Pragmatism, Mandarin and political culture in Singapore:
Recent reprises of an ideology

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Introduction: From Cultural Identification to Linguistic Commodification

Recent discourses on Mandarin in Singapore complicate the ideological categorization of languages in the country. There has been a detectable shift in the way Mandarin is viewed – from being the language of identity of the dominant Chinese population to being a commodity with high economic value. In the context of political communication and linguistics, Mandarin in Singapore has recently undergone the process of linguistic commodification. This does not mean that Mandarin as the language of cultural or ethnic identification is no longer deployed in official and popular discourses, except that the privileging of Mandarin as a valuable economic commodity in State policy pronouncements complicates the status of Mandarin in the country. The country's much-touted bilingual policy has been pretty much unrattled by broader, more encompassing sociolinguistic and communicative changes sweeping the country and the rest of the world. The four official languages have precise roles to play in the nation-building project: English, the 'neutral' language which does or should not evoke any emotional attachment among Singaporeans, is the language of inter-ethnic communication as well as the country's instrumentalist link to global capital and communication; Chinese (more precisely, Mandarin Chinese), Malay and Tamil are the official 'mother tongues' of the

three dominant races of the country, thus they function as the cultural bloodline of the speakers to their traditions, customs and ancient civilizations. However, the commodification of Mandarin as an economic asset betrays fundamental cracks in the ideological premises of the bilingual policy: the pragmatic function is now ascribed to both English and Mandarin.

This paper argues that the complications wrought by the commodification of Mandarin on the bilingual policy have been shaped almost single-handedly by the ideology of pragmatism, the same ideology that underpins practically all of the nation's political culture. Singapore, after all, is a "self-declared" pragmatic nation (Tan, 2012, 72). However, whereas many studies in this area explore the implications of such a pragmatic shift for language, communication and education policies (Wee, 2003; C Tan, 2006), especially as Singapore attempts to become a 'global city' (Wee, 2014), this paper unpacks the shift in order to examine how Singapore and Singaporeans also navigate their identity and political culture as a pragmatic nation to the core, exposed to recent vulnerabilities within and beyond their control but nevertheless still tightly framed within a "material orientation" that is "well entrenched as part of the 'truths' of being Singaporean" (Chua and Kuo, 1998/2012, 56-57). Therefore, the fact about Singapore and Singaporeans as pragmatic is no longer a point of contention in this paper; rather, it attempts to show how the Singapore State and Singaporeans themselves navigate their pragmatic political identity through recent global and domestic affairs in order. The focus is not only highlighting pragmatic pronouncements and policy changes, but on discursive and ideological strategies that show how the State and Singaporeans are able to pick and

choose, as well as ignore and discard, elements in their socio-political and sociocultural realities to respond to internal and external pressures of globalization.

In a sense, the view of language as a commodity is really nothing new. In one way or another, languages in the past and present have become commodities acquired to gain access to jobs, money, prestige, power, and knowledge. In this general sense, language teaching and learning are grounded in what Rahman (2001, 55) calls 'rational' motivations that are pragmatic, instrumental or utilitarian: "learning a language in order to empower oneself by acquiring the potential to acquire employment". Thus, my concern with the notion of Mandarin as a commodity is not so much that it has indeed become a commodity in a particular (Singaporean) market of linguistic exchanges, but rather in how the State-sponsored discursive shift from cultural identity to commodity is part of the government's broad strategic (re)articulations of its pragmatic political identity as a significant player in capitalist globalization and national identity formation, and which have likewise been taken up from the ground by Singaporeans themselves, constituting their subjectivities as they (re)enact the ideology of pragmatism in confronting and negotiating sociocultural, economic and political phenomena. Foremost of which is the rising tide of anti-foreigner sentiments in Singapore which include Chinese Singaporeans' strategic navigation of their identities and relations with China and China-born foreigners in the country.

Thus: what are recent traceable trajectories of Singapore-style pragmatism which can be gleaned through the commodification of Mandarin? This paper will explore three: the trajectories of the pragmatic Singaporean, the pragmatic bilingual policy and the pragmatic 'Little Red Dot'. How the ideology of pragmatism seeps into the political

culture of Singapore and, more specifically, how all levels of recent Singaporean political culture are shaped by the government's incessant strategic deployment of the pragmatic ideology in the light of the commodification of Mandarin and the rise of China in the global stage of politics, is the main concern of the paper.

Re-framing the Mother Tongues

But first, what is linguistic commodification? To be sure, the case of Mandarin in Singapore is a phenomenon that is associated with the kind of linguistic commodification recently noted among some local or vernacular languages in the world (Heller, 2010; Tan & Rubdy, 2008). In the case of Canada, for example, where multilingual repertoires and the (re)constitution of identity of a strong ethnolinguistic francophone minority are bound up with economic transformations less controlled by the state than by corporate politics, we are seeing "a shift from understanding language as being primarily a marker of ethnonational identity, to understanding language as being a marketable commodity on its own, distinct from identity" (Heller, 2003, 474).

This redefinition of language as a 'measurable skill' in the midst of intensifying economic competition where multilingual skills are deemed valuable is also observed today among middle-class foreign language learners in the United States. The learning of Spanish, for example, is couched in highly ideological terms, where the language is viewed as a social and economic capital necessary for the accumulation of linguistic proficiencies in the multilingual market place: "To be a member of the U.S. ruling class, one must accumulate certain linguistic resources and, right now, such resources may

include the ability to communicate in Spanish" (Pomerantz, 2002, 299). Ideologies of Spanish as a commodity have been observed as early as the 1990s in textbooks published and used in the United States, also shifting away from Spanish as an identity marker which was the predominant pedagogical trope in the 1970s and 1980s (Leeman and Martinez, 2007).

These examples, of course, demonstrate how issues of power accrue to such transformations in the way language and identity are viewed. In the case of francophone Canada, commodified multilingualism puts in place a hierarchy of language skills where certain kinds of multilingualism are more privileged than other kinds, thus throwing into light the issue of who is actually benefiting from such commodification, e.g., the economically marginalized local multilingual speakers who supply the market with low-level labour skills, or multinational companies operating locally which need to gain access to the local/regional multilingual market? In the case of Spanish in the United States, the ideological configuration of the language as a resource is confined to particular groups of people – the ruling class – while among most of the marginalized Spanish-speaking population, the language continues to be deemed as a problem, an obstacle to social mobility, for example. Nevertheless, what we are seeing is a general trend among some local languages in the world: from being repositories of culture and identity, they are now undergoing transformations as measurable objects of and in communication that need to be acquired for largely pragmatic or economic reasons. In the next three sections, I will now describe how the commodification of Mandarin is bound up with the ideology of pragmatism in Singapore.

The *Uniquely Pragmatic Singaporean*

The "perennial, almost obsessive, concern with economic relevance" (J Tan, 2006, 81) is what narrowly guides or frames pragmatism in Singapore, an approach to all policy-making and decision-making which former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew claimed are "ideology-free" (Lee in Apcar et al., 2007). To put it in another way, pragmatism as a concept is ''governed by ad hoc contextual rationality that seeks to achieve specific gains at particular points in time and pays scant attention to systematicity and coherence as necessary rational criteria for action'' (Chua, 1997, 58). However, although this paper agrees with this definition, it also argues that while pragmatic decision-making is indeed ad hoc, it is (speaking of Singapore) nevertheless ideologically systematic and coherent because of its deep entanglement with the economic imperative. If it makes economic sense, then an alliance, decision, action, or policy is pragmatic; it is a strategy of adopting "any means as long as the ends are successfully achieved through these means" (Tan, 2012, 79). Thus, Singapore-style pragmatism is "selective, strategic and instrumental" (73) whose "overriding goal" is "continuous economic growth" (Chua, 1997, 68). C Tan (2006) is more explicit in addressing the relationship between this ideology and education: "The aim of pragmatism in education is economic in nature" (51). It is in this context that the commodification of Mandarin – making the language an exchangeable economic good in the linguistic market – is inextricably bound up with the pragmatic sensibilities and dispositions of both the government and the people. Such an ideological collusion of commodification and pragmatism can be read through recent reprises of Singapore's pragmatic political culture in response to sociocultural issues in the country.

One such recent sociocultural episode was the controversial 'Curry Wars' in 2011 when a mainland Chinese family (as opposed to a local Chinese Singaporean family) lodged a formal complaint with the Community Mediation Centre about the smell of curry from the home of one of its Indian neighbours. The mediation somehow helped settle the issue between the two families, with the local Indian family asked to cook curry only when the Chinese family is not around, and the Chinese family made to promise to try the dish. However, this seemingly local incident was soon picked up by national newspapers, causing distress and anger among Singaporeans of all ethnicities. The issue spilled over into discourses of race, racism, multiculturalism, migration, and intercultural communication, with resident non-Chinese Singaporeans (especially the Malays and the Indians) protesting what many of them felt was the marginalization of their cultures in favour of the dominant Chinese culture (Klinger-Vidra, 2012). Even the local Chinese Singaporeans protested in favour of the local Indian family, arguing that new Chinese immigrants or Singaporean citizens from Mainland China have no right to impose their values and cultural preferences upon the local population. It must be noted that the new wave of Chinese (Mandarin-dominant) immigrants to Singapore typically does not come from Fujian and Guangdong provinces where most of the pre-World War 2 immigrants (who spoke Hokkien and Cantonese) came from. Additionally, Singaporeans complain that the new immigrants are not proficient in English which is the main language of communication in the country. Thus, the curry wars became the rallying ground for many Singaporeans to express their anti-immigrant sentiments, but for this particular case, to express their "frustrations over the number of Chinese immigrants in Singapore" (68).

The second case complicates the anti-immigrant sentiments of local Singaporeans who have increasingly seen the fast rising numbers of foreigners in the country (60, 000 in 1960 and 1.3 million in 2010) as aggravating "existing strains on the provision of resources" and thus threatening "to intensify cultural tensions in an already-sensitive multi-cultural environment" (Klinger-Vidra, 2012, 69). Chong and Tan (2013) sought to examine such anti-immigrant sensitivities which openly espouse a local vs foreigner rhetoric, through a sociolinguistic study of 100 Chinese Singaporean youth's attitudes towards different accents of Mandarin in Singapore. According to the researchers, political and sociolinguistic logics anticipate negative attitudes towards foreign accents (specifically Beijing and Taiwan accents of Mandarin), and positive attitudes towards the local Singaporean accent (Chong and Tan, 2013). A dominant truism in sociolinguistics, after all, assumes that attitudes towards languages, dialects and accents are essentially attitudes towards the people who speak them.

The results, however, were not as anticipated: young Chinese Singaporeans embrace the foreign accents while devaluing their own on grounds that communicating with Beijing and Taiwan accents is more marketable because of the perceived values of these accents in the linguistic market. It seems here that foreign accents, unlike their speakers, have been spared from racial, racist or even xenophobic denunciation, leading Chong and Tan (2013, 135) to conclude that in Singapore "functional uses of a language override its socio-cultural uses". In other words, Singaporeans, whose subjectivities have been shaped to fit the statist vision of the body politic as a docile collectivity always ready to sacrifice personal luxuries and freedom for the 'common good', also draw upon dominant tropes in their political culture to actively navigate the complex impacts of

globalization on their lives. Emotionally and economically strained, they reject particular groups of people who they think are hugely responsible for their current upsetting conditions, but they nevertheless embrace the accents of the same groups and work towards learning them to extricate themselves from the same emotional and economic stranglehold.

This everyday strategic approach to recent globalization-induced local problems is arguably *uniquely Singaporean* (cf. Klinger-Vidra, 2012, 73): the propensity to re-engage, re-align and/or renew relationships and identities based on essentially pragmatic motivations. While pragmatic policies can be found everywhere, the Singaporean brand of pragmatism has not only been central to national identity formation and the nation building project but, most importantly, an indispensable ideological tool for the political legitimacy of the ruling elite (Tan, 2012). Thus, the everyday enactments of the ideology of pragmatism – such as the rejection of Chinese foreigners but the embrace of their highly valued accents – are themselves constitutive of a national political culture sculpted out of the country's decades-old struggle with its survival as a reluctant independent nation (Tupas, 2011), its national identity (Ortman, 2009), and the global economy (Tan, 2012). Throughout Singapore's history, the ideology of pragmatism has almost single-handedly underpinned the nation-building project; any decision on political, sociocultural and economic fronts is desirable and justifiable for as long as it helps the economy improve. This is one of its most recent and grounded manifestations.

The Pragmatic Bilingual Policy

Recent complications in the bilingual policy of Singapore will be the second trajectory through which we see (re)articulations of the ideology of pragmatism. Singapore upon its separation from Malaysia in 1965 has always been committed ideologically to creating and maintaining a multiracial, multilingual society (Ganguly, 2003, 239). The country's language policy, therefore, has taken on the same ideological vision: a pragmatic policy that has sought to maintain racial harmony among the three major racial groups in the country (Chinese, Malay, and Indian) while enabling the state to confront and engage with, first, developmental strategies in the midst of acute economic problems such as unemployment and a declining entrépot trade in the years following the separation; second, the emergence of China as an economic force to reckon with in the late 1970's; third, intense competition from both developing and developed countries in the mid-1980's; and fourth, the United States as a vital growth engine for Singapore in recent years (Ganguly, 2003; Wu and Thia, 2002; Koh, 2012; Tupas, 2011).

Language policy, therefore, has essentially been ideologically consistent since 1965: (Mandarin) Chinese, English, Malay and Tamil are official languages of the country, with Malay as the national language; (Mandarin) Chinese, Malay and Tamil as 'mother tongues' through which Singaporeans express their ethnicities and values; and English as the language of multiracial unity and economic development. For the most part of Singapore's relatively short history, the demarcation line between the 'mother tongues' and English, a function of what Brown (1998) refers to as *ethnic engineering*, has been sharply drawn. On the one hand, English is a language which everyone must learn since it is the language that will firmly plug the country into the new global economy. English is a de-ethnicized language which purportedly serves everyone,

projects a cosmopolitan image for the country, curtails Chinese chauvinism, and provides people access to global information and technological resources (Quah, 2000, 82). On the other hand, the 'mother tongues' must also be learned since they serve as markers for ethnic identity and conduits through which people learn about their histories, traditions and cultures.

The current Singaporean educational system is firmly rooted in such a simple, though immensely problematic, dichotomy: everyone learns English in school as a 'first language' and chooses a 'mother tongue' as a 'second language'. A typical Singaporean is deemed to be one who knows English and one of the three official 'mother tongues' of the country. The unique nature of Singaporean bilingualism, therefore, is an ideological result of the state's pragmatic approach to development and its successful containment of racial tension which actually characterized its early years as an independent nation. There are recent complications in the neat picture of Singapore bilingualism – for example, the fact that the number of Singaporean homes with English as the dominant language is increasing, thus also increasing the prospects of English becoming a real mother tongue, a marker of cultural or (Singaporean) ethnic identity (Tan, 2014; Wee, 2002; Tupas, 2012) – but the government seems to have deployed a strategy of non-engagement with this issue so as not to elevate it further to a status of national concern. While sociolinguistically this is happening on the ground, the government seems insistent on safeguarding the basic ideological premises of the bilingual policy in order to keep to its pragmatic point about English as a non-emotive and instrumental language that belongs to no ethnic group in the country but which is needed for the country to keep its competitive edge in the global market.

However, keeping true to its adherence to pragmatism, the government has been more than willing to reinvent Mandarin as an economically viable language on top of its being the language of ethnic and cultural identity among Chinese Singaporeans. From a pragmatic perspective, 'ethnicizing' English does not make much sense, but commodifying Mandarin does. Ethnicizing English does not seem to bring forth any material benefit, but marketing Mandarin as a valuable economic asset surely does. Where English failed in official discourse to contest its exclusion as a mother tongue, Mandarin has been largely responsible for the recent blurring of the conventional official dichotomy between English and the official 'mother tongues'. It is important to highlight here the strategic responses of the State to two similar issues even if they involve one policy document such as the bilingual policy.

This could be traced back to 1979 when the 'Speak Mandarin Campaign' was first launched (see *Bilingualism*, 1978; *Speak Mandarin*, 1979-1989; *Survey*, 1987). True, the campaign was meant to change the sociolinguistic landscape of Chinese Singaporeans through more use of Mandarin in society and less use – if not destruction – of more than 12 Chinese 'dialects' in order to make language learning more effective and to create a common medium through which Chinese Singaporeans could communicate among themselves. Thus:

> Lee Kuan Yew started this campaign because he believed that there were
> too many schisms in the Chinese community in Singapore. Lee felt that
> the Chinese community was deeply divided along the lines of the various
> dialects spoken in Singapore. These linguistic divisions, he contended,

could create new social cleavages and tensions. Lee was also concerned that, given Singaporeans' growing exposure to Western cultural values through various mass media, the lack of a shared linguistic ethos could undermine the country's cultural identity (Ganguly, 2003, 259).

However, against this backdrop of a largely domestic concern over language and culture, Singapore also "watched the rise of Chinese economic and political clout in regional and global affairs" (Ganguly, 2003, 259), such that discussion on the economic value of Mandarin would slowly enter the official discourse of the campaign. Thus, while in the 1982 campaign Mandarin was "useful in the propagation of Confucianism to keep alive such traditional virtues as benevolence, love, loyalty and truthfulness" (*Speak Mandarin*, 1979-1989, 26), since 1985 Mandarin has become both (1) the language 'for our roots', 'of courtesy' and 'of heritage', and (2) the language 'of business' (*Speak Mandarin* 1979-1989). Then Second Deputy Prime Minister Ong Teng Cheong would articulate such commodifying discourse in the official speech on the campaign in 1985:

The Chinese learn and speak Mandarin not only because it is the common spoken language of the Chinese community, presenting our roots, but also because the economic value of Mandarin is increasing, particularly after China has started its economic transformation and adopted the open-door policy.

China, with a population of more than one billion, is a large market. With the open-door policy, there will be an increase in China's external trade and economic activities (*Speak Mandarin* 1979-1989, 49).

In other words, Mandarin would become both a medium for the transmission of culture and a pragmatic tool to achieve economic gains, a role earlier reserved only for English. Interestingly, however, while the rhetoric on Mandarin for the past three decades has taken on both 'cultural' and 'pragmatic' elements, even with State pronouncements on the need for Mandarin to build a bi-cultural population in Singapore which not only speaks English and Mandarin but also understands the Chinese way of life, including its philosophies and visions, the underlying ideology continues to be that of pragmatism – the economic imperative in any policy-making endeavour of the nation-state (C Tan, 2006). Teo (2005, 125) contends that "beneath the cultural rhetoric" of recent slogans is, "once again, an entrepreneurial pragmatism". While biculturalism as an ideology gives the government some space to argue that promoting Mandarin is not just to produce bilingual ethnic Chinese Singaporeans, but to create a culturally sensitive and knowledgeable people who can understand China (or being Chinese, for that matter), still biculturalism is meant to serve the pragmatic/economic imperative of the nation-state. Again, this is not surprising at all; in fact, this is consistent with the promotion of the ideology of pragmatism in practically all facets of Singaporean life and politics (Tan, 2012; Tupas, 2011). But what is important to highlight here is how Singapore selects and segregates significant pieces of the same political package – the bilingual policy, for example – strictly along the lines of pragmatic ideology, such that the ability to

communicate *to* and *with* China is highly prized because of prospects of monetary returns. In the process, other significant issues in bilingual policy such as the rise of English as the dominant mother tongues among many Singaporeans are easily discarded because they are impractical and counter-productive.

The Pragmatic 'Little Red Dot'

In reference to some of its tactical engagements with key players in the global stage of geopolitics and the economy, Singapore has been described as the pragmatic 'Little Red Dot': its alliances have been cautiously pragmatic, vigorously engaging with China, the United States and the ASEAN and the rest of the surrounding region on terms which would give Singapore maximum economic and political returns. "Pragmatism", according to Kingler-Vidra (2012, 67), "has led the Singaporean approach to the Eastern and western powers", with its language policy reflective of its pragmatic "balancing of Chinese and English markets" (68). For example, the country has engaged China vigorously on economic grounds, but has established deeper military ties (aside from economic and cultural ties) with its regional neighbours, as well as with Japan and the United States; similarly, it has also engaged China on economic bilateral terms, but has also diversified its economy away from China to make sure that it does not fall prey into China's economic dominance.

In his speech in 2002, immediately following the ASEAN crisis which saw the region – Singapore's traditional "hinterland" (Rajan, 2003a, 48) – acutely falter in the economic front, thus tilting the balance of economic power towards China, then Deputy

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong remarked that the "tectonic shift" necessitated a strategic repositioning of Singapore that would allow it "to exploit the wealth of opportunities that an affluent China is creating" (Lee, 2002, n.p.). Already that year, "for the first time, our exports to greater China (i.e. the PRC, Hong Kong and Taiwan) exceeded our exports to the US" (ibid.). This was accomplished against a confluence of economic, political, and social challenges to Singapore brought about largely by shifts in global movements, demonstrating its vulnerabilities to external pressures of globalization. These include the global slowdown in the electronics industry, the Asian crisis of 1997-1998 which dampened economic growth in the region, the September 11 terrorist attacks, and the advancement in communication and technology which has further shrunk economic distances and thus has reduced the demand for Singapore-based headquarters and hubs for all sorts of services (Rajan, 2003a). These contributed to the country's economic recession of 2001 and have thrown into light "(q)uestions…raised about the sustainability of the Singapore development model and its relevance in the global economy' (3). This does not necessarily mean a weakened Singapore because the confidence that the country has shown in the aftermath of the Asian crisis of 1997, for example, could still be gleaned from the way it continued to pursue globalization with a vengeance, as Tan (2001) would put it. Nevertheless, despite being less affected by the crisis than, say, Indonesia, South Korea, Malaysia and the Philippines, the fact that its economy, to paraphrase Tan (2001) again, was clearly affected by it despite sound fundamentals in place was enough cause for reflection and reason to learn from tough lessons. After all, the country's growth rate plunged from eight percent (8%) in 1997 to a mere 1.5% in 1998, employment rose by more than two percent, the stock market brutally

deflated, and property prices fell substantially. Thus, for the years that followed, Singapore had indeed actively pursued the Chinese market in search of new capital and business opportunities, making Singapore "China's top foreign investor" with China becoming "Singapore's largest trading partner", as well Singapore becoming "the only ASEAN country to have a bilateral FTA [Free Trade Agreement] with China" (Lee, 2014, n.p.).

Therefore, the recent vigorous commodification of Mandarin has become a socioeconomic strategy both to put China "within Singapore's catchment" (Lee in Rajan and Sen, 2003, 171), to reassess Singapore's role in the region and the rest of the world in order to survive and/or sustain its competitiveness in the global market, and to mitigate its own anxieties about its over-all economic well-being: "if we neglect the Chinese language, while others are picking it up", then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong argued in his 2002 National Day Rally Speech, "very soon, we will have no edge over them in doing business with China' (Goh in Wee, 2003, 216). More than ten years after the speech, anxieties and uncertainties remain because "Singaporeans are affected by… global trends" and "because in Singapore too, technology and globalisation are widening our income gaps and in addition to that, we have domestic social stresses building" (Lee, 2013, n.p.). Between China and India alone, as highlighted in the National Day Rally 2013 speech of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, there are one billion workers and many of whom are entering the global workforce which has become even more bitterly competitive. "Fortunately", proficiency in Mandarin has given many young Singaporean professionals a clear edge in China: "They may not have enjoyed it in school or PSLE [Primary Leaving School Examination] but now that they are working, they appreciated

its value and they are grateful we forced them to do it" (Lee, 2013, n.p.). In other words, the learning of Mandarin among Chinese Singaporeans is not an option; it is thrust – or *forced* – upon them because of the need to leverage on Mandarin as an economically viable language to help Singapore deal with global competition which has become "[q]uite formidable" (Lee, 2013, n.p.). Although this has indeed eclipsed the cultural argument for Mandarin as a 'mother tongue' in Singapore, the idea of Mandarin as an exchangeable economic asset has been embraced without much controversy.

It must be noted, however, that the pragmatism that underpins the commodification of Mandarin here does not mean a wholesale submission to China's dominance. Similar to Singaporeans' everyday enactments of pragmatism, the government has also carefully navigated the complex terrain of international diplomacy and foreign policy, which includes the economic domain as well. Simply put, Mandarin as a commodity is Singapore's tool to penetrate Chinese capital but it is also wary of Chinese dominance; thus, it uses the United States "as a hedge against increasing Chinese economic dominance, and uses its deepening engagement with its ASEAN partners as another avenue to diversify away from China economically" (Klinger-Vidra, 2012, 71-72). This is Singaporean pragmatism at its core, a "virtue" (72) that has guided the country's strategic alignments with the rest of the world. The commodification of Mandarin makes a lot of economic sense but it is also un-pragmatic to rely solely on China. In other words, it is not enough here to say that the commodification of Mandarin is due mainly to the rise of China; we need to appreciate the fact that the Singapore State mitigates its own embrace of China by making sure that it also pragmatically leverages

on other engines of growth in the region and the world in order to keep China's influence checked. This is Singaporean's pragmatic 'trick' in foreign policy and global affairs.

Conclusion

The commodification of Mandarin exposes Singapore and Singaporeans' most recent (re)articulations and (re)enactments of the ideology of pragmatism. Commodifying Mandarin has been strategically pragmatic, cutting through different layers of the nation's political culture. Thus, even if many of them vehemently reject foreigners (China-born foreigners in the case of our paper), they embrace their valuable and prestigious accents. Such a strategic pragmatic way to navigate the volatile issue of migration and foreign talent defies political logic and sociolinguistic truism, but this is what makes Singaporean-style pragmatism unique because it sculpts and soaks the character of the nation's political culture. Government interventions in education, social life, arts and culture, housing, the economy, and practically all other aspects of society and culture, are undertaken in the name of economic competitiveness and need, but what seems clear in the Singaporeans' (re)enactments of pragmatism in the issue of immigration and foreign talent is that these have become part of who they are, in fact a case of 'government' *in* their lives (Yap, 2012).

Similarly, the bilingual policy of the country, a centrepiece policy in economic development and nation-building, has also been unravelled by shifting sociolinguistic grounds, especially the ethnicization of English and the commodification of Mandarin. In its rudimentary form, the bilingual policy assigns an instrumentalist and pragmatic role to

English, while (Mandarin) Chinese is assigned the role of cultural ballast. However, the same bilingual policy is now haunted by ground realities which have shifted precisely because of it, because by being "selective, strategic and instrumental" (Tan, 2012, 73), ethnicizing English is rejected while commodifying Mandarin is pursued. In the end, however, the basic (ideological) framework of the bilingual policy is shielded from any significant ideological tampering, thus once again keeping true to the spirit of Singaporean-style pragmatism, as articulated here by the former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew: ''If a thing works, let's work it, and that eventually evolved into the kind of economy that we have today. Our test was: Does it work? Does it bring benefits to the people?'' (Lee, 1998, 109). Indeed, following this way of thinking, ethnicizing English or recognizing it as a mother tongue does not benefit the people, but the commodification of Mandarin does.

In the same fashion, but in a grander scale, Singapore has also responded to tectonic shifts in geopolitical and economic configurations by being pragmatic about them: it has established bilateral and multilateral relations with practically every country or regional bloc that matters to its economic well-being. On the one hand, the commodification of Mandarin is a pragmatic response to the rise of China as a global superpower; on the other hand, it has used the United States and the ASEAN region as a hedge against Chinese dominance.

Indeed, the commodification of Mandarin follows the logic that good economic well-being defines good life in Singapore. However, such commodification tells us more than that. In recent years, Singapore has been troubled by global and domestic issues, thus necessitating (re)articulations and (re)enactments of the ideology of pragmatism.

The commodification of Mandarin transcends issues of language and permeates the very core of Singaporean political culture. However, because pragmatism "is an ideological rhetoric that unproblematically frames economic growth as a pre-eminent national goal" (Tan, 2012, 90), the commodification of Mandarin is thus implicated in this ideology as well. Thus, it is hoped that this paper has shown that it is not a simple case of commodifying a language; it is more a case of reinscribing government in the political culture of Singapore. In other words, the commodification of Mandarin in Singapore reaffirms the central position of the state in the (re)making of Singaporean lives.

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