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ENGLISH VERSION OF SPEECH IN MADARIN BY THE PRIME
MINISTER, MR GOH CHOK TONG, AT THE LAUNCHING
CEREMONY OF THE 1991 SPEAK MANDARIN CAMPAIGN, AT
SINGAPORE CONFERENCE HALL AUDITORIUM
ON MONDAY, 30 SEPTEMBER 1991 AT 8.00 PM

A nation is “a single people traditionally fixed on a well-defined territory, speaking the same language and preferably a language all its own, possessing a distinct culture, and shaped to a common mould by many generations of shared historical experience”. [Rupert Emerson in “From Empire to Nation”]. By this definition, Singapore is not yet a nation. We do not speak the same language, and we do not yet possess the many generations of shared historical experience.

Within the same family, it is still very common to find that grandparents, parents and children do not share the same primary language - the language they are most comfortable in. For the grandparents the language they use is very often dialect, for the parents Mandarin and for the children English. Of course, the three generations do still converse with one another through a combination of

dialect, Mandarin and English. But their common vocabulary is unlikely to go beyond 500 words. They will have difficulty discussing any subject in depth. Their conversation will be shallow, limited by each other's command of the other generation's primary language.

I speak Hokkien to my mother. My children speak to me and my wife in English, and Mandarin to their grandmother, my mother. They have dropped dialect. It will take another generation in my family for three generations to share the same one primary language.

In Singapore, communication across families is even more complicated for the older generation. It is not unusual to find two Chinese together who are unable to talk to one another. One may speak Hokkien only while the other Cantonese. How can we ever build a nation if the Chinese community is unable even to speak the same language, be it dialect, Mandarin or English?

You will discover how heterogeneous Singapore is when you go campaigning in an election. No political leader in Singapore can reach out on his own to every Singaporean. No matter how good a linguist he is, he cannot be expected to master the four official languages plus over 20 Chinese and Indian dialects.

It is in our national interest to move into a situation where all Singaporeans can speak to one another in a common language, ie, English, and to members of his own community in his mother tongue. For the Chinese, the common mother tongue should be Mandarin rather than dialect. Unlike Hong Kong where Cantonese predominates, it will not be politically acceptable if we replace the teaching of Mandarin with any of the major dialects. I do not think we can agree on which dialect to be taught. If we do not succeed in forging Mandarin as the common mother tongue, the link language for future generations of Chinese Singaporeans will be English only.

Already English is becoming the dominant language among Chinese households. Its use had increased from 10 per cent in 1980 to 21 per cent in 1990.

The question is whether with the greater use of English, we may lose some aspects of our identity. These are the traditional values of our forefathers.

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Values and language cannot be easily separated. They are intrinsically linked to each other. Values get into our minds and hearts through folklore. For the Chinese these stories and beliefs are preserved in their literature or passed on

by word of mouth. Although Chinese literature, idioms and proverbs can be translated into English, their full meaning may be lost in the process.

A Chinese Singaporean who does not know Chinese - either Mandarin or dialect - runs the risk of losing the collective wisdom of the Chinese civilization. This year's campaign slogan is apt. Mandarin is more than a language. Mandarin not only allows Chinese to communicate easier with one another but also opens up many chests of treasures - Chinese literature, music, operas, paintings, calligraphy, ceramics and so on. When we can appreciate them, we will feel proud to be part of that rich history which is Chinese.

Having a sense of history is important. It gives us our bearing and makes us understand what we are today. As a country, Singapore's history is short. But if we know Mandarin, we can identify with a 5000 year old civilization.

Last month, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry organized a congress of Chinese businessman from all over the world. These were successful men and women. One would expect them to prefer using English, which is the language of trade and business. But I was told that was not the case. Although the official language of the congress was English, the moment someone spoke in Mandarin, the atmosphere changed. It became more intimate. The use of

Mandarin brought out immediate a common understanding among the Chinese businessmen of different nationalities. They felt a common bond. They felt they belonged together.

Our problem is how to make Mandarin popular with our students. Many parents have voiced the concern that their children may not be able to cope with the learning of Mandarin in schools. I believe we should make learning of the language lively and enjoyable. We should put fun and humor to soften the serious task of teaching Chinese.

Last year's 'Speak Mandarin Campaign' made some Singaporeans uncomfortable. I fully understand their concerns. Let me assure non-Chinese Singaporeans that the government is not promoting the Chinese language or culture at the expense of the others. In fact, the Ministry of Information and the Arts is working together with the Malay Language Committee to promote standard Malay. The Ministry has also asked the Indian community if they need help to promote the use of Tamil. We want all the ethnic communities to preserve their language, culture and values. We aim to be a harmonious multi-racial nation.

For the Chinese community, our aim should be a single people, speaking the same primary language, i.e. Mandarin, possessing a distinct culture and a shared past, and sharing a common destiny for the future. Such a Chinese community will then be tightly knit. Provided it is also tolerant and appreciative of the other communities' heritage, able to communicate with them in English, and work with them for a common future, Singapore will grow to become a nation.

Thank you.

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