

Singapore Government

PRESS RELEASE

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SPEECH FOR RADM TEO CHEE HEAN, MINISTER FOR

EDUCATION AND SECOND MINISTER FOR DEFENCE AT THE

LAUNCH OF SPEAK MANDARIN CAMPAIGN 1999 AT SUNTEC CITY ON FRIDAY 3 SEPTEMBER 1999 AT  
10.10 AM

ENGLISH TEXT OF MINISTER'S SPEECH IN MANDARIN

Mr Lee Yock Suan, Minister for Information and the Arts and Minister for the  
Environment,

Prof Wee Chou Hou, Chairman, Promote Mandarin Council,

Ladies and gentlemen

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1 The Speak Mandarin Campaign, now into its 21st year, has come a long way. Initially, the campaign aimed only to get the Chinese community to speak Mandarin instead of dialects. With the realisation of this goal, the campaign has, over the last two years, concentrated on encouraging the community to read and use Mandarin.

2 According to a recent Straits Times survey, Mandarin is the most frequently used language of Chinese students. Over 6 in 10 said they speak mostly Mandarin in

school and at home. In contrast, only one-third of the Chinese students would converse with their classmates in English. This attests to the success of the campaign in providing people with an environment to speak Mandarin and become confident in it.

#### Falling Chinese readership among the young

3 But we must not be complacent given the complex language environment in Singapore. Singaporeans switch between languages, or use words from different languages and dialects in the same sentence. Even as we take comfort in more people using Mandarin, we must also ensure that the environment for speaking Mandarin remains a conducive one. In this, the media has an important role to play. Models of good spoken Mandarin create good conditions for us to learn Mandarin well.

4 A related issue is that although more people are comfortable in speaking Mandarin, young people today are not as passionate about reading Chinese materials as young people yesterday. For example, Lianhe Zaobao reported in 1989 that 35% of its readers were below 30 years old; today it is a mere 20%. A Ministry of Information and The Arts (MITA) media

survey also showed that people generally preferred watching news bulletins over Channel 8 to reading Lianhe Zaobao.

5 Learning good Chinese from newspapers can help our young to speak better Mandarin, but young Singaporeans are not reading the Chinese papers. There are several reasons. Young bilingual readers may find it easier to read in English. They also have access to such competing media as Internet, television, cable, radio and magazines. Those who spend much time learning Chinese as a subject are also unlikely to want to spend their leisure reading Chinese papers. Besides, some of the young feel that the newspaper content lacks entertainment value.

#### Addressing the problem

6 This trend is a cause for concern. Waning interest in Chinese newspapers will make it harder for us to transmit the values and ethos of the Chinese community to the young. To address this problem, Lianhe Zaobao has revamped Fukan. The new zbNOW promises to be a more lively read with articles written to appeal to the young. It also hopes to encourage the exchange of views amongst readers, and to relate the learning of Chinese to real life.

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7 Schools will also continue to encourage pupils to read Chinese newspapers from a young age. Already, some Chinese lessons in the Primary and Secondary textbooks are adapted from newspaper reports, and newspaper clippings are often used as teaching and learning resources.

8 More recently, in tandem with the growing influence of Information Technology in almost every sphere of life, schools now use IT to teach Chinese, in addition to traditional instructional materials. The Speak Mandarin Website, launched in 1996, has also been keeping itself up to date with various multimedia

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technologies, so that it is a fun and rich resource to use. The number of users of the Chinese Internet is growing at an annual rate of 60 per cent, and is expected to rise from 2.1 million to over 6.7 million this year. By 2003, the number is likely to exceed 33 million, with China as one of the leading Internet markets [Extracted from Newslink, 13/7/1999, page 10, "HK, Taiwan, China in Net portal tie-up"]. The opportunities that will be opened up are immense, be it opportunities for business, learning, cultural exchange or entertainment. One can certainly expect a hundred flowers to bloom on the Chinese Internet scene. Really Chinese is as 'hip' a language as any others.

#### Concl usi on

9 Creating a conducive environment to speak Mandarin requires the combined effort of many agencies – home, schools, publishing houses, media companies, and even arts and entertainment groups who will make learning Mandarin fun and enjoyable. The home especially is where habits are cultivated from an early age, and we look to parents to encourage the good habits of speaking and reading in their children. Above all, we must see Chinese as a living language. It is not only a language for the transmission of cultural values. It is also a modern and vibrant language that is key to a whole new world of opportunities. The value of being able to speak, read and write Chinese is that one would have doors to the past, present and future opened to him.

10 It now gives me great pleasure to launch the 1999 Speak Mandarin Campaign, and with it the "Window to Mandarin" exhibition and zbNOW.

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