

Singapore voices : an interactive installation about languages to (re)(dis)cover the intergenerational distance

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parliament cannot speak fluently, especially without a prepared text. (stevewu77, 7 March)

"This is the reason why Chinese Singaporean lacks a identity in terms of their culture and tradition because their ties to their "mother tongue" has been cut." (Frankiestine, 7 March)

"I personally don't understand a single line of hokkien or techeow when my parents speak to some of my older relatives. At the very least, I understand all its degenerating words of vulgarities in all common spoken language in Singapore. Ah... The product of Singapore's education system. The least we should do is to learn those vulgarities, else someone scold us in that and we nodding our head in approval." (XIIIblackcat, 7 March)

*"It is only in Singapore that one's Mother Tongue goes according to your father's racial background. If my mother is Chinese and my father, Indian, I am subjected to taking Tamil as *Mother* Tongue. So being a Peranakan myself, no way was I allowed to take Malay as second language. Instead, I was "strongly" encouraged to study Chinese. Just because some Leader advocated that Peranakans are Chinese after all. ..." (kurangajarsekali, March 10)*

"Language politic is the worst kind of politic we have ever experienced since the civil riot in our national history and now we revisit this issue with different players..." (singaporean04, 11 March)

ENDING REMARKS

In Singapore, language politics, with its immediate contact with identity and culture, is a complex issue, and working with this material sometimes touches on raw nerves. It should be noted that 2009 was the 30th anniversary of the launch of Lee's *Speak Mandarin Campaign*. Working with **Singapore Voices** has shown that linguistic research, installation art and exhibition design, while based on different premises and most often having separate ambitions, can co-exist and create a coherent expression of the value of minority languages as vehicles for cultural knowledge. The installation has attracted an audience's attention to both the beauty and the heritage that resides in a multitude of languages. While English-Mandarin bilingualism is destined to provide the linguistic framework for Singapore's future generations, substrate languages are bound to nuance the picture. Hokkien, Teochew, Peranakan, Malayalam and all the other languages used on the island will certainly survive in some form or fashion for long time still. However, Singapore's cultural heritage may no longer have a chance to be transferred in a natural way from old to young, if language loss continues at the current speed. Will the children of the next generation only be able to access the verbal knowledge, stories and personalities of their grand-parents, and further removed ancestors, via sound recordings (or perhaps speech synthesis)? Will they will need a translation and much accompanying information in order to understand what they hear? if so, then linguists and multimedia artists with an interest in cultural heritage are going to have an important role to play to make sure that intangible values are not entirely eradicated.



Figure 10. Joel Yuan's portrait of Mme Lim Siew Kiat, speaker of Hainanese. Photo by Martin Reiser, reproduced with permission.

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