

# *Singapore Government*

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### **TO BE EMBARGOED UNTIL AFTER DELIVERY** **PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

**SPEECH BY MR MAH BOW TAN, MINISTER FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, AT THE LAUNCH OF THE SPEAK MANDARIN CAMPAIGN 2000, AT 7.30 PM, SATURDAY, 16 SEPTEMBER 2000, AT GV GRAND GREAT WORLD CITY**

\_\_\_\_\_The Speak Mandarin Campaign first kicked off in 1979 to get Chinese Singaporeans to speak a common language. After twenty-one years, we have largely succeeded in establishing Mandarin as the principal language of communication amongst Chinese Singaporeans.

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2 The question then is: Is there a need to continue with the Speak Mandarin Campaign? Senior Minister in a recent interview said that the Speak Mandarin Campaign cannot be considered a success until people feel a sense of familiarity and closeness when they speak the language. For Mandarin to become a language of society, it must be used at a higher level - to discuss political, economic and

social issues. Senior Minister added that this would take 1 or 2 generations.

3 Although more and more Chinese Singaporeans are speaking Mandarin, there is a need to improve the quality of the spoken language to achieve a higher standard of spoken Mandarin.

In our multi-lingual society many of us have a tendency to switch languages or use a mix of dialect, Malay, English or Mandarin in our daily conversations. Such habits hinder the achievement of a higher standard of spoken Mandarin. I therefore believe the campaign should not only continue but it should encourage Chinese Singaporeans to speak better Mandarin.

### Why Mandarin is important

7 4 Like other languages, Mandarin is crucial to the transmission of cultural values. A good command of Mandarin will open a whole new world of Chinese culture and heritage. Knowledge of Mandarin exposes us to the world of Chinese theatre, dance, music, film, drama and literature. Knowledge of Mandarin also facilitates our dealings with China, Asia's potential economic powerhouse.

5 I thus see the challenge for the Promote Mandarin Council as two-fold. First, we must get Chinese Singaporeans, especially the young and the professionals, to regard Mandarin as a modern and vibrant language. As such they must be motivated to achieve a better standard and a higher level of proficiency.

Second, we must create the environment for Mandarin to grow as a living language.

Role of the community

6 In this regard, the community -- such as community clubs, libraries, schools, theatre groups and the mass media – can provide the impetus to the learning of Mandarin.

7 There is also the Internet, which is becoming an increasingly important way of engaging young Singaporeans. The number of Chinese websites is increasing rapidly.

8 The question is whether Singaporeans can compete with other Chinese speaking nationalities to capture the Chinese-speaking web audiences worldwide. To do so, Singaporeans must acquire high communication skills and speak a standard of Mandarin that is understood by all.

#### Role of schools

9 Schools play an important role in stimulating students' desire to learn and appreciate Mandarin. It is important to create a conducive learning environment and organise interesting enrichment activities to support the learning of the language. I am happy to note that more and more schools are organising cultural programmes such as Chinese orchestra, *Xiangsheng*, Chinese dance, Chinese calligraphy for students.

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10 The Ministry of Education (MOE) has also been reviewing Chinese Language syllabuses, re-writing textbooks and modifying assessment criteria. New approaches and techniques of teaching Chinese have been adopted.

For example, since last year, *Hanyu Pinyin* has been taught to all primary one

pupils during their first 10 weeks of school. This is to help the students learn Chinese characters more effectively.

## Personal Experience

11 One of my greatest regrets was that I did not study Mandarin seriously when I was young. I even failed my Primary 6 exam. I found the lessons difficult and uninteresting. I only picked it up again later as an adult. Even then, it was after I had learnt Hokkien from the bus workers and Union leaders in SBS. I only started to pick up Mandarin again from the Chinese journalists in SPH in the late 80's and later when I entered politics.

12 It was a mistake that I did not want my children to make. However, my efforts to encourage them to learn Mandarin met with mixed success. Fortunately, one of my daughters showed some flair for the language, so I decided to send her to Taiwan for a 2 months immersion course after her 'O' levels. She went reluctantly but came back more enthusiastic.

She has started to listen to Mandarin pop songs and watch Mandarin movies which is a good start. I urge young Singaporeans not to make the same mistake as I did.

## For online reference

13 That is why the Speak Mandarin Campaign is so important. I hope it will spearhead the efforts of schools, public service organisations, private companies and grassroots bodies to get Chinese Singaporeans to improve their proficiency in Mandarin while appreciating Chinese culture. Through this year's slogan, "Speak Mandarin, It's an Asset", the Campaign will strive to drive home the message that a good command of Mandarin adds to our quality of life. On this note, I take great

pleasure in launching the 22nd Speak Mandarin Campaign.

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