

Singapore Government

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SPEECH BY MR ONG TENG CHEONG, MINISTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS AND LABOUR,  
AT KIM KEAT COMMUNITY CENTRE MANDARIN STORY-TELLING COMPETITION,  
ON SATURDAY, 17 OCTOBER 1981 AT 5.30 PM

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Recently, the three major dailies - Straits Times, Nanyang and Sin Chew - conducted separate random surveys to evaluate the impact of the Mandarin Campaign and the usage of Mandarin in daily life. The survey findings have been published. There is no need for me to reiterate them, except to state some of the general conclusions that can be drawn from the surveys.

It is clear from the survey findings that there is a discernible trend towards increasing use of Mandarin. Chinese Singaporeans generally agree on the usefulness of Mandarin over dialects. The majority of them are, in fact, capable of speaking Mandarin. However, there appear to be some psychological barriers to interpersonal communications with family members and with others in public places such as hawker centres, coffee shops and restaurants. The tendency is for them to switch from Mandarin or English to dialects at these places.

Chinese Singaporeans must learn to overcome this inhibition if they are to succeed in making Mandarin the common tongue of the Chinese speaking community. Their habitual lapses into dialect can be reduced and totally eradicated through more conscious effort on their part to use Mandarin instead of dialects as a means of communication among themselves.

The sense of purpose in using Mandarin must be clear. The objective of the Mandarin Campaign bears repeating: The Campaign was launched to encourage the Chinese communities in Singapore to use Mandarin in place of a multitude of dialects. It does not seek to replace the other official languages, such as English. English will continue to be the language of administration and commerce in Singapore.

The need to substitute the many spoken dialects of the Chinese community with a common language is borne out by the Education Ministry's report on pupils' home languages and their performances in their first and second language. The multi-dialect environment in the Chinese community has become a serious hindrance to the study of the Chinese language by school children. The learning load of Chinese school children can be lightened if they are exposed to a Mandarin speaking environment where they can put into practice the language they learn in school.

Continued widespread use of numerous dialects will lead to the emergence of a limited pidgin-type patois, unique to Singapore but incomprehensible elsewhere. This has to be avoided at all costs as it will frustrate government's efforts to build a society that is effectively bilingual in two official languages. For a Chinese Singaporean, it will have to be English and Mandarin so that even if he is unable to master English, he has at least a knowledge of Mandarin. This will also help him to understand better his own cultural heritage and value system. This link with his cultural traditions is vital in providing him with the necessary ballast to withstand adverse external influences of alien culture.

For these reasons, Chinese Singaporeans must strive to make Mandarin a living language instead of the dialects. If Mandarin is not used more widely at home and in public places, dialect may well continue to be their predominant medium of communication and Singapore will remain a fractured multi-lingual society. Mandarin will then remain at best a school language, pursued and studied for the sake of examination requirements. It will have lost its real value to the Chinese community.

Besides school education, the Straits Times survey results show that one third of the respondents have attained a high level of proficiency in Mandarin speaking through newspapers. The other two useful aids in learning Mandarin are friends (27 per cent) and television (27 per cent).

The Chinese language press, in particular, the two major Chinese dailies, can help Chinese Singaporeans, including school children, in learning Mandarin. To begin with, the Chinese language press should review their format and presentation to

cater for a wider range of readership. At present, they are at a disadvantage because of an earlier stoppage of the press. Unlike the English newspapers, which stop press late in the night, the early stoppage of the Chinese press means that they are unable to cover all the news events for the day. In the long term, this will affect their reputation as news agencies. Their readership will also lose out if more and more people turn to the English press to seek up-to-date news.

Another problem which is hindering readership in the Chinese press lies in the choice of Chinese words or characters. The Chinese dailies tend to use words or phrases which are uncommon and difficult to read or to understand. Some of them, including sentence structure, particularly those translated from international news, seem difficult even for 'O' level students.

As more parents send their children to the English stream schools and more school children study Chinese as a second language, the Chinese press must adapt and pitch their vocabulary at the CL2 'O' level or even at lower level in order to reach out to the mass. The use of simpler words and phrases, coupled with improved presentation in easily readable style, will encourage many more young Chinese Singaporeans to accept the Chinese press, help them to learn the language and to understand better their cultural heritage. This can be the contribution of the Chinese press in making Mandarin a living language. This will also ensure the long term viability of the Chinese press in a modern Singapore.

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