

17 OCT 1988

Singapore Government **PRESS RELEASE**

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Release No: 11/OCT
05-3/88/10/03

88-LHL-18

SPEECH BY THE MINISTER FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY, BG LEE HSIEN LOONG, AT THE LAUNCHING CEREMONY OF THE SPEAK MANDARIN CAMPAIGN AT THE SINGAPORE CONFERENCE HALL ON 3 OCTOBER 1988 AT 8.00 PM

In 1979, the Prime Minister launched the first Speak Mandarin Campaign. In the nine years of effort since then, we have made progress. More Singaporeans now speak and understand Mandarin. More and more, we are using Mandarin instead of dialects in homes and offices, departmental stores and hawker centres. Even for Seventh Moon Festival auctions, which have traditionally been conducted in dialect for maximum effect, Mandarin is gradually starting to be used.

Our surveys show some interesting results. For example, today more than 87 per cent of Chinese can speak Mandarin, compared with only 76 per cent in 1981. 32 per cent of the clan associations use Mandarin at their meetings, compared to only 22 per cent before 1979. 87 per cent of Seventh Moon auctions last year used some Mandarin, compared to only 50 per cent the year before. These are encouraging signs.

In recent years, Mandarin has also become more useful as a business language, especially in our dealings with other countries. As China's economy continues to open up and expand, Singaporean businessmen will have more opportunities to do business with China. Those who can speak Mandarin have a chance to trade all over China; those with only dialect will at best have an advantage dealing with one province.

Mandarin is also a major factor in retaining our Chinese cultural heritage. To achieve rapid economic development and modernisation, Singapore has adopted English as a working language. We have imported ideas, technology, and enterprises from the West. We are becoming increasingly an English speaking society. These fundamental changes have naturally brought in their train Western culture, life styles and moral values.

This transformation cannot be reversed. Nor can it be stopped, unless we are prepared to accept stagnation in economic progress. But as we become a modern industrial economy, we must not lose our cultural heritage, and become a pseudo-Western society. How do we avoid this?

Language has a considerable part to play. Although Oriental cultural and social values can be conveyed in translation, through English texts and explanations, knowledge of the mother tongue gives us a much stronger sense of identity and belonging. Understanding of the original language of the proverbs and stories adds a richness of association and nuance which can never be fully conveyed in the translation, no matter how good.

The Speak Mandarin Campaign is not meant to make Singapore a more Chinese society, at the expense of the Malays and Indians. It is meant to make dialect-speaking Chinese replace dialect with Mandarin. Malay and Indian Singaporeans are fortunate that they do not face a problem of dialects, as Chinese Singaporeans do. But the mother tongue and traditional values are as important to them as Mandarin is to the Chinese.

Majlis Pusat and other Malay cultural organisations organised a Malay Language and Culture Month this year, and Indian cultural organisations organise similar Tamil language activities from time to time. The government

encourages them to do so. Our desire to preserve traditional values is not confined to the Chinese community alone. It is good for the nation that Singaporeans of all races have a clear sense of where they have come from, and why they are here. Each community should take pride in its heritage, retain it and develop upon it.

Some Chinese want to retain dialect because they feel that their dialect group, even more than Mandarin, preserves their roots and sense of identity. If Mr Ng or Mr Wong is addressed as Mr Wang, somehow he feels not quite the same person. Fortunately Mr Lee usually does not have this problem, because the surname sounds the same in many dialects.

But this effort to retain dialects may instead make it harder for the younger generation to keep their roots. If children try to learn both dialect as well as Mandarin, the burden will be a heavy one. If the load is too much for them, they may fail to become proficient in either. Then they may not imbibe the values and sense of identity that will help guide them through life. But if they concentrate on Mandarin, they have a chance to learn it well. In which case, it can be an effective vehicle to convey Chinese culture and values to the next generation.

Of course, we could forget Mandarin, learn dialect alone, master it as a formal language, and use it as our mother tongue. In China, before the 1911 revolution made Mandarin the official dialect, people living in the provinces did that. But they abandoned that solution decades ago, because even there different dialect groups had to communicate with one another. Not even the most traditional and conservative Chinese would want Singapore schools to teach dialect instead of Mandarin. In Singapore, many dialect groups are packed together into one society. It is obviously better for all to learn Mandarin, than for the Hokkiens, Hakkas, Cantonese and Hainanese each to speak their own dialect, mingle only among their own clan, and be unable to communicate with anyone else.

The Speak Mandarin Campaign has the wide support of our Chinese community. At first, many, especially older folks, were unhappy that SBC was phasing out dialect programmes on television. Now, Singaporeans have accepted it. SBC Mandarin dramas, like the Army series and the Neighbours, have been highly successful. Dialect programmes broadcast by foreign television stations do not have a huge following in Singapore. I recognize what a sacrifice the older generation of dialect speaking Chinese have made, for us to achieve this transformation. I thank them for making this sacrifice, and cooperating in this effort to change the spoken language of the whole community. Their grandchildren will be grateful for what they have done.

Of course, there is still much more to be accomplished. The Campaign serves as an annual reminder to all of us of the task which still lies ahead. Those who can speak Mandarin should do so more often, take the initiative to speak Mandarin first, and encourage others to follow them. Only when everyone does that can we claim final success in our Speak Mandarin Campaign.

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