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This petition is also endorsed by many individuals from outside the Stanford community. If you are not affiliated with Stanford and would like to support our cause, please select "Non-affiliated" in the Google Form. Thank you, Team Cantonese

Dear Provost Persis Drell,

As members of the Stanford community, we wish to express our deep concern and disappointment at the decision to eliminate the Cantonese language program at Stanford. This popular program has expanded to include different proficiency levels since its inception in 1997 and enjoyed steady enrollment thus far. The decision to terminate the contract of the sole Cantonese lecturer on campus, Dr. Sik Lee Dennig, effectively erases the program. Moreover, we strongly believe that Stanford University has a historical obligation to the Cantonese community because its foundation was built on the backs of Cantonese migrant workers. Stanford University has a moral duty to continue Cantonese language education and to uphold its commitment to diversity and inclusion. We urge you to rescind the Language Center's decision and recommit Stanford to its Cantonese language program.

Stanford must continue its Cantonese program for the following reasons:

1. Eliminating the Cantonese language program is inconsistent with values of diversity, equity, and inclusion.
2. Without the sacrifices of Cantonese Railroad Workers, Stanford would not exist as we know it today.
3. Chinese people are not a monolithic group, and Cantonese is widely used across the Chinese diaspora.
4. Cantonese language is vital to cutting-edge, transnational research and cultural exchange at Stanford.
5. Stanford's Cantonese language program has changed students' lives for over twenty years.

We request that Stanford University make these institutional commitments to Cantonese:

1. Guarantee a Cantonese language program with at least 4 course offerings per quarter.
2. Allow Cantonese courses to fulfill the language requirement by including reading and writing.
3. Invest in the long-term viability of the Cantonese program through a permanent full-time instructor position that is compensated with salary, benefits, and protections.

The Undersigned,

1793 Stanford community members: 761 Alumni, 573 Undergraduate students, 359 Graduate students, 24 Postdoctoral fellows, 61 Staff, 39 Faculty.

This letter is also endorsed by 2240 non-affiliated signatories, including 376 educators or researchers in Asian or Asian-American studies, and 593 professionals at community organizations serving Asians or Asian-Americans.

Stanford must continue its Cantonese program for the following reasons:

1. Eliminating the Cantonese language program is inconsistent with values of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

According to [your Diversity Statement as Provost](#), IDEAL values (inclusion, diversity, equity, and access in learning) constitute the core of the university's mission. Chinese Americans in the US have been traditionally denied access to Cantonese language education and for some of us Stanford was the only place we could get formal education in our heritage language. We believe it is essential to promote racial equity and to honor Stanford's commitment to this endeavor. Language erasure threatens ethnic minority communities all over the world. Like many heritage languages, Cantonese must be protected by institutions with the power to do so—including Stanford.

Language oppression is [a form of domination](#) that is coherent with other forms of oppression along the lines of race, nation, colour and ethnicity. Eradication of minority languages and attempts at the imposition of master languages are among the primary consequences of colonialism, which is inextricably related to racial inequality. While “official” languages are aggressively promoted, their acquisition and use enforced, and their role in social, cultural and economic life unambiguously privileged, the refusal to include underprivileged languages in public discourse and institutions slowly but consequently eradicates these other languages. Globalization only further accelerates this unfortunate process. The wide variety of language courses at Stanford counters the detrimental effects of such state-driven language policies and slows down the aggressive expansion of languages already reinforced by economic and political superpowers.

Beyond language oppression, Cantonese people are also facing a tidal wave of anti-Chinese sentiment that has reached its [highest levels](#) in recent US history. Unfairly “blamed” for the COVID-19 pandemic by US leadership, Chinese people across the country are targets for [hate crimes and harassment](#), and fear for their safety in the COVID-19 era. This historical moment demands that Stanford show its support for the Chinese diaspora. Now is the time for institutions like Stanford to serve the community, not strip away its resources. Stanford must

take a stand against these forms of oppression, and preserve the Cantonese language program.

2. Without the sacrifices of Cantonese Railroad Workers, Stanford would not exist as we know it today.

Leland Stanford built his Central Pacific Railroad empire on the backs of Cantonese migrant workers. Historical research shows that “[More than anyone else, Leland Stanford](#) [was] responsible for the mistreatment and exploitation of thousands of Chinese workers in the United States – the enormous wealth he accumulated, in substantial part from their labor during the construction of the first transcontinental rail line, came from the hardship they endured.”

[Chinese railroad workers](#), most of whom spoke a [Cantonese \(Yue\)](#) language, were integral to the construction of Stanford’s transcontinental railroad. At one point they made up [90% of the railroad workforce](#). Tens of thousands of them came from southern districts of [Guangdong province](#) as part of a massive migration to meet labor demand in [California](#) and [the American West](#). [Payroll records](#) show that most of them had names that start with ‘Ah’, like Ah Ming, reflecting a distinctly Cantonese linguistic choice. These Cantonese workers suffered grueling and dangerous working conditions, paltry wages, and violent prejudice to construct the railroad that made Leland Stanford exorbitantly rich — rich enough to buy the summer home and farm in Palo Alto that we now know as Stanford University. It has been said that [the roofs of Stanford University are red with the blood of those Chinese railroad workers](#), many of whom [died](#) while building Leland Stanford’s railroad. After the railroad was complete, [Cantonese people continued to serve Leland and Jane Stanford on their properties](#) as gardeners, cooks, domestic workers—even constructing [parts of campus](#).

Last year on the 150th anniversary of the Transcontinental Railroad, you spoke on the role of these “[brave workers — mainly from Guangdong Province — who left their homes and crossed the ocean to find work](#)” and who were critical to building this university. Yet this does not begin to cover the debt that is owed.

Stanford University has a responsibility to address the harms its founder caused to Chinese Americans, and specifically those whose heritage reflect the Cantonese diaspora. Removal of the Cantonese program erases the historical contributions of Cantonese language, culture, and communities to the founding of this University.

3. Chinese people are not a monolithic group, and Cantonese is widely used across the Chinese diaspora.

Cantonese is a native or heritage language to Chinese people around the world. In China alone, [73.3 million people](#) speak Cantonese and it is the dominant language in Hong Kong, Macau, and Guangdong, and is widely spoken throughout southeastern China. Globally, [84.9 million people](#) speak Cantonese, which includes overseas Chinese in North America. Although

Cantonese shares much vocabulary with Mandarin, the two Sinitic languages are mutually unintelligible, meaning that speakers of one language cannot understand speakers of the other due to lexical, grammar, and pronunciation differences.

Early US immigration from China has historically come from Guangdong, so many Chinese Americans are of Cantonese descent. According to the [Census Bureau](#), there are 2.9 million people in the US who speak a Chinese language at home. Of those who report their specific language, nearly half report Cantonese specifically (Cantonese: 458,840; Mandarin: 487,250). Cantonese remains the language spoken by the majority of Chinese people in the Greater Bay Area (Cantonese: 129,624; Mandarin: 77,815) and in Chinatowns across the country.

The assumption that all Chinese people speak Mandarin is false, and it betrays the linguistic heritage of most Chinese people throughout American history. Unfortunately, Chinese Americans currently have limited access to formal education in Cantonese through their school systems or through [heritage language schools](#). Entire generations of Cantonese people struggle to speak, comprehend, or read and write in Cantonese because of language oppression by economically and politically dominant nation-states, including the US and China. [Some US colleges and universities](#) rise to this challenge through comprehensive Cantonese course offerings. UC-Berkeley is one of the rare institutions which has taken such a principled stance. Ongoing monolingualism threatens to rob Cantonese people of their unique cultural heritage. Stanford must be part of the solution, and stand side-by-side with other schools doing the right thing by protecting languages that do not enjoy the support of powerful nation-states.

4. Cantonese language is vital to cutting-edge, transnational research and cultural exchange at Stanford.

Cantonese language has an important role in research on Chinese immigration, Hong Kong, and Southern China. There is an urgent need to understand ongoing political struggles in Hong Kong and US-China relations. Stanford University has an obligation as a top-tier global educational institution to support research on issues affecting the Chinese diaspora in the US and abroad. Cantonese language education allows researchers in China studies and Asian-American studies to thrive on campus. In her capacity as the Cantonese language instructor, Dr. Sik Lee Dennig has served exactly this purpose: providing expertise on Cantonese language and history to Stanford faculty and alumni.

Stanford University has come to house many research projects related to 19th and 20th century Chinese immigrants such as [Arboretum Chinese Labor Quarters](#), [Chinese Railroad Workers Project](#), [Candong Village Project](#), and [Market Street Chinatown Archaeological Project](#). All of these projects are part of a larger effort to understand the lives of early Chinese immigrants whose primary language was Cantonese or a dialect of Cantonese. Many Stanford students have been able to advance their research capabilities due to learning Cantonese through active engagement with Cantonese communities locally and abroad, as well as the ability to decipher

Chinese literature from a Cantonese perspective.

Furthermore, Cantonese language courses equip students who participate in [BOSP's Hong Kong study abroad program](#) with the essential linguistic skills to further their engagements with the Hong Kong locals. The BOSP Hong Kong program points out that “the local culture and the daily city life are all important aspects of the program outside of academics that [students] should experience and learn from.” To prepare for these immersive experiences, students should have the opportunity to take Cantonese language courses that will offer them the ability to more intimately communicate and connect with the local Hong Kong community.

5. Stanford's Cantonese language program has changed students' lives for over twenty years.

With multiple course offerings at the beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels, and the unparalleled teaching commitment of Dr. Sik Lee Dennig (Jēung Lóuhsī) as a salaried Lecturer, the Cantonese language program has thrived in its current format. It is often said that language is a culture's conveyor. Over the last 20+ years, the Cantonese language program built community and cultural kinship, educated students in Cantonese culture and history, and connected students with their heritage. The program at Stanford has enjoyed steady enrollment since 2001, with an average of 31 students during fall quarters. Since its inception, approximately 1,000 students have taken Cantonese. Students include people of Cantonese descent, Mandarin speakers who wish to learn Cantonese, and members of the Stanford community interested in research and scholarship in Asia. Cancelling this successful and popular language program is detrimental to the Language Center and the ethos of multiculturalism at Stanford.

We have reached out to students and alumni about their experiences with the Cantonese program and provide excerpts here below. More testimonials can be found [here](#).

*Some may say Cantonese is just a dialect in China, downplaying its insignificance at a time when Mandarin Chinese becomes a more powerful representative of Chinese languages. **This is clearly a biased reading under what linguistic anthropology calls a specific language ideology...the idea that a nation-state should have its most standardized dialect as its only representative national language... Cantonese is not a dialect, but a truly global language.***
(Shan Huang, PhD Candidate)

*[Dr. Dennig's Cantonese courses] prepared me to communicate with my Hong Kong informants in their native tongue; and **my whole research program and dissertation would not have been possible** without the language foundation they provided...For all social science students whose research interest has brought them to Hong Kong, south China, and Southeast Asia, Cantonese language skill is essential...* (Hantian Zhang, PhD, 2015)

Without the range of intermediate and advanced Cantonese language classes at Stanford, I would not have been able to advance to candidacy... I received the prestigious and competitive Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research dissertation fieldwork grant in part

because I was able to show that my Cantonese language skills were advanced enough to conduct oral history interviews for my research. ...**Cantonese language training at Stanford enabled me to successfully conduct my research with elderly descendants of early Cantonese migrants who speak no other Chinese language except Cantonese;** these include villagers in China and seniors in the U.S. who have limited English proficiency.

Major transnational projects at Stanford relied on Cantonese language speakers: [Dr. Dennig] translated an important historic map for the Chinese Railroad Workers Project and I co-directed the [Cangdong Village Archaeology] project, which was based in Guangdong, China. **These two research projects have brought in major grants, resulted in numerous publications, and generated considerable media attention for Stanford University...** **Stanford cannot boast that it is a world class university conducting cutting-edge research if it diminishes a language program that is relevant to the study of over 80 million people around the globe.** (Laura W. Ng, PhD Candidate, Anthropology)

Taking Cantonese classes from [Dr. Dennig] was the single best decision I made at Stanford,... because as a future medical provider the majority of our monolingual Chinese immigrant patients speak Cantonese, not Mandarin, so this language is infinitely more useful. I realized after leaving Stanford how rare it is for a U.S. university to offer Cantonese as a separate course, and patients and providers alike are constantly so surprised and impressed that I was able to study it in school as a non-native speaker. (Leena Yin, Class of 2017)

When my grandfather died, it became urgent for me to learn my heritage language so that I could talk to my grandmother. I felt cheated by the absence of Cantonese at most schools, but at Stanford I could finally learn Cantonese and have it fulfill the language requirement. **Jeung Louh Si's language classes confirmed to me that I made the right choice to come to Stanford--a place where my identities would be celebrated and supported...** I was enrolled from Freshmen to Senior year, and they were the most important classes I took at Stanford. (Jamie Tam, Class of 2010)

Not only was Cantonese one of the main reasons why I had chosen to attend Stanford, I was able to learn the language and the culture. Learning about the political movements in Hong Kong, especially when at the peak times of the protest, allowed us as students to comprehend the severity of the situation and to take action. Without having this class, I would not have been able to immerse myself into a movement that meant so much to my heritage. (Yannie Tan, Class of 2023)

The impact of these courses expanded beyond the classroom, as I felt empowered to embrace my heritage and connect deeply with my parents and the Chinese community. **The cut to Cantonese courses is devastating.** (Doreen Chan PhD '20)

I had always felt awkward and out of place when attempting to speak/practice Cantonese when visiting Hong Kong. But, I always felt excited and empowered to try new things in [Cantonese] class... In October, I even had the chance to perform a neurologic exam on a patient who only spoke Cantonese - I definitely don't think I would have felt comfortable doing this before taking [the] class... This was such an unexpected highlight of my medical school experience!" (Jodi So, MD Candidate)

*By the time I arrived at Stanford, I had pretty much given up on my Cantonese – and its corresponding connection to many people in my life – as a lost cause. Jēung Lóuhsī's (Dr. Dennig's) Cantonese conversation series showed me that it wasn't too late to turn the tide... **Surrounded by fellow students in a supportive environment where even lapsed heritage speakers like me could make mistakes and learn without shame.** Given the deep personal impact the Cantonese program had on me (and many other students), **it came as a painful shock when I heard that the Language Center was planning not to renew Jēung Lóuhsī's contract.***

***It's already disappointing that Stanford, with its wealth built on the backs of Cantonese-speaking railroad workers, doesn't consider Cantonese worthy of a similar level of investment [as other languages]; to discover that Stanford doesn't even consider Cantonese worthy of existence as a language program is profoundly hurtful.** (Caroline Ho, MS Computer Science '20, BS Symbolic Systems '19)*

*In an environment where my parents pressured me to speak English to assimilate to U.S. culture, my Cantonese never developed enough to have a proper conversation with my parents or my grandparents. **Jeung Louh Si created an environment where I didn't feel ashamed of my Cantonese skills, but instead encouraged me to learn and use my voice confidently -- a gift I'm forever grateful for.** (Michelle Ly, Class of 2021)*

*I was excited by the Cantonese language courses offered by Stanford and helped attract me to the University in the first place...**I have now worked at a grassroots community organization in Chinatown for the past 11 years, helping people in Cantonese with housing, benefits and worker rights issues.** ...because of learning Cantonese, I was able to more deeply connect with my grandmothers before they passed away. It would be a travesty to eliminate these courses. (Mark Liu, Class of 2005)*

***For me and many other Mandarin speakers I know, learning Cantonese is a rare opportunity that empowers us to challenge the myth of a monolithic Mandarin-speaking Han Chinese culture...** Dr. Dennig not only teaches the language, but also introduces her students to **the issues of immigration, discrimination, assimilation, and dissent, all of which are inextricably connected to the identity of Cantonese speakers and at the same time essential components of the larger discourse on diversity and integration that is being urgently and diligently grappled with by this university as well as the entire nation.** I cannot imagine receiving the same kind of exposure at a less inclusive and social-minded institution, and that is why I have always cited the Cantonese program as a top reason why I am glad I came to Stanford. (Tianyi Huang, BA/MS '21)*

***This is ominous... All my Cantonese is indebted to her [Dr. Sik Lee Dennig].** (Renren Yang PhD '18)*

We request that Stanford University make these institutional commitments to Cantonese:

1. Guarantee a Cantonese language program with at least 4 course offerings per quarter.

Stanford should not expect students to separately petition for Cantonese courses to be offered on an “as-needed” basis. There is no reason to create unnecessary barriers to course offerings when demand for Cantonese language education at Stanford has remained steady and unchanged since 2010. Ethnic minorities should not be expected to petition for a course offering, and that is particularly true for Cantonese at Stanford University for the reasons elucidated above.

For the Cantonese language program to maintain its successful track record of educating and building a community of Cantonese speakers, multiple course offerings must be offered. The program should continue to offer two beginner courses: Beginning Cantonese, and Beginning Cantonese for Mandarin Speakers. Additional Intermediate and Intermediate-Advanced courses in Cantonese would help students transition to fluency and cover course material on more complex topics such as news media, social and political issues, elections, and Chinese American history. Upper level courses ensure that students achieve a high level of proficiency that allows them to conduct academic research, build professional networks in China and Hong Kong, and engage meaningfully with the Cantonese community.

2. Allow Cantonese courses to fulfill the language requirement by [including reading and writing](#).

Students should be able to take Cantonese language courses and have them fulfill the University’s language requirement. With the exception of the 2006-2007 academic year, Cantonese courses have not been able to fulfill the foreign language requirement because they exclude education in reading and writing. We view this as a long-standing barrier to the program’s growth that limits its ability to expand enrollment. [UC Berkeley](#) offers its own language program teaching Cantonese writing, reading, and speaking. We want Stanford to meet this same standard.

Cantonese students should have access to reading and writing skills that allow them to fully participate in the Cantonese community. Regardless of whether a student chooses to learn Cantonese or Mandarin or their own heritage language at Stanford, they should have the right to have that language meet degree requirements. China is a country with many distinct, mutually unintelligible languages, and it is discriminatory for Stanford to treat one Chinese language as less legitimate, less worthy of comprehensive study, than another.

Students conducting research using Cantonese documents need to be able to read and write in Cantonese. Written Cantonese can be significantly different from Standard Modern Chinese and there are Cantonese-specific characters that Mandarin students would not be able to read. From a historical perspective, this has been a challenge for scholars using Mandarin to interpret

19th and 20th century Chinese immigrant documents.

3. Invest in the long-term viability of the Cantonese program through a permanent full-time instructor position that is compensated with salary, benefits, and protections.

We believe that the long-term success of this program depends on the presence of a full-time instructor, who can bring a high level of linguistics training, cultural and historical knowledge, and experience to the role. A salaried lecturer position with benefits and protections provides incentive for the instructor to successfully lead the program, make connections with other units on campus, and build institutional memory. After 20 years of success, the Cantonese program risks failure if Stanford replaces the existing Lecturer role with a temporary position subject to high turnover. The alternative of hiring a part-time instructor on an hourly basis to replace the existing Lecturer role is not sufficient to keep the Cantonese language program alive.

Thanks to Dr. Sik Lee Dennig's long-standing role as the program's lecturer, Stanford's Cantonese program has thrived for the last two decades. Jeung Louhsi (Dr. Sik Lee Dennig)'s dedication to the program and willingness to go the extra mile for students is unparalleled. We would make these requests if only to defend her position as the Cantonese language instructor at Stanford. However, our broader objective is to ensure that Stanford maintains its commitment to Cantonese language and culture preservation through investment, *not* divestment. Stanford must "walk the walk" when it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion and allocate *more* resources to marginalized communities, not less. We urge you to meet this standard and fulfill Stanford University's responsibilities to the Cantonese community.

The Undersigned,

⇒ ***View the full list of signatures [HERE](#)***