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PRESS RELEASE

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**SPEECH BY BG (NS) LEE HSIEN LOONG,
DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER,
AT THE 1997 SPEAK MANDARIN CAMPAIGN LAUNCH
AT SUNTEC CITY ON TUESDAY, 2 SEPTEMBER 1997 AT 7.30 PM**

The Speak Mandarin Campaign has evolved over the years. It began as an exercise to encourage dialect-speaking Chinese Singaporeans to switch to Mandarin. This has proved effective. But at the same time, the use of English has risen steadily. English is the language of business and administration in Singapore and the world, and all our schools now teach in English.

So in the last few years, the Speak Mandarin campaign has targeted English-educated Chinese Singaporeans. Many among this group have received a bilingual education, but have lost touch with Mandarin after leaving school and starting work.

Our ability to speak both English and our mother tongues is a precious asset. Being bilingual and bicultural anchors our society in our traditional values, and enables us to plug into the international world of science, technology and economics. Understanding Chinese opens up a whole world of resources and ideas, and broadens our viewpoints and options.

We can take this advantage into cyberspace. Being bilingual allows us to tap into the wealth of both the English and the Chinese Internet universes. We must become as adept at exploring Chinese cyberspace as we are at exploring English cyberspace.

Chinese Internet is still quite new in Singapore. I am happy that the Committee to Promote the Use of Mandarin has taken the first steps in promoting Chinese Internet, with the support of the public and private sectors.

But at a more fundamental level, we need to go beyond encouraging social use of Mandarin and promoting Chinese Internet. This is not so much in the Speak Mandarin campaign, as in the Government's overall policies.

Our Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools have helped to preserve the best of the old Chinese schools. But SAP schools vary in the strength of their Chinese traditions. For example, Chinese High School and Dunman High School are particularly strong. So is Hwa Chong Junior College. The Ministry of Education (MOE) will study if we can get one or two more SAP schools to develop in this direction. This will not be easy, because it depends on the whole school environment, and not just one or two subjects. But we should try.

The future Chinese elite will come mainly from pupils who have done Higher Chinese in school. So we should ensure that the Higher Chinese and also the Chinese syllabi and textbooks convey Chinese cultural values and heritage, and do not just teach the language for utilitarian purposes. In 1992 Mr Ong Teng Cheong chaired a committee to review the teaching of Chinese in our schools. The committee recommended revising the textbooks to

achieve this. Since then the revised textbooks have been progressively introduced into the schools.

I recently looked at the new textbooks for Higher Chinese in secondary schools, to get a direct impression of what the pupils will learn from doing Higher Chinese. The new textbooks are significantly better than the old ones in terms of cultural content. But they can still be improved further, to choose texts which are more interesting to pupils, and to focus more sharply on conveying values and roots, a primary aim of teaching the mother tongue.

The Ministry of Education will do this progressively over the next few years. However, in doing this it should be careful not to make the subject more difficult. Not every pupil can do Higher Chinese in school. MOE estimates that between 10 per cent and 20 per cent of pupils have the language facility and intellectual ability to master both Chinese and English at first language level, plus all the other subjects. Every year out of 28,000 Chinese students who take 'O' levels, only 2,500 do Higher Chinese. I know from personal experience that the number who are totally and equally proficient in both Chinese and English will be much fewer. Many Singaporeans are bilingual, but inevitably one language or the other is dominant.

Making Higher Chinese harder will reduce the number of pupils who can cope with the subject. This will defeat our purpose. Instead, we should maintain the standard at a feasible level, and encourage and allow more pupils to take Higher Chinese. Presently only the top 20 per cent of Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) students are allowed to do Higher Chinese in secondary schools. The Ministry of Education will consider relaxing this, to allow students who did well in Chinese at PSLE to take

Higher Chinese in secondary school, provided they also did adequately in their other subjects.

We should also encourage more of the best students doing Higher Chinese to take Chinese Literature, and thus achieve a deeper understanding of Chinese culture. At present, only 500 do Chinese Literature, a tiny number compared to the 11,000 who do English Literature.

Some of the students doing Higher Chinese and Chinese Literature may end up more being proficient in Chinese than in English. But they will still have adequate English. At the same time, students whose dominant language is English will also have done Chinese at second language level. So the two groups will share considerable common ground. The differences between them should therefore not recreate the old bitter divide between the English and the Chinese educated in the previous generation. Our sense of being one Singapore is much stronger than before, and a certain tension between the two perspectives will be a necessary and positive feature of our cultural and political life.

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The Straits Times and the Lianhe Zaobao have distinct perspectives on the world. They often consider different events important, and report the same news differently. The two newspapers reflect the different world views of the English educated and Chinese educated journalists, as well as of their readerships. Having both perspectives allows us to see the world in richer, 3-D stereo vision, instead of a flat, 2-D photograph.

I read *The Straits Times*, *Lianhe Zaobao*, plus *Berita Harian* every morning. I often think how useful it would be if we got our students in

secondary schools and junior colleges to do, as part of their general paper, a comparison of how the different newspapers reported the same event, e.g. the tensions last year between Taiwan and China. Then they would understand the world, as well as Singapore society, better.

At the same time, as the Prime Minister said, we must address the problems which some pupils from non-Chinese speaking backgrounds have learning Chinese in school. These children do well in other subjects, so they are not academically weak. In fact some show considerable talent and intelligence. But they have great difficulty with Chinese. They try hard to learn the language. Their families too want them to learn. Yet despite strenuous efforts by themselves, their parents, teachers, and tutors, they still find it very difficult.

This is a problem of a minority of Chinese pupils. Those who speak Chinese at home have little problem with mother tongue in school. Many score distinctions for Chinese or Higher Chinese at PSLE. Unfortunately our Chinese curriculum assumes that the pupils will get support and reinforcement in the language from their home environment. Some pupils from English speaking homes who do not have this home environment and support also get by, by putting in more effort, and perhaps because they are better at languages. But not others. We must help them to solve their problem.

There have been long and impassioned debates as to whether standards of Chinese in schools are too low or too high. The Chinese cultural community in Singapore naturally hope that all pupils achieve as high a standard of Chinese as possible. This is also the Government's hope. Some have expressed the view that it is not standards which are too high, but the

quality of the teaching and textbooks that must be improved. They believe that if only we could have better teachers and more interesting textbooks, students would be able to master what is required of them.

We will continue to improve our teaching materials and techniques. But in the end what standard the pupils can achieve is not a matter of opinion, but an empirical fact. We must find out what this achievable standard is, and adjust our requirements accordingly.

We have to be realistic in what we expect of the pupils. The home language does make a big difference to learning language. Pupils from English speaking homes will naturally have to work harder at their Chinese than pupils from Chinese speaking homes. But the extra effort required should not be disproportionate to the pupils' overall workload of school work and homework. Our requirements must reflect what pupils of average ability, with a reasonable effort, can achieve, bearing in mind their range of family backgrounds.

Since the problem affects only a minority of pupils, the solution may be to address the specific difficulties of this small group, instead of changing the content of the syllabus across the board. The Ministry of Education will be studying this issue closely over the next six months.

A sound approach to teaching Chinese in schools will lay the foundation for wider use of Chinese in our society. Pupils who enjoyed Chinese in school will be more likely to speak it later in life, than pupils who found the subject an unpleasant and unrewarding burden.

We must take a flexible and pragmatic approach towards teaching, learning and promoting Chinese, in order to reach all segments of society. Chinese journalists write daily. Community leaders must read and speak Chinese well, but will not write in Chinese very often. Businessmen with projects in China will find business Chinese useful. Administrators and technicians will mostly use English at work, but still value their knowledge of Chinese for the sense of identity and roots it gives them. People's needs vary widely. By catering to these varied needs, we give the Chinese language the best chance of flourishing in Singapore.

Since this is the launch of the Speak Mandarin campaign, I have focussed today on the issue of Chinese language and the Chinese elite. But as the Prime Minister said at the Rally, the Malay and Indian communities have similar difficulties reproducing their elite groups in the next generation, and the Government will also look into their problems. The Eurasians do not have quite the same problem, because their mother tongue is English. All our communities need to keep their roots, and build on their traditions in this rapidly globalising and changing world. At the same time, we must steadily widen the common ground which we all share as Singaporeans together. This will safeguard the long term interest of our children, as well as of Singapore.

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