

**SPEECH BY MR ONG PANG BOON,
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Mandarin: A Language for the Sake of our Children

A month-long campaign has been held every year since 1979 to remind us of the need to use Mandarin in our conversations. Singaporean Chinese come from various parts of China and, in view of the multiplicity of dialects, there cannot be any effective communication of thoughts if everyone insists on speaking his own dialect, let alone unity and co-operation. Chinese in its written form is the common language of the Chinese. No matter what dialect you may speak, it is still the same Chinese script which you will understand. What you write is also Chinese. Nevertheless, there exists quite a gap between dialects and written Chinese. If we wish to write down what we say in Chinese, we have no alternative but to speak Mandarin.

For the Sake of Children

Learning a language should best be started from young. When a person gets older, with his life styles and habits becoming set and rigid, he will take a longer time and make a greater effort to learn a new language. However, with strong determination and concern for the well-being of the younger generation, and in order to help lighten the burden of the younger generation in learning spoken and written Chinese in schools, I believe that non-Mandarin-speaking parents will make the effort to learn and speak Mandarin in the best interests of their children. A month-long Speak Mandarin Campaign should remind all Chinese of the need to converse in Mandarin in their daily life wherever possible.

Scope of Campaign

Of course, we must be realistic and cannot expect elderly Chinese who have never learnt Mandarin to switch to Mandarin immediately. Therefore, the current campaign, being directed mainly at the hawkers, may not prove to be very effective. The reasons are simple: First, most of the hawkers are elderly people. Since 1974, the Government has, as a general rule, issued hawker licences only to those above 40 years of age. These elderly hawkers, if they had not been to school in their early years, may find it a formidable task to try to learn Mandarin at present, however much they may wish to do so. Second, more and more people, especially the younger ones, now prefer to visit fast-food shops and super-markets, bringing about a corresponding decrease each year in the number of people patronising the hawker centres. Third, hawkers, competing for business and survival, cannot afford to insist on speaking Mandarin, as this would only land themselves at loggerheads with their dialect-speaking customers. Therefore, to be effective, the Speak Mandarin Campaign should, in keeping with changing

circumstances, be extended to the modern fast-food shops, super-markets, leading restaurants and departmental stores, where the customers are mostly educated young people and the staff are also younger and better educated. They are the products of the Government's bilingual education policy which has been implemented for many years and, among them, those who cannot speak Mandarin are few and far between indeed.

Civil Service

As I see it, crucial to the success of the campaign is the attitude of the staff of government departments and quasi-government organisations. As a government effort, the campaign has little chance of success if the Chinese members of these staff whose duty it is to execute government policies do not learn or speak Mandarin themselves and even scoff at or discriminate against its speakers. Such an attitude needs looking into. I do not quite know whether it is due to their inability to do so or whether it is a result of wrong attitude that Chinese public servants do not speak Mandarin. Whatever the reason, such a phenomenon is bad for the campaign. For the campaign to succeed, that is in order that the people will speak Mandarin more often, Chinese public servants, particularly the high-ranking ones, must, as an example to others, speak Mandarin more often at their place of work and accord equal treatment to speakers of Mandarin. Only then will the people be persuaded to speak Mandarin.

Cultural Roots

The Government has introduced the policy of bilingual education so that the people can acquire science and technology through English on the one hand and preserve their cultural roots through mother tongue on the other. Chinese Singaporeans cannot get to preserve their cultural roots if they can only speak and not write Chinese. For culture is transmitted through the written words. If one can only speak and not read and write Chinese, what difference does it make whether one speaks Mandarin or dialects? In order to ensure that such a thing does not happen, we must have regard to the teaching of Chinese at school. How is the teaching of Chinese coming along at the primary and secondary schools? Barely satisfactory! In its May issue, the *Nanyang Education* referred editorially to what it considered as an improper reduction of the class periods for Chinese, allegedly on the ground that the students' standards of Chinese were already high enough. The cut is therefore thought necessary so that more time can be devoted to the teaching of English to raise the students' standards of the language. Such a reason has its flaws.

Language Teaching

First, as suggested by the Prime Minister, an immersion scheme was introduced by the Ministry of Education. The scheme required Chinese-medium students to attend classes at English-medium schools in the hope that immersed in an English-speaking environment the students will have more opportunities to hear and use English. Hence it is evident that language learning takes time and that to cut lesson time for Chinese is to reduce the students' opportunity of immersion in the language.

Second, it does not make sense to purposely check the students' progress in the learning of Chinese just to make up for the deficiencies in the teaching of English. For example, if a school is well known for its high standard of Mathematics and Science, then, based on the theory of reducing the number of periods for Chinese language, this school may very well reduce the students' time of learning Mathematics and Science in order to raise their standard of English. However, many schools in Singapore are renowned for high standards of Mathematics, Science or English, but none of them has ever reduced the number of periods for any of the subjects in which its standard is already high just to facilitate the teaching of Chinese.

On the contrary, these schools not only take pride in the subjects in which they enjoy a high standard, but also do their best to maintain their standard and prestige. Parents, too, take pride in being able to send their children to these schools. It is therefore wrong to cut down the number of periods for Chinese in order to raise the standard of English. Apart from obstructing the learning of Chinese, this will not necessarily raise the standard of English. In the end, the students do not do well in both languages and all the efforts will be wasted. In order to raise the standard of English, the cause of the falling standard of English must first be looked into, so that the right remedy may be applied to the teaching of English. If the low English standard is due to the use of unsuitable teaching materials, improper teaching methods, low morale among the teachers or wrong objective of examination, then increasing the number of periods of teaching will not raise the standard of English. On the contrary, increasing the teaching time of English may cause both the teachers and the students to have an aversion to the subject. Therefore, to raise the standard of English by reducing the number of periods for Chinese is not a good measure.

Crystallisation of Culture

At present, many people think that the learning of Chinese has caused students to score poor results in other subjects. In their view, if students are not required to learn Chinese which has no economic value, their overall results will be very good. In the eyes of these people, culture is but an empty word. Since the future of the nation and society is not for them to see, there is no need for them to worry and since cultural roots are things of the past, there is no need for them to go after them. Therefore, the number of periods for the learning of one's mother tongue, which is essential for the preservation of one's culture, can simply be reduced without the least compunction. If one handles one's mother tongue, which is closely connected with one's own culture, with an attitude of bargaining and discounting, then the future and the cultural inheritance of one's country are causes for concern. Therefore, in order to succeed in the Speak Mandarin Campaign, we must on the one hand encourage more people to speak Mandarin and on the other try to reduce or even remove the obstacle to and discrimination against the use of Mandarin and the study of the Chinese language.

People must be made to realize that man cannot live without culture and that a mother tongue is the crystallisation of culture. For the sake of our future, we cannot afford to treat the teaching of our mother tongue lightly. As long as the teaching of our

mother tongue at school is successful, there will be no need for the Speak Mandarin Campaign any more in the future.