

Please check against delivery

**SPEECH BY PROFESSOR WEE CHOW HOU, CHAIRMAN OF
THE PROMOTE MANDARIN COUNCIL AT THE OFFICIAL
LAUNCH OF THE SPEAK MANDARIN CAMPAIGN ON MONDAY,
13 DECEMBER 2004 AT 5 PM AT THE NTUC CENTRE
(TRANSLATION)**

Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Minister Mentor

Members of the Promote Mandarin Council

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good afternoon

1. It is a great honour to have the Minister Mentor grace this occasion today, as the Speak Mandarin Campaign celebrates its 25th birthday. This is indeed a significant event. As you all know, Minister Mentor has been the key driving force behind the campaign and efforts to promote Mandarin, Chinese culture and bilingualism in Singapore. Thanks to his vision and foresight in launching this campaign back in 1979, we are able to stand here today to take stock of its success and the road ahead.

2. As chairman of the Promote Mandarin Council, I am proud of the campaign's longevity and its many achievements in encouraging more Singaporeans to speak Mandarin, and appreciate Chinese culture. Having served on the council for seven years, I have witnessed many great moments, and also experienced several challenging ones.

3. Indeed, the campaign has come a long way. When it was first conceived and launched, the key message was to urge Chinese Singaporeans to use Mandarin as a common language over more than 12 different dialects, to facilitate better communication and understanding. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, most Chinese Singaporeans, except for the elderly above 60, preferred speaking Mandarin to dialects. In 1989, the 10th anniversary of the campaign, a Ministry of Education survey showed that 69 per cent of Chinese primary one students spoke Mandarin at home. Other surveys also showed that Mandarin was commonly used in social environments, such as in restaurants, coffee shops, food centres, markets and on public buses. The campaign then refined its message to reach out to more professionals and businessmen to use Mandarin in their daily lives. Beyond speaking Mandarin, the campaign has also, in the last five to six years, sought to interest its audience in Chinese culture, and in building a higher level of proficiency in the language through reading and writing.

4. Last year, the campaign made a bold move. It gave itself a little makeover in a bid to better connect with young English-speaking Chinese Singaporeans – mostly students and professionals. You may remember the television commercials featuring singer Tanya Chua and entrepreneur Kenny Yap. Apart from being faces that young Singaporeans can identify with, they also had real life experiences to share, on how Mandarin has played a key role in their personal success stories. The tagline, “Use It, Don’t Lose It’ was developed to drive home the message that it is important to use Mandarin in everyday life, as practice makes perfect. I am pleased to say that this move

has paid off for the campaign. We have received positive feedback from the media and members of the public.

5. Building on the success of last year's campaign, there will be more surprises and exciting programmes in store this year to reach out to two core target audience groups - young Chinese Singaporeans of the "post 65 generation" who currently do not speak Mandarin, and those who do speak Mandarin, but only at a superficial level. Through the mass media and entertainment programmes, the campaign aims to connect with the groups to demonstrate that it is cool to speak Mandarin through the theme "华语 Cool" and reinforce the message to "Use It, Don't Lose It". Mandarin is cool in more ways than one. It is cool in the way the English word is used in pop culture to describe something that is hip and trendy. With Chinese culture becoming an increasingly important influence in global culture, Mandarin is definitely in or "酷" (*ku*), as the Chinese call it. In Mandarin, there is another word 库 (*ku*), often used to connote a store of treasure. Indeed, Mandarin is an emotive, succinct and visual language, and it is truly a store of linguistic and cultural treasure waiting to be explored and mastered.

6. This is a significant point in the campaign's history because of events and changes in the larger context. Minister Mentor has spoken recently of the need to be bicultural as well as bilingual, and the Ministry of Education has announced major changes to be made in the teaching of Mandarin in schools. Key to these changes will be the need to find more creative ways to teach Mandarin to students, especially those who come from predominantly English-

speaking homes. In line with this, the Speak Mandarin Campaign this year is reaching out through new and fun ways.

7. This year's campaign ambassador, Joi Chua, is an example of a young Singaporean who has come to realize the importance of being bilingual. At age 26, Joi is as old as the campaign itself. An optometrist turned singer, she is aware of the need to be adaptable when communicating with both her patients in her former job, and her fans and journalists. She realized that her Mandarin was weak after traveling to Taiwan, and made efforts to improve. This has made an impact on her career and helped her to break into the regional pop scene. For *Chou Pi Jiang*, the homegrown group, tapping into biculturalism has led to success beyond our shores, in Taiwan and the region. The band's music is an interesting blend of Western influences such as reggae, rap and hip hop, but its name is derived from the saying *san ge chou pi jiang, he cheng yi ge Zhu Geliang*. Literally translated, this means that three cobblers working together can match even the wisdom of master military strategist *Zhu Geliang*.

8. A key highlight of the programmes lined up this year will be the Mandarin Movie Appreciation Series and Mandarin Moviethon to be held at Golden Village cinemas. Entertaining and artistic Mandarin movies will be screened, with introductions before and lively question-and-answer sessions after each screening, hosted by well-known critics and film personalities. Television viewers can also expect to see more innovative and fun ways of learning Mandarin with a special four-part game show to be produced by

MediaCorp and featuring some familiar Channel 8 faces. To encourage Singaporeans to use and learn Mandarin through different channels, there will also be special features and editorial collaborations with The Straits Times and *Lianhe Zaobao*. Through the print media, the campaign aims to show that reading Mandarin need not be a daunting or difficult task.

9. As you can see, the activities and programmes lined up will be a treat for the senses, as well as a celebration for everyone to join in. As the saying goes, *he bao zhi mu, sheng yu hao mo, jiu cheng zhi tai, qi yu lei tu, qian li zhi xing shi yu zu xia* (the huge tree you can barely wrap around your arms germinates from a seedling, the nine-storey tower is built from the earth, and a journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step). I see this year as a beginning of the next phase for the campaign. It is my hope that pop culture will lead our young to discover Chinese literature, history or art. Take *xinyao* for example. The poetic Mandarin lyrics of songs by the likes of *Liang Wenfu* (Liang Wern Fook) have inspired many young Singaporeans to discover the beauty of the language and take an interest in Chinese literature. Dr Liang who is himself is an accomplished writer, scholar and lecturer has composed a song, 'I Hope To Hear You Speak' for the launch today. In fact, I would recommend his song *Li shi kao shi qian xi* ('The Eve of the History Exam) to any young person as an interesting introduction to Chinese history.

10. Finally, I feel very grateful and heartened by the strong support for this year's campaign. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to our partners:

Golden Village, Lexmark, *LianHe ZaoBao*, MediaCorp Radio Class 95 & Perfect 10, MediaCorp TV & Artiste, Music Street Pte Ltd, Musiczone Records, Nokia, NTUC & NTUC Fairprice, Popular Book Co, Rawmusic Production, SingTel, Sony Ericsson, ST Edu-World, The Straits Times and Towkay Wong's Holdings. Of course, this campaign would not have been possible without the dedicated and passionate people working behind the scenes – members of the Promote Mandarin Council, and the campaign secretariat at the National Library Board. Thank you.

END