-general of education (curriculum) Sing Chern Wei says they "continue to play an important role in delivering a quality bilingual education premised on strong national education and character building".

SAP schools may not be the only institutions that can produce bilingual talents in Singapore, says poet Alvin Pang, 45, a member of the Promote Mandarin Council. But he feels they should not be done away with because they play "a specific historical and political role".

"They pay homage to the culture and heritage of Chinese schools that have shaped Singapore in the past, and the importance of this historical backdrop should not be downplayed."

Yuen Sin



Huang Clan Association's youth committee secretary-general Stanley Ng (left), 32, with association vice-president Benny Ng, 63, on its Geylang premises. Mr Stanley Ng says that in recent years, he has been talking to elder clan members about the need to be more conscious of how minority groups may feel. ST PHOTO: KIA CHEE SIONG

Greater sensitivity to 'majority privilege'

The Chinese community remains the dominant racial group here, and many may not have frequent interactions with those of other races.

For example, just two in 10 Chinese Singaporeans have a close friend who is Malay or Indian, according to a 2013 survey of 4,131 Singaporeans by the Institute of Policy Studies and OnePeople.sg.

In recent years, a number of younger Chinese Singaporeans have been fronting efforts to remind members of the community to be more aware of how they may be guilty of casual racism or actions that are insensitive to those of minority groups.

The issue of "Chinese privilege" was raised by Mr Stanley Ng, 32, the secretary-general of Huang Clan Association's youth committee, to about 40 youth leaders from Chinese clans at a dialogue on racial and religious harmony conducted by OnePeople.sg chairman

Janil Puthucherry last September. The term, coined by independent scholar and activist Sangeetha Thanapal, is borrowed from the term "white privilege" in the United States. It refers to the inability to see things from the viewpoint of those who are not in the majority race.

"While we are the majority and have a loud voice, it doesn't mean that we should not listen to what others are saying," Mr Ng tells Insight, explaining why he broached the topic at the dialogue, held at the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations (SFCCA).

In recent years, he has also been speaking to elder clan members about the need to be more conscious of how minority groups might feel.

"I don't touch it as Chinese privilege (to avoid sounding accusatory), but as a form of majority privilege to remind them of how they can be more sensitive in every-

day life. For example, if they burn joss paper along the corridor during the Hungry Ghost Festival, perhaps it might be good to ask neighbours of other races if it's okay for them to go ahead."

SFCCA youth committee chairman Tan Aik Hook, 49, says the dialogue with Dr Janil also reminded him and other clan leaders of the need to avoid using certain terms for other races that are derogatory and hurtful – even when not in the presence of those races.

Mr Timothy Seet, 24, the executive director of Unsaid, a youth arts and social organisation, says some Chinese Singaporeans may bluster at being labelled "privileged". But what the term aims to do is prompt reflections on how they may be advantaged compared to another group – such as not having their skin colour questioned, for example, or not being the subject of racist jokes or slurs – and then prompt them to take steps to address this gap.

He says: "The Chinese here often say that they don't experience racism and some may believe that racism does not exist, but being self-reflective about how others may go through experiences that are different from us is not something we do enough."

Ms Shahraney Hassan, 42, a consultant for the CommaCon campaign, a social cohesion initiative, hopes more people in the Chinese community can be receptive to discussions surrounding such issues. "Many still react defensively to the term, but some don't have friends outside of their own race, and don't understand the perceived and real challenges that others face, such as discussions surrounding such issues. "Many still react defensively to the term, but some don't have friends outside of their own race, and don't understand the perceived and real challenges that others face, such as discussions surrounding such issues."

But writer Masturah Alatas, 50, cautions against the use of the term "Chinese privilege" when it comes to discussions on race relations, which she says could be problematic as "there is no common or consistent understanding of Chinese-ness to begin with". For example, it is dubious if various Chinese sub-groups, such as Chinese who do not speak English or Chinese Muslims, have benefited from privilege.

Singaporeans can draw on "our own good linguistic, cultural and political traditions on how to talk about race", she added.

Yuen Sin

The back story

A team of editors and reporters from The Straits Times and Lianhe Zaobao newspapers put their heads together nearly two months ago to work on a project aiming to cut across the respective language boundaries within which each paper operates.

The aim: To examine how the Chinese Singaporean identity has evolved in the eyes of millennials who grew up under Singapore's bilingual education system.

It would do this through the exchange of six letters between two reporters. These would be written in their respective working languages on three topics: the rise of China, Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools, and issues arising from being the majority race.

The reporters – Zaobao's Ng Wai Mun, 29, and ST's Yuen Sin, 25 – also hoped that this intercultural conversation could throw up perspectives that are seldom encountered by the respective English-speaking and Mandarin-speaking communities their papers cater to.

The letters were translated and ran in a three-part series last week, culminating in spe-

cial features on the Chinese Singaporean identity that ran in both papers today – the third day of Chinese New Year.

The experiment drew mixed reactions. Facebook user Chang Zi Qian, who read both the English and Chinese versions of the letters on SAP schools, said something was lost in translation. "The original Chinese letter was very heartfelt," he wrote in Chinese. "The (English translation) didn't do the original letter justice."

Zaobao reader Li Gang said it was a "meaningful initiative", while ST reader Lily Chen wrote on Facebook: "I like the format of having more than one opinion in the Opinion section."

MJ Chia, another Zaobao reader, was struck by the value of language mastery after reading the columns.

"Language is not just something you learn to pass exams," he wrote in Chinese on Facebook. "If you carry this attitude, it will not only be your loss, but also a regret in the lifelong journey of learning! It is only when you continually use it in every-day life that you can truly grasp its essence."