

More learning Chinese dialects to connect with seniors or embrace cultural identity

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SINGAPORE - Accountant Teo Seok Kheng has been taking Hokkien lessons since January last year (2021).

She has completed basic and intermediate lessons organised by the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan Cultural Academy on Wednesday nights and found it easier to communicate with elderly residents in Dawson, as part of her volunteer work with non-profit group My Community.

Ms Teo, 56, says the lessons have also helped her embrace her cultural roots.

"When I entered primary school, my family switched to speaking Mandarin from Hokkien so that I could do well in school. Even my grandmother struggled to pick up Mandarin for her grandchildren's sake," she said.

"It's now time to reconnect with my cultural identity, and I have also started speaking Hokkien with my father again, after all these years."

Ms Teo is one of a growing number of Singaporeans who are boosting their proficiency in Chinese dialects to connect with the elderly, embrace their cultural identity, or perform better at work.

On Saturday (March 26), the National Heritage Board held the first of its [Discover Through Dialects: Kreta Ayer Heritage Tours](#) in Cantonese, to make the history and heritage of the area more accessible to seniors as well as those speaking dialects.

The tours will also be conducted by volunteer guides in Hokkien and Teochew in coming months.

The pandemic has also triggered interest in picking up dialects, say language schools and clan associations which have seen rising demand for classes.

Former investment banker Eugene Lee and his wife Ski Yeo, both 37, report a surge in people aged from nine to 60s at their school LearnDialect.sg, since Covid-19 began. People began to realise the importance of being able to connect with the vulnerable elderly who can understand only dialects.

Both started the school in 2018 after volunteering at a nursing home, where they saw many dialect-speaking seniors neglected due to language barriers. They offer Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese workshops taught in English, and produce free online resources in different dialects. The school charges \$199 for two four-hour sessions.

About 70 per cent of their learners are aged below 40, and around 25 per cent are non-Chinese. More professionals in the public, medical and social sectors are joining classes too to better serve dialect-speaking individuals.

One of them is a Malay nurse who wants to be known only as Ms Noraine.

The 26-year-old who attended Hokkien lessons at LearnDialect.sg said: "Now I can make small talk with my Hokkien patients and also make them smile. I think they are happier when they see me try to speak Hokkien.

"Last time, I could only say 'jiak ba beh' (have you eaten?), but now I can give them simple instructions, or ask about their family and their feelings in Hokkien."

Hokkien is the dominant dialect in Singapore, followed by Teochew and Cantonese.

Mr Chris Driver, director of studies with Inlingua School of Languages, said in the last five years it has started offering dialect courses to healthcare workers, including those from Myanmar and the Philippines. Community support organisations serving the elderly have also registered students.

The school, which offers classes in 25 languages around the world, conducts courses in Cantonese, Hokkien and Teochew. It has a total of about 100 students for its dialect courses a year. The cost is \$500 per person for a 30-hour basic course.

Clan associations have also seen healthy demand for dialect classes.

Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan has three Teochew classes currently for ballads and proverbs, elementary and intermediate. Its chief executive secretary, Ms Tan Siew Kiang, said interest is high, especially for elementary class.

Owing to the ongoing pandemic, it can take in only a maximum of 18 persons per class. It charges \$60 for members and \$75 for non-members for six lessons per class.

The Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan Cultural Academy, which has been conducting conversational Hokkien lessons since 2016, has seen an upward trend of about 5 to 10 per cent of people keen on learning the dialect over the years.

It has about six intakes per year with an average of 10 to 15 students in each class. They are mostly in their 20s to 50s, with 10 to 15 per cent non-Chinese.

The course fee is \$180 for four lessons. Its members get a 10 per cent discount.

Many parents are also sending their young children to the academy's Hokkien immersion camps during school holidays.

Mr Jeremiah Soh, its publicity and marketing manager, said local movies featuring dialect dialogues and the Covid-19 campaign advertisements showcasing various dialects have generated some interest.

Recent local dialect dramas such as "Ho Seh Bo" and "I Want To Be A Towkay", which were collaborations between the Ministry of Communications and Information and Mediacorp, helped to keep seniors updated on the latest government initiatives. The main characters speak Mandarin, as well as Hokkien, Teochew or Cantonese. There are also some scenes where Hainanese and Hakka can be heard.

The Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre (SCCC) has also been introducing some dialect content, such as in its SINGAPO(ren) permanent exhibition and its One of Us video series and exhibition.

Mr Low Sze Wee, chief executive officer of SCCC, said: "One of the reasons why our local Chinese culture is so distinctive is due to the co-existence and interactions among different Chinese dialect groups on our small island over the past 200 years. Hence, SCCC uses different platforms to highlight the contributions and interactions of our five major dialect groups."

According to Singapore's Census of Population 2020 (Census 2020) released by the Department of Statistics in June 2021, [English overtook Mandarin as the most used language at home for the Chinese ethnic group](#) - with a proportion of 47.6 per cent in 2020.

The use of Mandarin as the most frequently spoken language was 40.2 per cent in 2020. Chinese dialects accounted for 11.8 per cent, down from 19.2 per cent in 2010.

About 150,000 households were surveyed for the Census 2020.

In response to The Straits Times' queries, the Promote Mandarin Council said the Speak Mandarin Campaign, which started in 1979, encourages Singaporean Chinese to embrace the use of Mandarin in their daily lives, and enjoy an appreciation for their Singaporean Chinese culture and heritage.