Language in Society (2025), 1–23
doi:10.1017/S004740452510167X

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

Marginalization, 'Lee Kuan Yew', and a Chinese-educated class: Understanding the collective memory of Singapore's Speak Mandarin Campaign

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(Received 18 December 2024; revised 15 July 2025; accepted 15 July 2025)

Abstract

The Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC) was launched in Singapore in 1979, promoting Mandarin among the Chinese population. An emerging prevalent narrative blames the SMC in terms of causing Chinese cultural erosion. This article seeks to understand how and why this monolithic discourse has emerged. We do this by tracing Mandarinization as a transnational ideology originating from China's founding as a republic. We draw on life history interviews with eleven individuals born between 1940 and 1966. Informants recount engagements with the SMC, from alignment to nonchalance, and fear of resistance. Accounts often invoked 'Lee Kuan Yew' as a chronotope, representing the sociopolitical circumstances of Singapore in the 1970s–80s. We argue that the current discourse surrounding the SMC might be theorized as a form of collective memory. It emerges from and is sustained by conflating prominent language policies with a perceived sense of the state's oppression and marginalization of a Chinese-educated class. (Collective memory, collective remembering, Mandarin policy, Speak Mandarin Campaign)

Introduction

In multilingual Singapore, the state promulgates three official racial groups, each prescribed an official mother tongue supposedly representative of its cultural heritage (i.e. the Chinese have Mandarin,[1] Malays the Malay language, and Indians have Tamil). The Chinese community is the largest such group in Singapore at 74.3% of the citizen population (with the Malays at 13.5% and Indians at 9%; Census of Population 2020). As a consequence of the state's bilingual policy that prioritizes English education followed by official mother tongues (Lu 2020:149), Mandarin is the most widely spoken language at home after English (Singapore Department of Statistics 2020). Most within the Chinese community have also internalized the relationship between

the state's ideology of Mandarin and their racial identity and cultural practices (Starr & Hiramoto 2018).

The social status of Mandarin and the Chinese linguistic milieu in Singapore, however, has never been stable. Prior to Singapore's independence in 1965, only one percent of the population spoke Mandarin (Bolton & Ng 2014), with Chinese 'dialects' or *fangyan* 方言 (as non-Mandarin Chinese languages are labelled in Singapore) serving as the dominant home language. Indeed, an emergent, influential narrative characterizes Mandarinization in terms of cultural decline and loss, laying the blame squarely at the feet of the state and its key policy instrument—the Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC; Kuo 2017, 2024; The Economist 2020), which then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew launched in 1979. The SMC itself did not outrightly ban the use of *fangyan* in all domains. It was a massive media campaign that encouraged the use of Mandarin, whilst disallowing the use of *fangyan* in all forms of public broadcast media.

Thus, letters and commentaries published in *Lianhe Zaobao* (Singapore's most widely circulated Chinese broadsheet) often lament the role that the SMC played.

> For the Chinese community, 'Speak more Mandarin and less dialects' [Speak Mandarin Campaign slogan in 1979] caused dialects to disappear among Chinese families. The Speak Mandarin Campaign's emphasis on listening and speaking Mandarin has caused students' Chinese standards to drop. This development worries many Chinese intellectuals, who also feel helpless at preventing the decline of their mother tongue. (Luo Zuiyue 2020, translated from Chinese)

> It has been decades since the Singapore government promoted the Speak Mandarin Campaign in the 1980s, with positive results that are apparent to all, even as it has also led to the 'loss' of various Chinese dialects. Today, few young Singaporeans (especially those born from the 90s) can understand their own dialects... The demise of dialects may also have contributed to the loss of transmission and eventual disappearance of local opera troupes. (Wu Quan Shen 2022, translated from Chinese)

This theme of the centrality of the state extends to research chronicling the evolution of Chinese language policies in Singapore. From the outset, early characterizations of initiatives to promote Mandarin use and the simplified Chinese script in Singapore were largely from the state's perspective or emphasized general communal trends (e.g. Kuo 1984; Newman 1986, 1988). Newman (1986) traces the early beginnings of Mandarin use to Chinese medium schools in 1920s Malaya, but does not explain why exactly Mandarin organically developed as a prestige variety in schools. Chen's (1993) account of modern written Chinese in Singapore describes it simply as a consequence of the Singapore government's looking to China for exonormative standards. Bokhorst-Heng's (1999) research has outlined the effects of the state's SMC, with the language shift towards Mandarin from *fangyan* largely attributed to state imposition.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S004740452510167X Published online by Cambridge University Press

The emphasis on the primary role of the state is seen to persist in later sociolinguistic scholarship. Sociolinguists have often examined further language shift from Mandarin to English (Stroud & Wee 2010), while applied linguists investigating classroom teaching attribute declining Chinese standards and interest among students to pedagogical methods that are out of touch with an increasingly cosmopolitan population (Lee 2013; Curdt-Christiansen 2014; Ng 2014). Scholars studying *hanyu pinyin*[2] have tended to stress its pedagogical value (C. Tan 2014), and have taken for granted the role of the state in implementing *pinyin* naming conventions and pedagogies (P. Tan 2013). In Chinese studies, a similar focus on state policy and its effects is also apparent, especially with regard to the history of Chinese language education in Chinese medium schools and Chinese education more generally (Neo 2018, 2020).

It is our view that this collective tendency to emphasize the role of the state (both in public rememberings like in the letters to *Zaobao* and academic scholarship) overlooks the actual historical contestations within and advocacy by members of the Chinese community, and transnational influences prior and contemporaneous to the Singapore government's Chinese language policies. Additionally, we see these state policies as multi-layered, multi-sited, and ideological phenomena shaped by both global and local sociocultural and political economic conditions. For example, we intend to highlight Sinocentric political discourses since the 1930s that treat Mandarin as a language of modernisation and ethnic unity (Tam 2020). Given this complexity in the history of Mandarinization in Singapore, how can we explain the emergence and dominance of the discourse of blame surrounding the SMC?

This article seeks to address the above question through the conceptualization of *collective memory* (Cubitt 2007) or *collective remembering* (Milani & Richardson 2023) as a heuristic to tracing and understanding the emergence of a monolithic discourse blaming the SMC. In what follows, we elaborate on the notion of collective memory and how it has potential value in examining how people talk about past events. We then address the transnational and ideological nature of Mandarinization from the 1930s. We focus on semi-structured interviews with eleven individuals (born between 1940 to 1966) where they recount experiences of navigating, negotiating, challenging, and aligning with policies of Mandarin in their life histories.

The purpose of this article is not to evaluate whether such a collective memory is an 'accurate' reflection of history, or whether it is (un)fair for people to blame the SMC for the erosion of Chinese culture in Singapore. The point is to demonstrate the actual historical complexity of processes of Mandarinization in Singapore, and explain why a certain monolithic collective memory has emerged despite this complexity.

On collective memory

In reviewing the field of memory studies as a whole, Rampton & Van de Putte (2024:3) characterize it as one where scholars are focused on examining the meanings of past events, interpreting how these meanings attributed to past events change or are maintained across time and contexts. This is in line with how the conceptual

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metaphor of 'memory' is studied within the field of history. Cubitt (2007:9) settles on the idea that memory is 'the means by which a conscious sense of the past, as something meaningfully connected to the present, is sustained and developed within human individuals and human cultures'. Crucially, memory is neither just a personal or individualistic apprehension of the past, but includes social, cultural, and institutional structurations. Thus, the study of memory in history is about examining the tensions and connections between individual recollections and more cultural ways of remembering, so as to explore how humans' relationships to the past are constructed, as well as the implications of such constructions (Cubitt 2007: 12–13).

Cubitt (2007:18) further defines collective memory as a form of,

> ...ideological fiction... which presents particular social entities as the possessors of a stable mnemonic capacity that is collectively exercised, and that presents particular views or representations of a supposedly collective past as the natural expressions of such a collective mnemonic capacity.

This is to be distinguished from *individual memory* found in the minds of persons, through which those persons have knowledge of things that they have personally experienced (Cubitt 2007:14). Thus, collective memory can be treated as an ideological representation of a supposed shared past, possibly disjunct from specific individual memories. For example, a teenager's account of World War II today might reflect a collective memory of the event structured via school textbooks, and this is to be treated differently from the individual stories of living through World War II by survivors.

Accordingly, one area of concern is in trying to understand 'how the remembering self can enact different and contradicting memory narratives in specific situations, both reproducing and resisting the dominant accounts without creating existential problems for the self' (Rampton & Van de Putte 2024:4). Such discursive contestations have been observed and studied within critical discourse studies (Richardson & Wodak 2009; Milani & Richardson 2023). Here, Milani & Richardson (2023:462) frame *collective remembering* as 'an umbrella term through which to conceptualize the discursive production and circulation of acts of remembrance involving a variety of institutions, platforms and constituencies'. Importantly, it is recognised that the construction of collective memory can reflect the construction of a collective identity (Wertsch & Roediger 2008:320 in Milani & Richardson 2023:460), where the act of collective remembering becomes a potential site of contestation of group identities.

Our article adopts Cubitt's (2007) notion of collective memory for its emphasis on dominant forms of memory narratives or discourses, whilst acknowledging that there might exist other memory accounts that contest the dominant discourse. For the purposes of this article, the dominant collective memory of concern pertains to the characterization of the SMC as the cause of Chinese cultural erosion in Singapore. This is with the proviso that individual accounts of the past might offer different perspectives (as individual memories; Cubitt 2007), or that different groups might contest the dominant narrative. Armed with such a theoretical understanding of

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discursive constructions of the past, we now address the transnational and ideological nature of Mandarinization, before delving into the interview data.

Mandarinization as a transnational ideology

China's becoming a republic in 1912 led to a consensus among politicians, activists, and scholars about the need for an updated national language to allow greater participation by citizens. However, contrary to popular belief, the selection of Beijing Mandarin as *guoyu* 国语 'national language' did not proceed as a result of the 1913 Language Unification Conference (Tam 2020:80–84). The conference did not see delegates vie for linguistic supremacy based on the geographical region they supposedly represented. Instead, delegates converged on the notion of a hybrid phonological system that was meant to incorporate and represent the Han ethnic nation's linguistic diversity, settling on an artificial form that most resembled Southern Mandarin spoken in Nanjing. The Beijing variety was overtly avoided as many felt it too closely associated with the Manchu court and therefore politically unpalatable. Yet, by 1925 the Kuo Min Tang (KMT) government would largely abandon the project of standardization based on the 1913 hybrid *guoyu*, and would adopt Beijing Mandarin as the national language. Such a decision was to have repercussions for Chinese communities across East and Southeast Asia.

Within a few years of the 1913 conference, advocates for the hybrid *guoyu* were reconsidering their positions. There were several reasons for this (Tam 2020:86–99).

(i) With the dissolution of the republican government in 1916, radicals could no longer blame the Manchus for China's backwardness. The New Culture Movement based on progressive modernist ideals of electoral politics and the scientific method began to spread from Beijing. Beijing Mandarin was now associated with ideals of modernism and revolution rather than the Qing dynasty.

(ii) Following influences from nineteenth-century missionaries to governments in France and Japan, global models of modern language claimed that any modern language had to have a written form of its spoken counterpart. By 1920, the vernacular literature movement established in Beijing University filled this gap by producing literary works based on Beijing Mandarin.[3]

(iii) Proponents of the hybrid *guoyu* began to acknowledge that its artificial nature meant greater practical challenges for effective dissemination. This was especially difficult in terms of developing teaching materials and teaching a language for which there was no existing speech community.

Beijing Mandarin, already a language of influence being used in the seat of the nation's capital, thus became associated with ideals of progress and modernity, and for practical reasons in 1926, a national language to be taught in all schools in regions governed by the KMT. Crucially, the two largest and most influential publishing houses in KMT China—Commercial Press (*Shangwu chubanshe* 商务出版社) and Zhonghua Book Company (*Zhonghua shuju* 中华书局)—saw profit in aligning themselves with government policy, and quickly published textbooks promulgating the

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new national language (Tam 2020:97). After 1930, the Ministry of Education began including *zhuyin fuhao* in textbooks, reflecting how the language is to be pronounced. Textbooks thus indicated that pronunciation was an integral part of Chinese language education, rather than something to be taught separately from reading and writing. It also conveyed an important modernist idea that the Chinese language is now unified in sound and script (Tam 2020:98).

These intellectual, cultural, and political currents linked to Mandarin were certainly not confined to Mainland China. The Chinese diasporic communities in Southeast Asia were well aware of these ideologies, as textbooks printed in China were exported to Chinese medium schools throughout the region. In these localities, the Chinese-educated elite swiftly conformed to similar practices of adopting Mandarin as the language of schooling, though not necessarily imbibing it as the language of nationalisation. Thus, such educated migrants (or the children of migrants) became bilingual in both their autochthonous *fangyan* as vernacular and Mandarin as the language of education (Tam 2020:100). Importantly, these national language policies were mostly upheld by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as it came to power in 1949, with the notable name change from *guoyu* to *putonghua*, and a new romanisation system (i.e. *hanyu pinyin*) to replace *zhuyin fuhao* by 1955 (Tam 2020:147). Both the CCP on the Mainland and KMT Taiwan, despite their ideological differences, promoted Mandarin for nation-building ends from the 1950s onwards.

Mandarinization as ideology and policy was consequently transnational in nature[4] from at least the 1930s, adopted by Chinese communities spanning Mainland China, Taiwan, and Southeast Asian diasporas. The push for mass education in Mandarin across these territories was also to lead to the emergence of other coterminous narratives. *Fangyan* began to be framed as obstacles to progress, as symbols of backwardness and a feudal past (Tam 2020:184). Mandarin, as the one language learnt by and therefore distinguishing the educated elite, became increasingly associated with culture and sophistication. This was even as some continued to see *fangyan* as true expressions of ethnic identity and culture.

The situation of Mandarin in schools is described by our informants' memories of their own schooling experiences. It is to these individual memories and accounts that we now turn.

Individual memories and discourses on Mandarinization

These accounts are drawn from semi-structured life history interviews with eleven individuals born between 1940 and 1966, ten of whom were born in Singapore. These individuals were selected based on their positions in domains of Chinese cultural and knowledge production, often former journalists, school teachers, academics, or prominent members of Chinese clan associations.[5] The study itself is funded by the National Heritage Board, a government agency. Given the scarcity and historical value of these oral accounts, nine informants have waived their anonymity, agreeing to have their interviews published on a website,[6] as well as the National Archives (in entirety), both of which are publicly accessible. While ensuring anonymity might be the default position in qualitative research (Akuffo 2023:568), we believe that identifying informants in our case is important for future researchers and the public to

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connect these accounts with specific contextual and historical information (Nespor 2000). As explained in later sections when we address the sociopolitical history of Singapore, it is also to allow our informants to be heard as identifiable individuals, something which they have been denied in the past.

Interviews were focused on uncovering their experiences with Mandarin in school and in daily life, in effect, how they remembered their encounters with Mandarin and its related state policies. In total, we collected about thirty-five hours of interviews, some of which took place over multiple sessions between December 2022 and June 2023. We analysed the data by examining how informants discursively constructed and positioned themselves in relation to these experiences pertaining to Mandarin. Such an approach might broadly be characterized as an analysis of stance (Du Bois 2007; Jaffe 2009). In this paradigm, stance is taken to mean 'a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, through which social actors simultaneously evaluate objects, position subjects, and align with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of value in the sociocultural field' (Du Bois 2007:169). In our study, the discursive figure of interest is that of Mandarin and its related policies, where the kinds of stances that are habitually and conventionally linked to certain subject positions allows us to conceptualize the indexical relationship between acts of stance-taking and the sociocultural field (Jaffe 2009:4). In these acts of stance-taking, certain linguistic resources might be deployed by informants, and when deployed in a patterned way, would suggest indexical links (c.f. Silverstein 2003) between these resources and specific social meanings.

In this way, we attended to how informants described their experiences encountering Mandarin for the first time, how they experienced learning the language in school at various institutional stages, and how they negotiated key national policies and events pertaining to Mandarin. We noted how informants evaluated and expressed an attitude or stance, viewpoint, or feelings about these policies and events, and whether and how these stances are expressed via certain linguistic resources. For example, informants might use the same linguistic resources in a regular way when describing or attributing blame to the SMC, and such discursive constructions might in turn be connected to a certain group identity (i.e. recall the link between collective remembering and group identity; c.f. Milani & Richardson 2023:460). The framework of stance can therefore be a productive way of examining any pattern or (ir)regularity in metapragmatic positioning or dispositions taken up by informants, and uncovering 'indirect indices' between their discursive production during the interview with social identities and ideologies (Ochs 1996; Jaffe 2009:13).

Table 1 below is a summary of our informants' biographical profiles. In analysis of the data, we make these empirical observations:

(i) All eleven informants described a diglossic situation in their lives as school-going children, when Mandarin was taught and used in school, and *fangyan* was used as a home language. The school was where they encountered Mandarin formally for the first time. Their stance towards this situation was not framed in controversial terms, but perceived as 'natural'.

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Table 1. Summary of informant profiles.

Name/date of interview	Relevant key role or occupation in the Chinese community	Year of birth	Attended Chinese- or English-medium secondary school	Highest education attained	Mentioned explicit support for SMC in 1979	Framed SMC as leading to cultural loss today	Deployed 'Lee Kuan Yew' as chronotope
Tan Kian Choon/10 Feb 2023	Former key leader of Hokkien Clan Association	1943	Chinese	River Valley High School; later obtained a degree from Oklahoma City University at age fifty	✓	✓	✓
Chua Gim Siong/7 Mar 2023	Former key leader of Chin Kang Clan Association; former key leader of Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations	1946	Chinese	Degree from Nanyang University	✓	✓	✓
Au Yue Pak/16 Dec 2022	Former key leader of Kong Chow Clan Association; Former Sin Chew Daily journalist	1940	Chinese	Degree from Nanyang University	✗	✓	✓
Tay Cheow Yong/2 Feb 2023	Former vice-principal; Former planning officer in Ministry of Education	1944	Chinese	Anglican High School	✗	✓	✓

(*Continued*)

Table 1. (*Continued.*)

Name/date of interview	Relevant key role or occupation in the Chinese community	Year of birth	Attended Chinese- or English-medium secondary school	Highest education attained	Mentioned explicit support for SMC in 1979	Framed SMC as leading to cultural loss today	Deployed 'Lee Kuan Yew' as chronotope
Kok Heng Leun/4 Oct 2023	Founder of Drama Box, a local Mandarin theatre company	1966	English	Degree from National University of Singapore	✗	✓	✗
Eric Lee/29 Mar 2023	NA	1961	Chinese	Diploma from Baharuddin Vocational Institute	✗	✓	✗
Kevin Tan/10 Feb 2023	NA	1961	English	Law degree from National University of Singapore; JSD from Yale University	✗	✓	✓
Ho Gee Soon/6 June 2023	Former school teacher	1944	Chinese	Degree from Nanyang University	✗	✓	✓
Eddie Kuo/14 & 21 Dec 2022	Prominent academic and former member of cultural committees at community and national levels	1940	NA	PhD from University of Minnesota	✗	✓	✓

(*Continued*)

Table 1. (*Continued.*)

Name/date of interview	Relevant key role or occupation in the Chinese community	Year of birth	Attended Chinese- or English-medium secondary school	Highest education attained	Mentioned explicit support for SMC in 1979	Framed SMC as leading to cultural loss today	Deployed 'Lee Kuan Yew' as chronotope
Victor Yeo*/26 June 2023	NA	around 1960	Chinese	Degree from Nanyang Technological Institute	✗	✓	✓
Chong Won Hai*/21 Mar 2023	NA	around 1960	English	Degree from University of Singapore	✗	✓	✓

*indicates a pseudonym where the informant does not wish to be identified; biographical profiles have also been intentionally left vague.

(ii) All eleven informants mentioned the Speak Mandarin Campaign as a key historical event. Contemporary to the launch of the SMC in 1979, two individuals described themselves as being in support of it at the time, while others expressed varying degrees of nonchalance. All eleven individuals expressed stances that positioned the SMC as a cause of cultural loss.

(iii) Nine informants made reference to 'Lee Kuan Yew', deploying it as a chronotopic resource.

We provide instantiations of these findings below.

Stance towards Mandarin in schools

From informants' accounts, Chinese-medium schools in Singapore had adopted Mandarin as the medium of instruction from at least the late 1940s and early 1950s. This parallels the historical developments emanating from Mainland China outlined in the previous section. In these retrospective accounts of their schooling experiences, all informants framed the use of Mandarin in schools as a natural state of affairs, and none questioned or raised concerns about why this was so.

(1) It was a matter of course to learn Mandarin in school at the time. We then used *fangyan* back at home. (Tan Kian Choon, translated from Mandarin)

Interestingly, educators in the past also appeared to have less of a monolingual ideology when teaching. As described by Au Yue Pak, teachers would utilise students' home language as resource (in her case Cantonese) in order to teach the target language of Mandarin.

(2) In the first grade, we had Chinese teachers teaching us Mandarin in Cantonese for the first one or two months. After that, they all used Mandarin. So we were promoting Mandarin at that time. Our Chinese teacher at that time, I remember the fifth-grade Chinese teacher's surname was Jia, Jia Qinglin's Jia. He usually teaches in Mandarin, but he tells stories in Cantonese, because Mandarin is not vivid for storytelling, isn't it? So he tells the stories, such as Wu Song fighting the tiger, and so on, and the stories in the Water Margin, all in Cantonese. (Au Yue Pak, translated from Mandarin)

So all seven informants who attended Chinese-medium schools were cognizant of the fact that the promotion of Mandarin in schools pre-dated state policies regarding Mandarin by far. There was no resentment expressed at all that they could not study their vernaculars, or that they had to learn Mandarin despite it not being their first language. These sentiments were in stark contrast to when they talked about the SMC, for which there were more differentiated reactions.

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Stances towards the SMC

First, it has to be recognised that many key community leaders were in support of the SMC and actively helped to promote it at its launch in 1979. It was not a completely top-down imposition even if it was a state-initiated campaign. Thus, Chua Gim Siong and Tan Kian Choon in excerpts (3) and (4) below recount the reasons for their support and their participation in the SMC at the time.

(3) I remember the recreation section was set up on May 20, 1977. It was the first time you could hear non-dialect conversations in a Chinese association, probably Chin Kang Huay Kuan was the first. Then the Speak Mandarin Campaign. What Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew said convinced me. He said, if one wants to be a doctor, one needs to further his studies in medicine. The first thing is to learn dialects because Cantonese doctors don't treat Hokkien patients. This is the issue, so there must be a common language. The common language among Chinese is Mandarin, and I think it is fair and square. As for whether to completely abandon dialects for the sake of Mandarin, it is a matter of opinion. (Chua Gim Siong, Federation of Chinese Clan Associations; translated from Mandarin)

(4) Actually the Hokkien Huay Kuan has always been quite supportive of these government campaigns, because they are also part of education. The government's promotion of Mandarin was driven by the overall situation then, and there was no reason to be unsupportive. The entire China was progressing. The 80's would have been the start of China's reform and opening-up, when Deng Xiaoping visited the south, visited Shenzhen. We also attended visits to China by the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry. We went to huge places, because back then Prime Minister Lee had a good relationship with China. (Tan Kian Choon, Hokkien Clan Association; translated from Mandarin)

This is not to say that these individuals who helped promote the SMC had no reservations about the policy. Tan Kian Choon himself expressed a sort of contradictory sentiment later in the interview (see excerpt (5) below). Crucially, he attributed the lack of public resistance to the sociopolitical context in the 1980s.[7]

(5) To the clan associations, there is no reason to exist if there are no dialects. So it was a worry. For if comprehensive implementation were to lead to a neglect of dialects, then dialects would lose their value. There was such a feeling from the outset, but due to the power of the state, there was a limit to what the public could say. The actions against leftists in the early days also meant that people were afraid of speaking up. There was also the Tan Lark Sye incident.[8] (Tan Kian Choon, Hokkien Clan Association; translated from Mandarin)

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At the same time, not all Clan Associations were that affected by the SMC. As Au Yue Pak describes in excerpt (6), smaller associations (in terms of membership) like the Kong Chow Clan Association were more nonchalant about the policy at the time, and persisted in their linguistic practices.

(6) I don't have any disagreements because I can understand Mandarin, neither did I have any opinions. All in all, if you are not Cantonese, I will speak Mandarin to you. If you are one of us, we speak Cantonese in our own meetings. That's what we've done all this time. (Au Yue Pak, Kong Chow Clan Association; translated from Mandarin)

Individuals not playing key community roles also tended to be blasé, describing indifference to the policy in their own daily lives. Kevin Tan, who attended an English-medium school, attributes his 'detachment' from the SMC and debates surrounding it to his more anglicised background.

(7) It was just another campaign. We were also tired of you know national campaigns, anti-littering, anti-spitting and anti-smoking and anti this and anti that, right? By that time, it was just another campaign... There was also a big debate, even from the 70s, actually, about the lowering of standards in Chinese. And of course, with some more, I think, strident people arguing that the government was actually destroying Chinese culture, destroying the language... But maybe I don't know, maybe, coming from my background, we were a little more detached from this. (Kevin Tan)

Informants' accounts therefore paint quite a complex picture of their reactions to the SMC in the 1980s. There are key leaders who supported and participated in its promotion, yet the same individuals might also claim to have expressed certain misgivings from the outset (see the contrast between excerpts (4) and (5)). Seven out of eleven informants described how they did not seem concerned by it when it was launched in 1979. However, all eleven informants evaluated the SMC in a negative light in hindsight, explicitly linking the SMC to cultural loss. An example is Kok Heng Leun's rationalisation in excerpt (8).

(8) So thinking about this Speak Mandarin Campaign, for one it didn't consider it has cut off the roots or how to transfer the culture and its outcomes. Then there is no room for development [outside of school], and it will always stay stuck like this. What will happen then, gravity will drag it down. It will always be dragged down. So now, all Chinese teachers will feel that the standard is getting worse. (Kok Heng Leun, translated from Mandarin)

Here, *fangyan* has been metaphorically framed as the roots of Chinese culture, so that the SMC's eradication of *fangyan* is akin to removing Chinese cultural roots.

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The promotion and teaching of Mandarin and Chinese without domains for use and development outside of the school will only mean that Chinese standards will fall. These views are congruent with the earlier examples of letters published in the *Lianhe Zaobao* (see above), essentially blaming the SMC for cultural loss and falling Chinese standards.

'Lee Kuan Yew' as chronotope

Another recurring theme in informants' accounts when framing the SMC was their reference to Lee Kuan Yew or other equivalent term (e.g. 'the former prime minister') as a prime mover of the campaign or representative of the state. Thematically, it stood out to us that a historical event was mentioned in conjunction with a historical figure. This did not occur when informants were describing other key events in their lives, including their first encounters with Mandarin in school, or when some talked about the closure of Nanyang University. In total, nine out of eleven informants invoked the name of Lee Kuan Yew while recounting the SMC as a historical event.

(9) There must be some key people who would be centrally involved [in introducing the SMC]. But I don't know. Am I right to say that Lee Kuan Yew himself played a key role? And his views are quite clear. By the way, if you read his book, his views are very clear. He thinks he is fully justified. Of course, for the benefit of the Singapore. And yet in his position, his views can hardly be challenged. And so things will carry on. (Eddie Kuo)

(10) I was still in MOE in 1979. 1980 in the Curriculum Development Division, it [the SMC] was implemented by Lee Kuan Yew. Because he was the founding Prime Minister. In those days when he spoke, everyone had to obey. (Tay Cheow Yong, translated from Mandarin)

As shown in excerpts (9) and (10), the deployment of 'Lee Kuan Yew' occurs without extensive elaboration or explanation, almost as a sequitur to show how the SMC was implemented (i.e because Lee Kuan Yew could 'hardly be challenged' or 'everyone had to obey'). So the informant is taking for granted that the interviewer/interlocutor has prior and shared knowledge of Lee Kuan Yew as a figure in the time period being referenced. The fact that nine out of eleven informants referred to Lee Kuan Yew in these similar ways indicates (i) salience of the reference in their life histories pertaining to Mandarin, (ii) congruity in how they perceived the man, and (iii) congruity in how they characterized THE TIME PERIOD AND CIRCUMSTANCES by referring to the man. But what meanings in the sociocultural field (Jaffe 2009) regarding this time period might be indexed by invoking 'Lee Kuan Yew'? In order to understand these shared inferences and connotations, it is important to consider key historical events and developments from Singapore's independence in

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1965 leading up to the 1980s, throughout which Lee Kuan Yew was Prime Minister. The SMC was not the only policy of note that Lee oversaw.

- 1963 Operation Coldstore: Arrest and detention without trial of more than 100 leftwing politicians and trade unionists, including individuals who had defected from Lee Kuan Yew's People's Action Party to form the Barisan Sosialis. They were accused of being communists. As an example of how hard-handed and persistent these measures were, Chia Thye Poh, Leader of the Opposition in parliament, was detained from 1966 to 1998.
- 1978: A review of the bilingual policy, the Goh Keng Swee Report, recommended streaming in primary schools from 1979. Best performing students would study English and Chinese as 'first languages' (i.e. to the highest levels of proficiency), average students would study English as first language and Chinese as second language, worst performing students would study English as first language and Chinese as third language (i.e. focusing on reading, listening, and speaking). This cemented the pre-eminent status of English, as it was the one language that had to be taught at all levels of school to the highest proficiency.
- 1980 closure of Nanyang University (南洋大学): The only Chinese medium university in Singapore had a history of leftwing student activism and protests. It was accused of falling academic standards and forced to merge with the University of Singapore to form the National University of Singapore.
- 1987 Operation Spectrum: Arrest and detention without trial of twenty-two individuals accused of a Marxist conspiracy to overthrow the state.

If we are to consider the chronotope as a specific configuration of time and space being represented in discourse (c.f. Blommaert 2015), then Lee Kuan Yew appears to be referred to as a figure symbolic of a certain time and space (that requires little elaboration). In Bakhtin's original formulation, the chronotope referred to the inseparable spatial and temporal connections expressed in literary works (Bakhtin 1981:84). We use the term here in Blommaert's (2015) sense to highlight a specific time-space contextual arrangement that is invoked by informants in their interviews through 'Lee Kuan Yew' as a meaning-making resource. That is, 'Lee Kuan Yew' is being used as a chronotopic discursive resource by informants, indexing the oppressive sociopolitical conditions in Singapore in the 1960s to 1980s, and his authoritarian style of rule. Informants are, in effect, positioning themselves as subjects or victims of oppression. The deployment of such a discursive resource might also be attributed to the difficulty in openly expressing such views regarding the state's oppression even today, decades after the referenced time period.[9] This reluctance for elaboration is most apparent in excerpt (11) below.

(11) The 1970s and 80s had Lee Kuan Yew. No one dared to give feedback. Because at that time it was impossible to provide feedback. Because the situation was very different from today. It was, how should I put it, shortly after the country was founded. Many things were heavily regulated. There were benefits to it, and the country developed rapidly. I strongly agree with this aspect. One of its drawbacks was that you couldn't hear negative

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opinions. Because people didn't dare say it. You understand what I mean? I don't have to explain it too clearly. Saying it in this way is enough. (Victor Yeo, translated from Mandarin)

Crucially, the two informants who did not deploy Lee Kuan Yew as a chronotope went into great detail when describing their experiences of marginalization in the time period. For example, in excerpt (12), Kok Heng Leun recounts the frustration he witnessed in his father and himself in the 1970s and 80s. In excerpt (13), Eric Lee discusses how many of his cohort from Chinese medium schools could not attend university despite their good academic results.

(12) Actually, I could always see the experience my father's generation from my father. It is like they gradually feel that they don't have a position in this society... So my father, for example, his invoice, we helped him write his invoices and deliveries when we were in secondary school. We wrote all of them for him. Then, because he could not write, he got angry whenever he wrote... Sometimes, I had to accompany him to some government agencies to handle some matters. When he was in the car, he was always very anxious... At the scene itself, he didn't understand when you asked in English. Then I explained in Mandarin and asked him if he had any questions, but he remained silent. When he got back in the car, he would get angry again. So it's that kind of silence or being muted. I don't think it's silence, I think it's the era of being muted. I really see it clearly in him. Of course, I also see it in myself when I face these people. Actually, when I went to the government agencies, because English is my, although it should be my first language, but actually, when I was young, even when I entered secondary school and junior college, I still felt that it was my second language. So every time when I had to attend these occurrences, I always had to be mentally prepared and ready. What do I want to talk about? How do I say it in English? And actually, there is a lot of pressure, a lot of pressure. (Kok Heng Leun, translated from Mandarin)

(13) The entire education system changed, and Mandarin seemed to disappear. I remember that those who did well in the middle school exams and were admitted to high schools or junior colleges had to participate in an immersion programme. After their morning classes, they had to spend the afternoon learning English. I'm not sure which year it was, but it should be around that period of time. It was quite tough for the students during those two years. Many of my classmates went to junior colleges. Those who did well couldn't get into university. At that time, it was NUS. (Eric Lee, translated from Mandarin)

The historical context above of sociopolitical oppression would also allow one to better apprehend the seeming lack of resistance to policies like English-dominant

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bilingualism and the SMC at the time of implementation. Regardless of whether the arrestees were indeed communists in support of armed insurrection, opposing state language policies (especially if one were Chinese-educated) in the 1980s ran a risk of being labeled a leftwing agitator. This would also explain Tan Kian Choon's comments in excerpt (5), on why 'there was a limit to what the public could say', though in this case, the chronotopic resource used was the 'Tan Lark Sye incident'.

The emergence of a collective memory of blame on the SMC

In tracing the history of Mandarinization in Singapore, we have outlined the following key strands:

(i) Mandarinization was a transnational phenomenon originating from the 1930s, with ideologies and policies that associated it with nationalism in Mainland China and Taiwan, as well as modernity and progress via schooling.
(ii) The Mandarinization of Chinese-medium schools pre-dated the SMC by forty years. Yet, this development was accepted unquestioningly by all informants. This is in contrast to how the SMC is evaluated by them.
(iii) The SMC was referenced as a key historical event by all informants, but with varying degrees of support and indifference at time of implementation. Key community leaders played active roles in promoting the SMC.

Thus, we see a range of factors contributing to Mandarinization in Singapore beyond the SMC. First, informants are well aware that Mandarin was already conventionalized as a medium of instruction, and language of Chinese sophistication and education by the 1950s in Singapore. The eventual demise of *fangyan* might also be attributed to the expansion of Chinese (mass) education, which was previously limited to a small minority. Similar trends of language shift towards Mandarin from *fangyan* are seen in Mainland China, even as it does not have an explicit policy like the SMC. Second, there were uneven reactions to, alignment with, and active collaboration within the Chinese community (despite possible personal misgivings) when it came to the implementation of the SMC. As a well-studied phenomenon, we also know that Chinese parents from the 1980s, in their own invisible home language planning, adopted a more pragmatic approach in only transmitting Mandarin and English to their children (Pakir 1994). These were factors and choices that individuals made and can remember, outside the direct remit of the state. Yet, no informant attributed blame or responsibility to these other factors in their life histories for the erosion of Chinese culture. How can we explain the current dominant discourse of blame surrounding the SMC produced in newspapers and echoed by our informants?

It is worth returning to the field of memory studies pertaining to discourse (Milani & Richardson 2023; Rampton & Van de Putte 2024). In theorizing how individuals remember the past, Milani & Richardson suggest three key characteristics (adapted from Milani & Richardson 2023:461–62):

(i) Remembering is always a process where individual strands become collective through a range of meaning-making resources.

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(ii) Such collective remembering is always political and the crux of intersectional identities; often the site of sociopolitical contestation between groups.
(iii) These collective memories are often affective, where emotive expression is innate to discursive construction.

In line with the above, the prevalent use of 'Lee Kuan Yew' as a chronotope is one example of a prominent meaning-making resource in our informants' accounts, and offers our first clue. As informants deploy this chronotope to characterize the time period and how the SMC is to be regarded, it suggests that informants are indexing 'Lee Kuan Yew' to the oppressive sociopolitical conditions then, and themselves as subject to these conditions. This also highlights the very political nature of acts of collective remembering (Milani & Richardson 2023:461). To be more specific, the SMC occurred contemporaneously with the concretization of English-dominant bilingualism in the education system in 1979, as well as the closure of Nanyang University[10] in 1980. Both of these policies led to widespread ill-feeling and hurt among Chinese-educated individuals (Kwok & Chia 2011:251), who were disenfranchised through the emphasis on English in all official domains. Six out of nine informants who made reference to Lee Kuan Yew, also addressed at least one of these two events in their life histories. As aforementioned, the two informants who did not refer to Lee Kuan Yew (e.g. Kok Heng Leun in excerpt (12)), were also the ones who went into great detail describing a sense of marginalization at the onset of the SMC. It is such a sentiment—an affective element (c.f. Milani & Richardson 2023:462)—that could explain why the SMC might be coloured by informants as another state policy culminating in disempowerment and cultural erosion. In other words, individual discourses of blame on the SMC could be the partial result of conflating the language policy with an overall perception of sociopolitical oppression at the time.

However, this alone cannot explain why memories of Mandarinization pre-SMC or of active collaboration by community leaders almost never surfaced in public discourse as being linked to cultural erosion. Certainly, no blame nor resentment is associated with these events by informants, even as informants clearly recounted them in interviews. Recall the theorizations on collective memory and identity (Milani & Richardson 2023:460; Rampton & Van de Putte 2024:3), and specifically Halbwachs' (1992, in Cubitt 2007:160) take on collective memory as a social endeavour:

> One can remember only on condition of finding again, within the frameworks of collective memory, the place of the past events which interest us... Forgetting is explained by the disappearance of these frameworks or of a part of them, whether because our attention is no longer capable of focusing on them, or because it is focused elsewhere (distraction is often only a consequence of an effort at attention, and forgetting results almost always from distraction). But forgetting, or the deformation of certain of our recollections, is explained also by the fact that these frameworks change from one period to another. Society, depending on circumstances and on its point in time, represents the past to itself in different ways: it modifies its conventions. As each of

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its members bends himself to these conventions, he inflects his recollections in the direction in which the collective memory is evolving.

In this way, one's experience is 'inflected' or mediated by group membership. The capacity to reconstruct these experiences as memories or discourses is contingent on how it is continually shaped by participation in or identification with the group(s) in question (Cubitt 2007:161–62). Moreover, Cubitt (2007:134–35) posits that the purpose of collective memory, as a kind of retrospective knowledge, is often required to (i) maintain and express a group identity on which its continued existence depends; and (ii) to maintain and advance their positions in relation to other groups or institutions (also see Wertsch & Roediger 2008:320).

With regard to a collective memory of the SMC, the group identity in question might be logically surmised as the Chinese-educated class, or 'Chinese-educated intellectuals'. By Kwok & Chia's (2011) estimation, the label of 'Chinese-educated intellectuals' (*huawen jiaoyu zhishifenzi*) emerged as a term of self-reference in public discourse in the late 1990s. This is in contrast to the lack of such a term for those who are ethnically Chinese- and English-educated, possibly because of the dominance of English by then and the lack of a need to position oneself as such. In Kwok and Chia's (2011:239) sociological description, this group of 'Chinese-educated intellectuals' are marked as individuals who actively participate in Chinese public discourse (e.g. by writing in to newspapers), responding to developments and concerns in the Chinese community, especially education. While some scholars have made a distinction between different generations of Chinese intellectuals (e.g. Chua 1999), the group referred to here includes a broader collective of persons the majority of whom attended Chinese-medium schools, though not necessarily to tertiary level. To be sure, this would encompass a wide spectrum of people: those who are self-taught and have been exposed to Chinese translations of Western texts, and are cosmopolitan in outlook, and younger generations who might not have attended Chinese-medium schools, but are effectively bilingual in both Chinese and English, and exposed to Chinese intellectual discourse. They may not be homogenously disadvantaged by their Chinese-educated background, as some have succeeded in sectors or private enterprises where English is not essential (Kwok & Chia 2011:239–40).

One key indexical quality, especially among older Chinese-educated members, is their expression of sentiments and experiences of marginalization (Kwok & Chia 2011:241). In line with the findings of this study, one might mark the 'borders' delineating this group of 'Chinese-educated intellectuals'—Singaporeans of Chinese ethnicity who partake in a sense of marginalization and/or victimisation when positioning themselves in relation to policies like the SMC. Recall Kevin Tan's stated detachment from discourses about the SMC (see excerpt (7)). So an English-educated individual like him who signals detachment from such discourses of marginalization might be clearly positioned as not belonging to the group,[11] even as he also invokes Lee Kuan Yew as a chronotope. Nonetheless, these sentiments of marginalization might still be presented in quite nuanced ways. While Kok Heng Leun addresses the SMC in terms of cultural erosion in excerpt (8) and then outlines the difficulties people such as himself felt (see excerpt (12)), he also expresses the idea that the Chinese community cannot absolve itself of blame.

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(14) It should be said that in Singapore, many people will change themselves because of policies. They allow themselves to be changed by policies. Of course, the Singapore government has always felt the need to improve society through policies. Because only then can we all be united. So someone initiated a slap, and we accepted it. I think it's like this. This is a policy, but you also accepted that policy, or you accepted his wisdom or you thought that was a good decision, and you accepted it. Now that you've been slapped, of course you can scold him. But think about what you have done as well. (Kok Heng Leun, translated from Mandarin)

If we are to account for the unspoken nature of and lack of blame on Mandarinization pre-dating the SMC and active collaboration with the policy, then it very plausibly has also to do with the maintenance of and/or alignment with a group identity of 'Chinese-educated intellectuals'. A key *raison d'etre* of the group is predicated on its perceived marginalization by the state (Kwok & Chia 2011). In accordance with Cubitt's (2007:134–35) theorizations on the functions of collective memory, one of the ways in which this group identity is constructed and sustained is via the repetition of retrospective knowledge it tells about itself. Accordingly, discourses of blame surrounding the SMC—a conflation with a general sentiment of marginalisation and oppression by the state—might be seen as a form of conventionalized practice that is repeated in order to formulate this identity and align oneself with the group. This collective way of remembering the SMC can therefore be perceived as an 'indirect index' (Jaffe 2009:13) of the group identity of 'Chinese-educated intellectuals'. At the same time, memories (and discourses) to do with Mandarinization before the SMC and collaboration with the state are less relevant to the notion of marginalization, and therefore 'forgotten' in collective ways of remembering. Consequently, despite informants' multivariate ways of living through Mandarinization and the SMC in the past, they all orient towards it in similar ways in the present.

Conclusion

This article has sought to explain the emergence of a prevalent discourse of blame surrounding the SMC through the conceptualization of collective memory. Our findings suggest a complex history where Mandarinization can be traced to transnational ideologies of ethnic unity and modernization from the founding of China as a republic. Informants recount an uneven engagement with policies of Mandarinization (especially the SMC), ranging from nonchalance, to alignment, to fear of resistance. Accounts also often deployed the figure of Lee Kuan Yew as a chronotopic discursive resource, representing the sociopolitical circumstances of Singapore in the 1970s and 80s. We argue that the SMC has to be understood as co-occurring with a set of other state policies. The current prevalent discourse surrounding the SMC emerges from and is sustained by a conflation of prominent policies with a perceived sense that the ruling government has oppressed and marginalized a Chinese-educated class. At the same time, the repeated production

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of said discourse might reflect the construction of the group identity of 'Chinese-educated intellectuals'.

It is our view that a historical recovery of memories as discourses produced by individuals is important in both the fields of history and sociolinguistics. In Singapore, where a highly centralised state is a reality, there is all the more an imperative to recover individual strands of memories and histories so as to understand how we have arrived in the present. We are reminded that people have always had their own interests and alignments with language as a resource and stage for contestation. This is even as it is easy to shift responsibility to a monolithic state.

Acknowledgments. This article includes data gathered from a project supported by the Heritage Research Grant of the National Heritage Board, Singapore. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Heritage Board, Singapore.

Notes

1. While the official label is 'Mandarin' in Singapore, the spoken cognate is also known as *putonghua* 'common language' in mainland China, and *guoyu* 'national language' in Taiwan.

2. *Hanyu pinyin* is a romanisation system for Mandarin primarily adopted in mainland China and the Chinese community in Southeast Asia, including Singapore. It is used to facilitate the teaching of Mandarin pronunciation. Taiwan adopts a transliteration system, *zhuyin fuhao,* for the same purpose of teaching *guoyu* pronunciation.

3. The written form of Chinese prior to the introduction of progressive Modernist ideals were only expressed through Classical Chinese, to be distinguished from vernacular forms.

4. In Singapore, the transnational nature of Mandarinization was not always unidirectional originating from spheres of influence in Mainland China and Taiwan. It was multidirectional especially in officialdom from the 1980s (after Deng Xiaoping's Open Door Policy), with teachers regularly engaging in mutual visits and exchanges across Singapore, Taiwan, and the Mainland, learning about pedagogical developments and experiences in teaching Chinese and Mandarin (Chinese as Second Language Teachers' Association [华文第二语文教师协会] 1982).

5. Clan associations in Southeast Asia were historically significant grassroots organizations established by Chinese immigrant groups in the nineteenth century. Migrants typically amalgamated based on similar ethnicity and language (e.g. Hokkien Clan Association) or geographic origins in mainland China. Initially established to facilitate the settlement and welfare of fellow immigrants, these organizations later morphed into institutions capable of mobilizing their respective local Chinese communities for political and social ends (in the 1940s and 50s) before declining and are currently focused on promoting Chinese language and culture (Pan 1996).

6. Excerpts only, which are available at https://www.youtube.com/@SGChineseReform.

7. We elaborate on these sociopolitical conditions in the next section, as connected to the individual accounts produced by informants.

8. Tan Lark Sye was a prominent Chinese businessman and philanthropist. A long-time president of the Hokkien Clan Association, he led efforts to build various Chinese medium schools in Singapore and the region, including the founding of Nanyang University in 1953. In 1963, he was accused of being a communist and stripped of his citizenship by the state.

9. The sensitivity of such political views persists today, as the influence of the ruling People's Action Party remains hegemonic. Research for this study was funded by the National Heritage Board, a state organ, and one of the grant's original key outputs was to produce a summary paper meant for public consumption on MUSE SG, an online magazine commemorating historical events. Certain members of the bureaucracy deemed some of the comments by informants (also produced in this article) to be potentially provocative, so that publication of the MUSE article was scrapped.

10. The closure of Nanyang University was especially hurtful, not just to its graduates, but also the wider Chinese population in Singapore (including the less educated ones), for various reasons. First, it was dubbed the 'people's university' (K. Tan 2017) as it was initiated and established entirely from donations

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by the Chinese community, and symbolized the community's values and aspirations regarding education. Second, the university's closure also came to be synonymous with perceived state oppression and victimization of the Chinese-educated, with the Chinese community never quite accepting the official narrative that the school was closed due to falling academic standards (K. Tan 2017; Huang 2019).

11. It is not the scope of this article to investigate how such a group identity emerges from discourse. We are simply suggesting it as a possible reason why a collective memory of the SMC might have been produced.

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Cite this article: Lu, Luke and Chien Wen Kung (2025). Marginalization, "Lee Kuan Yew", and a Chinese-educated class: Understanding the collective memory of Singapore's Speak Mandarin Campaign. *Language in Society* 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1017/S004740452510167X