RESEARCH ARTICLE

I am More Chinese than You: Online Narratives of Locals and Migrants in Singapore

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Abstract

Migrants from mainland China now make up nearly a million of Singapore's total population of 5.4 million, an influx unprecedented since the nineteenth century. This has compelled both locals and migrants to (re)think their Chinese-ness. Simultaneously, the state produces its hegemonic version of Chinese-ness with Mandarin as an important signifier. This discourse has been increasingly challenged by residents with the advent of the internet as a platform for alternative views. This article suggests that by endorsing Singaporean state discourse that defines Chinese authenticity as Mandarin proficiency, Chinese migrants deride Chinese-Singaporeans as *less* Chinese, and therein *less* Singaporean. In defence, Chinese-Singaporeans appear to present a united front by deriding Chinese migrants' deficiency in the English language. I argue that, to the contrary, Chinese-Singaporeans' online narratives show fragmentation within the group.

Keywords

Introduction

In an era of rapid globalisation, there appears to be decreased interest in studying notions of national belonging. Indeed, there are even scholars who have claimed the end of the nation-state.[1] Yet there remain scholars who suggest that belonging, whether cultural or national, remains key to defining oneself.[2] While questions of belonging are often discussed in relation to migrants, I deviate from this to direct my attention first and foremost at the ethnic majority in Singapore. Juxtaposed against a backdrop of migration, Chinese-Singaporeans form 'the unmarked category against which "others" within the national territory are defined'.[3] In other words, the position of the Chinese-Singaporean is often taken for granted and unquestioned relative to its migrant counterparts. Through examining the online narratives of both mainland Chinese migrants and Chinese-Singaporeans, I argue that the Mandarin language has emerged as a key signifier of Chinese-Singaporean identity. Chinese-Singaporeans' weak Mandarin proficiency, as derided by mainland Chinese migrants, is seen to render them *less* Chinese and therein *less* Singaporean. In defence, Chinese-Singaporeans appear to present a united front by deriding Chinese migrants' deficiency in the English language. I argue that, to the contrary, Chinese-Singaporeans' online narratives show fragmentation within the group.

Michael Skey suggests that there is an important link 'between recognition and belonging and the unequal relations of power that exist in the attribution and acceptance of identity claims'.[4] He argues that one's level of national belonging is dependent on the judgements and (re)actions of others. Those who are recognised as belonging are able to access in-group benefits as well as possess a more settled sense of identity. More importantly, they are able to judge the status of the Other. In other words, recognition of one's belonging acts as a way to anchor one's subjective belonging—offering 'a key sense of material and ontological security'.[5] This has often been overlooked by extant literature on migration where belonging is predominantly discussed with regards to the integration of migrants.

While English-ness was a key referent to British national identity,[6] Singapore as a 'sociocultural hybrid' has meant that Singaporean national identity cannot be defined in an essentialist or positive sense.[7] This has led Peidong Yang to conclude that foreigners 'unwittingly constitute a relative and negative solution to Singapore's

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1   Ken'ichi Ōmae, *The End of the Nation State: The Rise of Regional Economies*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1995; Jean-Marie Guehenno, *The End of the Nation-state*, trans. Victoria Elliott, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1995.

2   Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*, Routledge, New York and London, 2012; Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*, Duke University Press, Durham, NIC, 1999; Caroline B. Brettell, 'Introduction: Global Spaces/Local Places: Transnationalism, Diaspora, and the Meaning of Home', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2006, pp. 327–34.

3   Michael Skey, '"A Sense of Where You Belong in the World': National Belonging, Ontological Security and the Status of the Ethnic Majority in England', *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2010, pp. 715–33.

4   Ibid., p. 719.

5   Ibid., p. 715.

6   Ibid.

7   Peidong Yang, '"Authenticity" and "Foreign Talent" in Singapore: The Relative and Negative Logic of National Identity', *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, vol. 29, 2014, pp. 408–37.

national identity problem'.[8] At the same time, the Singaporean identity is one that precludes the 'authenticity' of one's 'race'. Yang puts it aptly:

Appeals to authenticity based on cultural nostalgia or atavism threaten to unravel the precarious unity of the Singapore nation. Each movement of nostalgic imagination of cultural continuity with the past inevitably leads to a 'home' country or civilization that is not Singapore … the Confucian value discourse and in particular the 'Speak Mandarin Campaign'—which sought to revitalize the Chinese authenticity of Chinese Singaporeans— left Malays, Indians and other Singaporeans awkwardly unacknowledged.[9]

The state's appeal to Chinese authenticity, as I will show later, is mainly in the form of the Mandarin language, driven by the annual 'Speak Mandarin Campaign' that persists today. Instead of merely pointing out the problematic nature of the Singaporean identity, however, as Yang has done above, I aim to examine Chinese-Singaporeans' *response* to this instability in their identity—a response that may appear united but which, I argue, actually reveals fissures within the group.

This article aims to contribute to the debate in several ways. First, I aim to reorient the study of Chinese-ness. The destabilising of Chinese-ness as a concept is not new, but it has mostly been limited to contexts in the West. Although seminal work by such scholars such as Ien Ang and Ong Aihwa has been essential in understanding the constructions of Chinese-ness in the face of the West and by the West, its relevance is limited in non-Western fields.[10] Furthermore, while 'Chinese' migrants used to be lured to the more 'developed' Western economies, in recent decades there has also been an increasing trend of Chinese migrants heading to Asian destinations. This trend is under explored in academic literature.[11] Following Vasantkumar, I see Chinese-ness as processual rather than fixed.[12] As such, Chinese-ness is taken as cultural discourse that is 'not just imagined but authorized and institutionalized'.[13] The rhetoric of what Chinese-ness *is*, in this article, is held to be less important than the construction of its discourse.

Second, my approach aims to surpass methodological nationalism. As Peggy Levitt and B. Nadya Jaworsky argue, scholars often discuss migration with regards to established nation-state territories.[14] As such, the integration of immigrants is often portrayed as problematic—in contrast to the integration of 'a national people'. Such methodological nationalism often

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8   Ibid., p. 417.

9   Ibid.

10   Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West*, Routledge, London, 2005; Ong.

11   For exceptions, see Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Weiqiang Lin, 'Chinese Migration to Singapore: Discourses and Discontents in a Globalizing Nation-State', *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, vol. 22, 2013, pp. 31–54; Hong Liu, 'Beyond Co-Ethnicity: The Politics of Differentiating and Integrating New Immigrants in Singapore', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, no. 37, 2014, 1225–38.

12   Chris Vasantkumar, 'What Is This "Chinese" in Overseas Chinese? Sojourn Work and the Place of China's Minority Nationalities in Extraterritorial Chinese-ness', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 71, no. 2, 2012, pp. 423–46.

13   Allen Chun, 'Fuck Chineseness: On the Ambiguities of Ethnicity as Culture as Identity', *Boundary 2*, 1996, p. 114.

14   Peggy Levitt and B.Nadya Jaworsky, 'Transnational Migration Studies: Past Developments and Future Trends', *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 33, 2007, pp. 129–56.

assumes cultural 'certainties' of a nation-state are disrupted by new migrants, neglecting to see that the 'national' can be problematic in itself. Instead of following dominant theories about the sense of belonging among a national people when juxtaposed against the migrant, I argue instead that the already existent fissures among the 'national' are revived through confrontations with migrants. Indeed, I show that Chinese-Singaporeans' sense of national belonging is constantly in flux and contingent on their Chinese-ness—an unstable identity heightened by the presence of co-ethnics.

Finally, the case study of Singapore as used in this article is both unique and universal.[15] It is unique because of its particular context and as the only state outside Greater China with a predominantly Chinese population. Yet, it is also universal, aptly described by Amanda Wise as 'the future of cities'[16] and as a highly globalised metropolis with multiple flows of migrant labour.[17] A study of its migration context thus hold potential for analyses of other cities in the world that can anticipate or already have similar flows of migration.

In this article, I first discuss the methodology used in studying identity on the internet. Subsequently, I show the online discourses circulated by mainland Chinese migrants on Chinese-Singaporeans' Mandarin proficiency. I demonstrate that by endorsing Singaporean state discourses that Mandarin proficiency equates to being Chinese, Chinese migrants are able to accuse Chinese-Singaporeans of being *less* Chinese. Second, I show Chinese-Singaporeans' reactions to mainland Chinese migrants' derision. While their responses may appear united in being defensive of local language use, Chinese-Singaporeans' online narratives actually show fragmentation within the group.

Studying authenticity on the internet

This article stems from my PhD project on Chinese-Singaporeans' and mainland Chinese migrants' social imaginaries of Chinese-ness, for which I conducted fieldwork in Singapore from late 2013 to mid 2014. My fieldwork was based on mixed methods, which included in-depth interviews, participant and non-participant observations, documents research and social media research.

Here, I focus on social media research that spanned several media outlets including state media websites, online forums and social media sites such as You Tube and Facebook. Digital ethnography was first conceived when online narratives of locals and migrants were rife, easily accessible and often openly critical of the Singapore government. The method took into account Singapore's status as a tech-savvy state where household access to internet in 2015 was 88 per cent, a high internet penetration rate that easily rivals other developed states.[18] In fact, the wide usage of the internet was seen by many as the reason for the local opposition's large gains in the 2006 and 2011 elections.[19] There is substantially more surveillance of the online

15   Liu, p. 1225.

16   Amanda Wise, 'Becoming Cosmopolitan: Encountering Difference in a City of Mobile Labour'. Paper presented at the Race, Mobility and Imperial Networks Conference, Melbourne, 9–11 November 2015.

17   Selvaraj Velayutham, *Responding to Globalization: Nation, Culture, and Identity in Singapore*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 2007.

18   Infocomm Media Development Authority of Singapore, 'Infocomm Usage-Households and Individuals', www.imda.gov.sg

19   Terence Lee and Cornelius Kan, 'Blogospheric Pressures in Singapore: Internet Discourses and the 2006 General Election', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, vol. 23, 2009, pp. 871–86.

sphere now, but the internet remains the best site to locate narratives that would not normally surface publicly in a heavily-regulated state like Singapore. [20]

China is a tech-savvy state as well and boasts of having the highest number of internet users in the world.[21] The prevalence of internet use among the Chinese and specifically among Chinese migrants was established in Wenli Chen and Alfred Siu Kay Choi's study of computer-mediated social support in Singapore. Out of a total of 710 respondents, the study found 76.7 per cent were internet users.[22] This corresponds with international research that shows the high prevalence of migrants' use of the internet for varied purposes such as social networking and reinforcing identity and belonging.[23] My research certainly reflected these trends. While access to the internet is still considered a privilege for many across the world, the level of internet access I have encountered in my research was very high across the classes of migrants, from banking professionals to construction workers. This corresponds to the fact that those who migrate are often not the poorest or least resourceful members of a country's population.

All the data was collected within a ten-year period, from 2005 to 2015, matching the unprecedented immigration growth in Singapore in the twenty-first century.[24] Chinese migrants' views were also researched from websites dedicated to Chinese migrants in Singapore. These were usually published in Mandarin and translated by me. All names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect users' privacy. All narratives used in this article were sourced according to content. I did a Mandarin search for Chinese migrants' narratives on google.com.sg, focusing on content related to Chinese-Singaporeans' use of Mandarin. Chinese-Singaporeans' narratives were sourced through searching in English on google.com.sg for content related to Chinese migrants and Mandarin. Such data is easily accessible in popular forums as the issue of migrants, especially Chinese migrants, has been a hot topic in the recent decade.

Chinese migrants' quotes as used in this article were taken from a Chinese website where Singapore's Speak Mandarin Campaign was discussed by many Chinese migrants residing in Singapore (bbs.tianya.com), and from a website dedicated to Chinese migrants residing in Singapore (bbs.sgcn.com). The quotes were chosen from these two websites based on the forum thread. Both threads were created with specific headings to address the issue of Mandarin use by Chinese-Singaporeans—the theme this article is exploring. Chinese migrants' often negative opinions about Chinese-Singaporeans' use of Mandarin was confirmed by my interview data and was thereafter explored further through online research.

20   See Josephine Yee Hui Yip, 'The Singapore Law Review: Internet Regulation a Myth in Singapore?', 2013, http://www.singaporelawreview.org/2013/11/internet-regulation-a-myth-in-singapore/#_ftn6; Tessa Wong, 'MDA Rolls out Licence Scheme for News Websites', *The Straits Times*, 28 May 2013, http://www.straitstimes.com/breaking-news/singapore/story/new-licensing-scheme-news-websites-reach-50000-people-month-20130528

21   Internet Live stats, 'China Internet Users—Internet Live Stats', 2015, http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/china/

22   Wenli Chen and Alfred Siu Kay Choi, 'Internet and Social Support among Chinese Migrants in Singapore', *New Media & Society*, vol. 13, 2011, pp. 1067–84.

23   Brenda Chan, 'Imagining the Homeland: The Internet and Diasporic Discourse of Nationalism', *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 29, 2005, pp. 336–68; Harry H. Hiller and Tara M. Franz, 'New Ties, Old Ties and Lost Ties: The Use of the Internet in Diaspora', *New Media & Society*, vol. 6, 2004, pp. 731–52.

24   Brenda Yeoh and Weiqiang Lin, 'Rapid Growth in Singapore's Immigrant Population Brings Policy Challenges', Migration Policy Institute, 3 April 2012, http://www.migrationpolicy.org/

The identity of those posting as Chinese migrants residing in Singapore was inferred from the content of their posts, such as indications their workplace was in Singapore and discussion of regular hangouts in Singapore, and from their online profiles which often stated their place of residence as Singapore and even the number of years they had lived there.

The data from Chinese-Singaporeans used in this article were sourced from websites popularly used by locals such as Facebook, SG Forums and YouTube. Chinese-Singaporeans' quotes used in this article were all sourced from viral threads that were widely circulated, proving the interest they created. The identity of the posters as Chinese-Singaporeans was inferred from the contents of their posts and their online profiles. The use of Singlish (with which the author is familiar) by the users was especially revealing of their identity as Singaporeans. The common blending of Mandarin characters into their posts also indicated Chinese-Singaporean identity.

The internet is commonly acknowledged as an excellent site for ethnography; however, concerns around authenticity remain.[25] How can one be really sure that the online user is Chinese-Singaporean, Chinese or a migrant? But the issue of authenticity is as much a problem offline. Christine Hine argues that instead of taking authenticity as a problem to be resolved before analysis can take place, 'it would be more fruitful to place authenticity in cyberspace as a topic at the heart of the analysis'.[26] This is the position I have taken. Even if the users I quote are not Chinese, Chinese-Singaporeans or migrants as claimed, their postings together present the ideals and norms of (Chinese) authenticity. The internet as a site of cultural reproduction means it is also a site of performance; 'talking' about Chinese language enables one to perform one's authenticity.[27] Certainly, while Frederick Barth may have argued that the dynamics of social boundaries are more significant than cultural traits in asserting one's identity, I suggest that online, where social boundaries may not be as clear-cut, *the social* use of cultural traits to assert difference gains importance.[28] In other words, as well as complementing my offline research, digital ethnography has the potential to locate more intricately how cultural traits are used socially to establish one's authenticity or the Other's lack thereof. With this in mind, the narratives that were chosen had to meet three criteria. As well as being atypical of the comments on the forums and matching my offline fieldwork observations, it had to reflect the issue of (Chinese) authenticity.

'I am more Chinese than you': Chinese-ness as Mandarin?

Singapore has the highest proportion of foreign workers in Asia, where its 3.11 million-strong workforce includes 1.11 million non-residents.[29] The large presence of migrant workers in the small city-state has increased the insecurities of locals; many complain that migrant workers have contributed to pushing up property prices, overwhelming public transport

25 Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*, Sage, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 2000; Daniel Miller and Don Slater, *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*, Berg, Oxford, 2000.

26 Hine, p. 49.

27 Neil Blair Christensen, *Inuit in Cyberspace: Embedding Offline, Identities Online*, Museum Tusculanum Press, 2003, p. 72

28 Frederick Barth, 'Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference', Little Brown, Boston, 1969.

29 Yeoh and Lin, 'Chinese Migration to Singapore', pp. 31–54.

and overcrowding an already congested city. The sensitive issue of immigration is further compounded by the fact that most newly arrived immigrants are from mainland China, a group that has grown from several thousand to nearly a million in the last two decades.[30] This is out of a total resident population of 5.4 million. Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Shirlena Huang suggest 'the anxieties that multiply in the contact zones of the city between "self" and "migrant other" do not only coalesce around lines that divide one from the other, but are also heightened by notions of proximity, similarity, and substitutability'.[31] The similarities shared by the Chinese migrants and Chinese-Singaporeans are in constant interaction with the differences. This has been reflected in several recent events, including a car accident in 2012 involving a Ferrari driven by a rich Chinese national that crashed into a local taxi, killing both drivers and the taxi's passenger. The incident incited severe criticism of rich Chinese nationals by locals in Singapore.[32] The vitriol against Chinese migrants also flared later the same year, when Chinese migrant bus drivers organised a strike—Singapore's first in twenty-five years—to protest against welfare and wage differences.[33]

At the heart of importing large number of Chinese migrants is the Singaporean state's desire to maintain an ethnic Chinese majority and its imaginary of Chinese-ness.[34] The latter is pragmatic. 'Chinese-ness' and its interchangeability with 'Asian values' was first used as an administrative tool in the newly independent Singapore. More recently, it has been used to capitalise on China as a booming economy. Chinese-ness has traditionally been framed in Singapore through the idea of China as 'the motherland', with Mandarin language an important signifier.[35]

A product of colonialism, the pragmatic Singaporean state adopted English as its working language upon independence. Mandarin, Tamil and Malay took on the status of 'Mother languages', or second languages, still mandatorily taught, as *the* language of each majority 'race': Chinese, Indian and Malay. This is despite the diverse languages actually used by the population. A 1957 census showed that 39.8 per cent of Singaporean Chinese identified Hokkien as their mother-tongue, 22.6 per cent Teochew, 20 per cent Cantonese, 6.8 per cent Hainannese and 6.1 per cent Hakka, while the rest spoke other Chinese dialects.[36] By 1990, due to the success of the state's attempts to marginalise dialects in favour of Mandarin, the social use of dialects among Chinese Singaporeans had declined to 50.3 per cent. By 2000,

30   Ibid.

31   Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Shirlena Huang, 'Sexualised Politics of Proximities among Female Transnational Migrants in Singapore', *Population, Space and Place*, vol.16, 2010, pp. 37–49.

32   Andrew Jacobs, 'In Singapore, Vitriol Against Newcomers from Mainland China', 26 July 2012, http:// www.nytimes.com/2012/07/27/world/asia/in-singapore-vitriol-against-newcomers-from-mainland-china. html

33   Haroon Siddique, 'Singapore's First Strike in 25 Years Shines Spotlight on Racial Tensions', *The Guardian*, 28 November 2012, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/28/chinese-bus-drivers-strike-singapore

34   Chua Beng Huat, 'Being Chinese under Official Multiculturalism in Singapore', *Asian Ethnicity* 10, no. 3, 2009, pp. 239–50.

35   Eugene K.B. Tan, 'Re-Engaging Chineseness: Political, Economic and Cultural Imperatives of Nation-Building in Singapore', *The China Quarterly*, vol. 175, 2003, pp. 751–74.

36   Wendy Bokhorst-Heng, 'Singapore's Speak Mandarin Campaign: Language Ideological Debates in the Imagining of the Nation', *Language Ideological Debates,* 1999, pp. 235–65.

dialect use had shrunk further to 30.7 per cent.[37] The state's language policies not only forced the 'unification' of various Chinese dialect groups under the false mother tongue of Mandarin, they also set one language for each 'race' as defined by the state. In this manner, language has been framed as inextricable from one's 'race' since independence.

By forcibly unifying the heterogeneous Chinese Singaporean population under the rubric of Mandarin, the state achieved ease of administration, ethnic management and even created what it saw as a bulwark against Westernisation. Mandarin was championed as the anchor to cultural values for the Chinese Singaporean population, as 'emotionally acceptable',[38] and as cultural capital, without which Chinese Singaporeans 'would not only be socially fragmented but also emotionally disadvantaged and psychologically disconnected from a sense of history and heritage'.[39] Mandarin's cultural capital gradually evolved into a focus on its economic capital. The state's instrumentalism was increasingly apparent as calls were made to take advantage of the rise of China as an economic powerhouse. Singapore's founding father Lee Kuan Yew, for example, called for the need to exploit 'network capitalism' to its fullest in obtaining economic opportunities in China.[40] Speaking Mandarin is not just culturally 'right', it is now also seen as economically strategic. The state's agenda has since translated into numerous policies, including shifting the focus of the Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC), in place since 1979 and initially designed to stop the Chinese Singaporean population from speaking dialects, to encourage Chinese Singaporeans to speak 'standard' Mandarin—that is, Mandarin as used on the Chinese mainland.

The Speak Mandarin Campaign may be considered a failure, as Chinese-Singaporeans' Mandarin abilities are commonly known to be mediocre at best. Yet Chinese migrants endorse state discourses that define Chinese-ness as the ability to master Mandarin.[41] Chinese-Singaporeans' weak Mandarin proficiency is then taken as proof of Chinese-Singaporeans' *less* Chinese-ness. This can be seen in the comments discussed below, sourced from online forums dedicated to Chinese migrants living in Singapore (bbs.sgcn.com). The post replicated an article from a Singaporean newspaper that discussed how some Singaporeans feel that speaking Mandarin in public displays one's 'low *suzhi*' (low quality). The post was titled 'Singapore: Speaking Mandarin in public is considered "low *suzhi*", my God!':

> **I wish Singaporeans will quit speaking Mandarin, They insult the English when they speak English, they insult the Chinese even more when they speak Mandarin. While both are insulting, as a Chinese patriot, I prefer that they insult the Americans and British. This small country … even the Singaporeans that originate from Mandarin-speaking families pretends to be bad at Mandarin and never speak it. They will even take pride in that …[42]**

37   Jean Michel Montsion, 'Chinese Ethnicities in Neoliberal Singapore? State Designs and Dialect (Ical) Struggles of Community Associations', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2013, pp. 1–19.

38   Lionel Wee and Wendy D. Bokhorst-Heng, 'Language Policy and Nationalist Ideology: Statal Narratives in Singapore', *Multilingua*, vol. 24, 2005, pp. 159–83.

39   Peter Teo, 'Mandarinising Singapore: A Critical Analysis of Slogans in Singapore's "Speak Mandarin" Campaign', *Critical Discourse Studies*, vol. 2, 2005, pp. 121–42.

40   Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Katie D. Willis. '"Singapore Unlimited"?: Transnational Elites and Negotiations of Social Identity in the Regionalization Process,' *Asian and Pacific migration journal* 14, nos 1–2, 2005, p. 80.

41   Teo, pp. 121–42.

42   '天涯社区，'在新加坡的公共场合讲华文竟然是素质低下的表现，MY GOD!(转载)', 2009, <bbs.tianya.cn>.

> The problem is when they claim they are 'Chinese' but is ashamed of the Chinese language. They keep on emphasizing that they are 'Chinese', while proudly saying, 'sorry, my Chinese is very bad leh'… I once saw a kid tell his mother in Singlish [note: Singaporean English], 'Mummy, I don't know Chinese leh'. I was shocked.[43]

The following comment originated from a discussion with a post titled, 'Singapore's Speak Mandarin Campaign satire', in which a user posted a satirical newspaper article on the Speak Mandarin Campaign. Discussion ensued to discuss the campaign's success.

> The [Speak Mandarin] campaign may have been around for 30 years but it is in my personal opinion, a failure. You can try grabbing any young Chinese Singaporeans on the streets of Orchard Road [shopping district in Singapore] today and ask him or her to converse with you in Mandarin that is not mixed with English and dialects—I doubt few will be able to fulfil your request. Even Mandarin college debates in Singapore send in students from mainland China these days. Hahaha.[44]

Indeed, it can be seen that language is a site of struggle. As Desmond Wee argued:

> Language thus, extends into an arena where it is not only a way to present the 'who we are', as it is also a means for the Other to project their assumptions on the way 'we must be' or the way 'it is supposed to be'.[45]

Indeed, by using language, and specifically Mandarin, as a benchmark, Chinese migrants judge Chinese-Singaporeans, who it is assumed *should* know Mandarin but do not. Their expectations clearly fall in line with the Singapore state's discourse of 'Chinese is Mandarin'. By using the stereotype of a Chinese-Singaporean with weak Mandarin proficiency, the commentator reaffirms his or her Chinese-ness. In other words, by claiming Chinese-Singaporeans have weak Mandarin proficiency, mainland Chinese migrants are saying they have strong Mandarin proficiency, therein being *more* Chinese than Chinese-Singaporeans. Since Mandarin is defined by the state as a key signifier of Chinese-Singaporean identity, Chinese-Singaporeans' weak Mandarin proficiency, as derided by mainland Chinese migrants, is seen to render them not only *less* Chinese but also *less* Singaporean. Coming back to Skey who argues that one's level of national belonging is dependent on the judgements and (re) actions of others, Chinese-Singaporeans' sense of belonging is threatened in their *lesser* Chinese-ness and Chinese-Singaporean-ness.[46]

'We are a different, better kind of Chinese'

Chinese-Singaporeans are certainly aware of discourses circulated among mainland Chinese migrants about their weak Mandarin proficiency. This awareness is coupled with what is

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43   Ibid.

44   '新加坡讲华语运动搞笑报导', 2009, <bbs.sgcn.com>.

45   Desmond Wee, 'Singapore Language Enhancer: Identity Included', *Language and Intercultural Communication*, vol. 9, 2009, pp. 15–23.

46   Skey, p. 719.

perceived as mainland Chinese migrants' frequent requests for locals to speak Mandarin to them. This has resulted in such comments online as:

> excuse me, not all chinese sporeans [Singaporeans] speak mandarin fluently. We prefer to speak in english and are very comfortable with our chinese identity. We dont need mandarin to make us more chinese.[47]

> Why sud [should] Singaporeans speak Mandarin so clearly all the time? It's our culture. It's the same as not speaking perfect english when u are buying Char Kway Teow (a local delicacy) frm [from] an uncle. The PRCs[48] who clean toilets, what for speak so clearly to them? Just clean the toilets will ya? I clean Public toilets before, no big deal, QUIT BITCHING![49]

> not All Chinese in China can speak mandarins as well. Nothing wrong with Chinese not able to speak mandarins. The mother tongue of Chinese is dialect (be it hokkien, teochew etc etc depending on one's father). it is only a shame when the Chinese cannot speaks his or her mother tongue[50]

> In the face of facts, there are many Chinese nationals online who are speechless and unable to address the discussion, resorting to racial and personal attacks … If the other is an overseas Chinese who doesn't know Mandarin, they curse him as 'er mao zi' [derogatory term for Chinese traitors who work for Caucasians]. If the other is an overseas Chinese who knows Mandarin, they curse that he has forgotten his ancestors … There is no traditional Chinese culture in you but your ancestors' hybrid culture. This is the reason why no matter where you go, you defecate and pee everywhere; create trouble and is a disgrace. In terms of nationality, you who hold the PRC passport are Chinese; in terms of ethnicity, you are not Chinese … You are not qualified to chastise overseas Chinese who are the real Chinese. The ancestors of Singaporeans, Hongkongers, and the Taiwanese ancestors are the orthodox Chinese.[51]

> Anyone who can't speak simple English can't work [as] frontline [staff] at all!! I'm a spore [Singaporean] Chinese n took Chinese as 2nd language but I don't understand all these PRCs Chinese/ mandarin still!! PRCs Chinese speak with tongue twirled n twisted with high pitch ... Only PRCs understand their own breed![52]

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47   'I am not PRC', My Singapore News, http://mysingaporenews.blogspot.com.au/2012/06/i-am-not-prc.html

48   'PRC' is a term used colloquially in Singapore, often derogatorily, to refer to citizens of the People's Republic of China.

49   'PRC Chinese Flaming Singaporeans On Forum', 4 March 2009, http://sgforums.com/forums/1390/topics/350287

50   MalaysianKaki News, 6 July 2014, https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=555315377912494&id=266048183505883

51   '中国人，移民新加坡前必读！否则后悔莫及!', 10 Feb 2012, <youtube.com>

52   'Malay Abang Told to Learn Chinese Because PRC Waitress Spoke no English', 23 October 2015, https://m.facebook.com/allsgstuff/posts/

As can be seen, Chinese-Singaporeans defend their weak Mandarin proficiency by suggesting speaking the language well does not equate to being Chinese. In other words, Chinese-Singaporeans are attempting to broaden the definitions of Chinese-ness, *outside* the Mandarin signifier. Other languages such as English, dialects and even a Singaporean version of Mandarin are all taken to be better than mainland Chinese migrants' Mandarin. The message is clear—Chinese-Singaporeans' defences stated here all suggest they are a *different kind of Chinese, and a better kind* from the mainland Chinese migrants, whether they can speak Mandarin or not. As Wacquant argued, 'linguistic relations are always relations of power *(rapports de force)*'.[53] Whether it is to be *more* Chinese or a *different, better* kind of Chinese, Mandarin has become the heart of the battle between mainland Chinese migrants and Chinese-Singaporeans. But even as Chinese-Singaporeans' vitriol against Chinese migrants may appear to present a united front, one that is posited by many scholars as presenting a common sense of belonging, I argue that language is actually proving to further split the heterogeneous Chinese-Singaporean population.[54] By having to ceaselessly defend themselves against the charge of speaking 'poor Mandarin', Chinese-Singaporeans have mostly taken up two stances: first, arguing there is a Singapore brand of Mandarin; second, criticising Chinese migrants for not being able to speak English. They are both, however, weak stances. A Singaporean style of Mandarin is not endorsed by the state; rather, the state openly calls for 'standardised' Mandarin use (that is, Mandarin as used in mainland China). Moreover, there are many Chinese-Singaporeans who cannot or do not speak Mandarin. This is especially true of younger generations who were raised in predominantly English-speaking environments, a result of parents responding to state education policies that privilege English as a *lingua franca*.[55] This is in contrast to many of the older generations who may have been schooled in a Mandarin-based curriculum before the 1980s, even as English-curriculum schools proliferated after the state's independence.

Chinese-Singaporeans also often end up in conflicting positions when it comes to using English as a defence against Chinese migrants. This can be seen in instances where Chinese-Singaporeans who openly insist on speaking *only* English have been heavily condemned by fellow Chinese-Singaporeans, despite the reality that English has become the dominant language in most young Chinese-Singaporean families.[56] For example, one young Chinese-Singaporean posted on a local forum a piece titled 'I, a Singaporean Chinese refuse to speak Mandarin', which was quickly met with thirteen full pages of backlash, with netizens crying out that they 'feel sorry for his ancestors' and that he has lost his 'roots'.[57] Hence, while Chinese-Singaporeans are eager to declare they are a different kind of Chinese, many are still unable to escape state discourses that claim Mandarin proficiency equals Chinese-ness. As can be seen, whether Chinese-Singaporeans advocate for a Singaporean style of Mandarin or English against mainland Chinese migrant's criticisms depends on their generation and previous schooling. But demonising Chinese-Singaporeans who only speak English is not a

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53   Loic Wacquant, 'Toward a Reflexive Sociology a Workshop with Pierre Bourdieu', *Sociological Theory*, vol. 7, 1989, p. 26.

54   Yang, pp. 408–37; Catherine Gomes, 'Xenophobia Online: Unmasking Singaporean Attitudes Towards "Foreign Talent" Migrants', *Asian Ethnicity*, vol. 15, 2014, pp. 21–40.

55   Luke Lu, 'Can English Be a Singaporean Mother Tongue?', *Today Online*, 15 July 2013, http://www.todayonline.com/commentary/can-english-be-singaporean-mother-tongue

56   Ibid.

57   'I, a Singaporean Chinese Refuse to Speak Mandarin', 2010, <sgforums.com>.

new phenomenon. It is reminiscent of tensions that occurred between the Chinese-schooled and English-schooled Chinese-Singaporeans even before the state's independence, where those who spoke only English were cast as rootless and immoral.[58] Another line of tension also exists between Chinese-Singaporeans who advocate dialect use over Mandarin or even English. Many who still advocate dialect use are from older generations or from the minority of families in Singapore that still use dialect on a daily basis. These Chinese-Singaporeans resist state discourses that since the 1960s have used the Speak Mandarin Campaign to both ban and discourage the use of dialects, in favour of Mandarin.[59] Instead of holding Chinese-ness to Mandarin use, this group claims our 'real' mother tongues are dialects. There are likely to be few Chinese-Singaporeans of the younger generations that will even recall the battle for dialects that raged when Singapore was newly independent.

At the same time, the issue of class is clearly present. Because the state's education policies privilege the English language, it is perceived that the better-educated and better-waged will often have strong English language skills. In other words, English is highly associated with both economic capital and social elites in Singapore.[60] On the flipside, the lower-educated and the lower-waged are often perceived as having weaker English language proficiency and thriving more on dialects or Mandarin. As such, Chinese-Singaporeans who suggest mainland Chinese migrants should speak English instead of Mandarin perform the role of the *seemingly* better-educated and better-waged. This discourse places Mandarin speakers, mainland Chinese migrants and Mandarin-speaking Chinese migrants alike in the lower places of the class hierarchy. There is a hint of irony, however, when it comes to Chinese-Singaporeans who speak *excellent, 'standardised'* Mandarin—in contrast to the creole Mandarin or Singdarin (Singaporean-Mandarin) spoken by most.[61] This is the result of an elitist education policy. The first ten years of every child's compulsory education in Singapore must include the study of his or her mother tongue (for Chinese-Singaporeans, that is Mandarin), but the curriculum of a higher standard of Mandarin termed Higher Chinese is limited to only the top ten per cent of Chinese Singaporeans students in Singapore.[62] This is because of the state's claim that each person has a limited capacity for learning languages; thus legitimating their stance that Chinese Singaporeans should drop dialects in favour of Mandarin. As such, the 'burden' of learning higher standards of Mandarin, which are necessarily closer to the standards of *putonghua* used in China, should be taken on only by select elite students. The state's narrative is adamant that it is this elite group of effectively bilingual students who will become the next generation of cultural elites.[63] But even though mainland Chinese migrants speak excellent Mandarin, they are denied the top spots in the class hierarchy.

58   Kwok Kian-Woon, 'Chinese-Educated Intellectuals in Singapore: Marginality, Memory and Modernity', *Asian Journal of Social Science*, no. 29, 2001, pp. 495–519.

59   Bokhorst-Heng, pp. 235–65.

60   Rita Elaine Silver, 'The Discourse of Linguistic Capital: Language and Economic Policy Planning in Singapore', *Language Policy*, no. 4, 2005, pp. 47–66.

61   'What about Singdarin? (Singaporean-Mandarin)', 18 April 2012, http://limpehft.blogspot.com.au/

62   Lionel Wee and Wendy D. Bokhorst-Heng, 'Language Policy and Nationalist Ideology: Statal Narratives in Singapore', *Multilingua*, vol. 24, 2005, pp. 159–83.

63   Ibid.

Indeed, it can be argued that even if Chinese migrants are effectively bilingual in English and Mandarin, they may still, in the eyes of Singaporeans, be unfit for the top spots in the class hierarchy. To return to the Chinese-Singaporeans' comments above, Chinese-Singaporeans' dominant images of mainland Chinese migrants are associated with jobs such as 'toilet cleaners' and those who 'defecate and pee everywhere; create trouble and is [*sic*] a disgrace'. These are just two of several discourses where mainland Chinese migrants, despite the reality, are associated with the developing status of their country, China; as backward and of a lower class in general.[64]

Conclusion

This article has shown that by endorsing Singaporean state discourse that Mandarin proficiency equates to Chinese-ness, Chinese migrants are able to deride Chinese-Singaporeans as *less* Chinese. Since the state defines Chinese-ness as integral to the Chinese-Singaporean identity, being *less* Chinese necessarily renders the Chinese-Singaporean *less* Singaporean. The instability and flux of the Chinese-Singaporean identity, while already present, has been heightened in confrontation with Chinese migrants. In response, Chinese-Singaporeans have appeared to be united in their defence of local language use, such as English, dialects or Singdarin. However, a closer analysis reveals that Chinese-Singaporeans' online narratives show fissures within the group; fissures that have been revived along the lines of generation, educational background and class. Such an analysis not only destabilises Chinese-ness, it also brings into question the often taken-for-granted status of the 'national'. In particular, the case study of Singapore is unique as the only state outside Greater China with a predominantly Chinese population. This has allowed for the destabilising of Chinese-ness as situated in co-ethnic interaction. At the same time, it is also universal as a globalised city with multiple flows of migrants. A study of its migration context can shed light on future analyses of other cities in the world that can anticipate or already have comparable flows of migration.

About the author

Sylvia Ang is a recent PhD graduate from the department of Anthropology and Development Studies at the University of Melbourne. She has a Masters in Development Studies from the same university and a BA (Political Science) from the National University of Singapore. She has recently published 'Chinese Migrant Women as Boundary Markers in Singapore: Unrespectable, Un-middle-class and Un-Chinese' in *Gender, Place and Culture*. Her current research interests are mobility and transnationalism, the intersection of ethnicity, gender and class, and local modernities.

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64   See Sylvia Ang, 'Chinese Migrant Women as Boundary Markers in Singapore: Unrespectable, Un-middle-class and Un-Chinese', *Gender, Place & Culture,* vol. 23, no. 12, 2016, pp. 1–14.

Ang, S., 'Chinese Migrant Women as Boundary Markers in Singapore: Unrespectable, Un-middle-class and Un-Chinese', *Gender, Place & Culture*, vol. 23, no. 12, 2016, pp. 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2016.1262828

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