

**Ai chiah png mai?**

*Zoi sia*

**Ho kiu mo kien ngi**

**Cai gieng**

*Boh ho yi shu*

**Hou hoisam yihngsik neih**

\*What do these phrases mean? Turn to pg 4.

# Dialects find a voice

Long in decline, Chinese dialects are being picked up today by some younger Singaporeans who want to bridge the gulf with the elderly, or just rediscover their roots

## sundayspecial

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Hwa Chong Institution (HCI) student Kenneth Leong remembers those first months when he began paying community service visits to the elderly in Ang Mo Kio: Awkward smiles, doubtful looks and translations between Mandarin and Hokkien of every sentence spoken.

"The only one in our group who could speak dialect translated; it was really a cumbersome process," he recalled.

Two years on, the 18-year-old is proud to say that he can do more than ask a senior, "ai lim zui mai" (do you want some water?). He rattles off in fluent Hokkien about his doings at school. The old folks, in turn, joke with the youngster about having a "zha bo peng you" (girlfriend) or urge him to study hard.

Of Cantonese and Teochew stock, Kenneth says neither dialect is really used at home. "For many of us, we learnt along the way with every visit (to the old folks) and tapped the knowledge of those more proficient among us," said the final-year student. "It was definitely not easy."

The impending closure of radio station Rediffusion was perhaps inevitable given the drastic decline of Chinese dialects among younger generations of Singaporeans ever since the start of the Government's big Speak Mandarin push more than 30 years ago. While the latter was seen as necessary, some older folk have worried about the loss of a part of Singapore's heritage, and that youth would grow up disconnected from their roots and alienated from their dialect-speaking elders.

But what TODAY found were pockets of young Singaporeans and community groups that are making the effort to learn — and even teach others — the patois.

### PASSING IT ON

Much of this stems from the effort, by youths like Kenneth, to reach out to less fortunate senior citizens. His group mate Ng Chow Hui, for instance, picked up some basic Hokkien phrases from his parents for his community service. But he later also found himself digging deeper into his cultural heritage and the history of Hokkien people.

The decline of dialects, he laments, "is a loss for the younger generation as they will not know their heritage. How can the previous generation, which is only fluent in dialects, pass down the stories and traditions?"

His team is trying to get more students to befriend the elderly and, to that end, they have put together a handy booklet of Hokkien phrases that volunteers can use on their house visits. Said Kenneth: "The elderly appreciate that we use their mother tongue. When we were finally able to speak to them in Hokkien, there was that moment of joy for them."

At the National University of Singapore, the Students' Community Service Club has already held three workshops in Hokkien and is planning for similar sessions in Cantonese.

Organiser Maurice Ng, 23, said the response has been encouraging. The second-year life sciences student, who believes dialects are vital for connecting the older and younger generations, is hoping to hold at least one workshop each year.

### MORE INITIATIVES

At the grassroots level, the People's Association (PA) has rolled out dialect-related activities. Within the various community centres, there are dialect singing courses and a dialect initiative



NUS students interacting with senior citizens during an outreach event. PHOTO COURTESY NUS STUDENTS' COMMUNITY SERVICE CLUB

was piloted last year to reach out to younger people.

National Institute of Education student Chang Ai Jia, 24, took part in the "Learn Cantonese language through Forgotten Cantonese Cuisine" class to get in touch with her regional roots.

Inspired after an exchange programme to Hong Kong, Ms Chang was eager for opportunities to use the language. People around her generally don't. "People these days don't see the need to speak the language, hence learning it would be viewed as a waste of time. There is also a perception that dialect speakers are less educated," she said.

Now she is confident enough to use the patois at Cantonese eateries — and there is one other benefit that Ms Chang treasures: "I definitely feel closer to my grandmother as there is this shared mother tongue between us."

### 'KEEP IT REAL'

For older Chinese Singaporeans, other avenues to indulge in the old patois can be found in the arts.

The Chinese Theatre Circle's members and supporters, most of whom are over 45, turn to opera for a whiff of nostalgia and the opportunity to speak dialect with one another.

Artistic director Joanna Wong says that she introduced English and Chinese subtitles in her performances three decades ago for the younger audience. The troupe is now hoping to raise awareness of the art form — and in turn dialects — by working with schools.

The Glowers Drama Group, whose members are mostly past their 50th birthday, use a mix of Cantonese, Mandarin and English in their plays. When members get together socially, founder Catherine Sng, 62, said the exchanges take everybody back to the old times, when people often spoke a hodge-podge of languages in the same conversation.

On how to revive interest in their dialect roots, Ms Sng advised: "Don't force people to support dialects, let those who are interested find the avenues themselves to sustain the passion ... keep it real."



Members of The Glowers Drama Group performing a Cantonese song during a play. PHOTO COURTESY GLOWERS

### FAMILIES IMPORTANT

Clan associations, meanwhile, are doing their part, but they feel that community groups are limited in what they can do. The Singapore Kwangtung Hui Kuan and the Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan, for example, have language classes once or twice per week for about 20 participants. But the interest is mainly among China immigrants.

The Singapore Hainan Society, which regularly organises Hainanese drama performances for its 600-strong membership, also sees lacklustre response from the young.

Its secretary, Mr Teh Chai Kang, said: "We don't organise activities for youths as much now as turnout has not been very good."

"The young people are not keen any more and only

come with their parents when there are special occasions or during festivals."

The Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan and Singapore Hakka Chong Association think the close-knit ties among family makes it more effective for youngsters to learn dialect from their elders.

Madam Lim Wee, 62, who converses in Hokkien with her 11-year-old nephew, agrees. "My nephew picked it up because all of us speak the dialect at home, and we spoke it to him ... It is all about exposure to the language as children learn things really quickly."

"It's a win-win situation, because his father speaks English with him, while he is learning Mandarin at school, so he's quite well-exposed."