

SPEECH BY MR LEE YOCK SUAN, MINISTER FOR INFORMATION & THE ARTS, AT THE LAUNCH OF SPEAK MANDARIN CAMPAIGN 2001 ON 8 SEPTEMBER 2001 AT 11.00 AM, SINGAPORE INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION & EXHIBITION CENTRE AUDITORIUM

Good morning

Prof Wee Chow Hou, Chairman of the Promote Mandarin Council,

Ladies and gentlemen

I am pleased to be here for the launch of the 23rd Speak Mandarin Campaign.

It is heartening to note that since its inception in 1979, the Speak Mandarin Campaign has helped to establish Mandarin as a principal language of communication among Chinese Singaporeans. According to the figures released by the Department of Statistics in May, only 31% of Chinese Singaporeans now converse in dialects as against almost half in 1990. There is an increase in the usage of Mandarin among the young. They have benefited from our bilingual education system which emphasizes the use of English and the mother tongue.

Over the years, the Council has looked into new areas to promote the use of Mandarin. At his National Day Rally speech two years ago, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong expressed concern at the 'chap chye' Mandarin spoken by many Chinese Singaporeans. He said that while more were speaking the language, they were not speaking it better. Instead they were mangling it with a mix of Mandarin, dialect, English and Malay. He spoke of an urgent need to raise the standard of Mandarin. The Prime Minister returned to the issue at this year's National Day Rally when he called on the Chinese community to build up a core of effectively bilingual Singaporeans with a high competence in Mandarin and a love of Chinese culture. Only then can Chinese Singaporeans keep up the

standard of Mandarin which is an intrinsic part of our culture and traditions. Besides getting more Singaporeans to speak Mandarin, we should get them to speak it well.

This is a formidable challenge. While more Chinese Singaporeans are speaking Mandarin in place of dialects, they are also speaking more English than Mandarin. This makes it difficult for local Chinese to improve their Mandarin which can only come about with greater usage. The Campaign also has to contend with the might of the Internet and the popular Western culture. With the internet, Western culture has extended its reach and become more pervasive. We are already feeling the effects of this. You may have read in the press that some Chinese parents are giving their children only English names. They said English names are convenient and fashionable while Chinese names are 'outmoded' and 'difficult to remember'.

Fortunately, with the opening up of China which is developing into one of the economic powerhouses of the future, the tide is starting to flow the other way. The West itself is embracing some aspects of Chinese culture. More Americans are turning to alternative forms of medical treatment like acupuncture and herbal medicines. The concept of balance in food – 'cooling and 'heatiness' – is being studied by the West. Tai-ji, Sun Tzu's Art of War, 'dim sum' and Chinese gongfu are enjoying unprecedented popularity even as Chinese artistes like Zhang Zhi Yi and Jackie Chan receive international acclaim.

Our knowledge of the Chinese language and culture will stand us in good stead to tap the enormous potential of China's economy. However, even without this economic incentive, Chinese Singaporeans should still study Chinese language and culture for its intrinsic value. Our common working language is English but our mother tongue provides us with vital links to our roots and identity. It gives us a world-view that complements the perspective of the English-speaking world.

Proficiency in Chinese will also enable us to absorb the richness of the original Chinese stories and literary works which are lost in translation. It will help us appreciate more deeply our cultural heritage and values.

Much effort has been made to promote the appreciation of Chinese arts and culture through local drama and other art forms. There has been some success. For example, the acclaimed plays such as Kuo Pao Kun's 'Double bill' and 'Shang Yang' were performed to packed houses at the Arts Festival in 2000 and 2001 respectively. This shows that Singaporeans, both young and old, will respond to Chinese productions if these are well presented. Dramatists and playwrights thus play a key role in helping Chinese Singaporeans find their cultural identity. The mass media also has a part to play. As Singaporeans watch a lot of television, and as broadband brings more entertainment into homes, the media has a duty to ensure a judicious balance of modern and classical programmes.

There is no doubting the vibrancy of Chinese culture. What is needed is an imaginative approach to convince the young of its relevance in the modern world. Such an approach is also needed to persuade people that if Mandarin is worth speaking, it is worth speaking well. I urge the Council to work with the community groups, the media and schools to promote Mandarin as an intrinsic part of Chinese culture. They all have a responsibility to keep the language relevant to Singapore, to hold the interest of the young, and help them master it. In this, they can make use of multi-media, popular music and the arts as keys to unlocking the treasures of Chinese language and culture.

Chinese Singaporeans, especially the English-educated, should take another look at Mandarin. It is not a sterile business language or an archaic language of academia. It is a living and thriving language. I hope Chinese Singaporeans will learn to speak good Mandarin and use it to tap into the rich vein of Chinese

culture. It is now my pleasure to launch the 23rd Speak Mandarin Campaign and Mandarin Festival.