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**SPEECH BY BG (NS) LEE HSIEN LOONG
DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER
AT THE 1994 SPEAK MANDARIN CAMPAIGN
LAUNCH ON 6 SEP 94 AT SHANGRI-LA HOTEL AT 8.00 PM**

In the 16 years since we launched the Speak Mandarin campaign in 1979, many Chinese Singaporeans have switched from dialects to Mandarin. The 1990 Census showed that more Chinese families now speak Mandarin. Between 1980 and 1990, Chinese households using Mandarin as the predominant household language rose from 13 per cent to 30 per cent. Households using dialects fell from 76 per cent to 48 per cent. Mandarin is also being used among more Chinese Singaporeans at their workplace. The percentage of Chinese doing so increased from 28 per cent in 1991 to 36 per cent in 1993.

The percentage of Chinese households speaking English at home rose from 10 per cent to 21 per cent. This was to be expected as younger, English-educated couples married and started their own families. But despite this, Mandarin is holding its own against English in homes.

This is a good trend which we should encourage. We cannot return to the old days, when Chinese pupils had to juggle between speaking dialect with their parents, Mandarin with siblings and English for schoolwork. Most children cannot cope with three languages. If we force them to use all three, they will master none. Worse, their vocabulary is likely to be limited to a few commonplace household words. Their conversations will be shallow, and their ability to absorb important cultural values through the medium of the mother tongue will be impaired.

Four or five years ago, we found some difficulty encouraging people to learn Chinese in schools, and to use Mandarin at workplaces. Children from Chinese speaking homes, who were the majority, never had any problems with the mother tongue. But a minority of those from English speaking homes did. The parents of such children resented the amount of time their children had to spend learning Chinese in school. They felt then that the future lay with the English speaking world, and that Mandarin had no economic value. They believed that the way to succeed in life was to master the English language. They wanted their children to concentrate on learning English, and spend less time and energy on Mandarin, at the expense (they felt) of other important subjects.

This was one of the reasons the Ong Teng Cheong Committee was formed to improve the teaching of Chinese in schools. The Ministry of Education has implemented the changes proposed by the Committee. These changes have had a significant effect. We have lightened the load on Chinese pupils from English speaking homes, without lowering standards of spoken or written Chinese expected of pupils. Parents are now much happier. Teachers face fewer problems teaching or promoting the use of Mandarin in schools.

But the more important reason for the change in attitude towards the Chinese language is the boom in China. The commercial value of Mandarin is now obvious to all. Schools have had to offer more classes teaching Higher Chinese to meet the new demand from students. Even non-Chinese Singaporean businessmen are picking up some Mandarin to invest in China, manage their operations there, or just to trade with Chinese firms.

Our motive for organising the annual Speak Mandarin Campaign is not merely economic or commercial, important though these considerations are. More importantly, through the use of Mandarin, Chinese Singaporeans can preserve and transmit values, culture and a sense of identity. Language, culture and values are intimately linked. It is not easy to convey fully the import of the values and culture of the Chinese civilisation through, say, English as

the idioms will lose their flavour and some of their meaning in the translation. The same is true for Malay culture, or Indian culture. Hence the Government's emphasis on pupils of all races learning the mother tongue in schools.

Furthermore, knowledge of the mother tongue is an important part of a person's sense of identity and self confidence. Someone who knows that he belongs to a rich and ancient culture will not easily be seduced by plausible but unsound ideas derived from a superficial understanding of another culture. But someone who feels insecure about his own status and craves approval from what he considers a superior civilisation may lose his bearings and be carried away.

However, while we hold fast to traditional values like respect for elders and the upholding the central importance of the family, we must at the same time remember that we are an open and forward looking society. We will always be exposed to external influences. We cannot reject change, or else the world will leave us behind. We must remain receptive to new ideas even while we sieve out those which are undesirable and harmful.

The focus of this year's Speak Mandarin Campaign is on raising the status of Mandarin among Chinese Singaporeans, especially English-educated Chinese Singaporeans. More English-educated Chinese Singaporeans are now on the Speak Mandarin Committee. This year's Committee is chaired by Mr Ho Kwon Ping, an English-educated bilingual entrepreneur. I am also grateful to the other English-educated professionals who are helping out in this year's campaign, and particularly to Professor Tommy Koh and Professor Chan Heng Chee, who have very sportingly volunteered to perform a xiangsheng for us tonight. They will not only provide fresh perspectives and ideas on how to make the Campaign more effective, but also keep the organisers mindful of the sensitivities involved in promoting the language and cultural values of the majority community in a multi-racial society.

In our zeal to promote the use of Mandarin, we must never unwittingly offend non-Chinese Singaporeans, or even Chinese Singaporeans from non-Chinese speaking backgrounds. We must never give the minority communities in Singapore reason to feel threatened or oppressed by the language or culture of the majority community. On the contrary, we should go out of our way to make them feel relaxed and confident, that there is room for all races and cultures in Singapore.

The Committee must consolidate and further build upon the achievements of previous Speak Mandarin Campaigns. It continually needs to come up with new ways to make learning Mandarin fun, and to encourage people to use the language. Wherever possible, the Campaign should try to achieve its objectives through activities laced with a healthy dose of fun and humour. I am happy that the Committee is promoting activities like xiangsheng, and has organised the premiere screening of a Chinese film to kick off a week-long festival of Chinese films. This is a good start. It will help to make learning and using Mandarin interesting, especially to English-educated Chinese Singaporeans.

If we succeed in capturing the attention of the non Chinese-speaking Chinese, and can encourage them to appreciate and use Mandarin more often, over time we will get more Chinese Singaporeans to share the use of Mandarin as a common language for all Chinese dialect groups.

On this note, I am pleased to launch the 1994 Speak Mandarin Campaign.
