

Minister George Yeo (1998)

SPEECH (DELIVERED IN MANDARIN) BY GEORGE YEO, MINISTER FOR INFORMATION & THE ARTS AND 2ND MINISTER FOR TRADE & INDUSTRY AT THE 1998 SPEAK MANDARIN CAMPAIGN LAUNCH ON 12 SEP 98 AT 3.30 PM

Review of Past 20 Years

Twenty years ago, Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew launched the Speak Mandarin Campaign. He explained why Chinese Singaporeans who spoke 12 different dialects would be better off if they encouraged their children to speak Mandarin: Mandarin not dialect is what we teach in schools, he said. Very few children could cope with two languages plus a dialect. Mandarin should be the common lingua franca for all Chinese Singaporeans.

Ten years later, Senior Minister reviewed the progress of the campaign. He noted that our bilingual policy had become established and many Chinese Singaporeans now accepted Mandarin as the preferred language at home and for social intercourse. Emotionally this switch from dialects to Mandarin was a painful one. But Singaporeans are a pragmatic people. Once they understood the rationale, they rose to the challenge. It was not always easy but, today, as we look back and see how far we have come, the effort has been worthwhile.

We can take satisfaction in the fact that the basic aims of the campaign have been achieved. Surveys have repeatedly shown that almost all Chinese Singaporeans can speak some Mandarin, though at different levels of fluency (SPH Survey, 1993). A more recent survey of 1,000 Chinese Singaporeans by Forbes Research (1997) showed that 81% speak Mandarin daily. Most English-educated Chinese Singaporeans (86%) have no difficulty understanding simple

Mandarin. Mandarin is generally used for occasional greetings, to express appreciation and other feelings, and for ordinary conversation.

We have therefore succeeded in the historical task of establishing Mandarin as the high language for Chinese Singaporeans above the use of dialects. As measured by the most frequently spoken language at home for Primary One Chinese pupils, the number of dialect-speaking homes have fallen sharply from 64% in 1980 to 10% in 1988 to 9% this year. I describe this as a historical task because the promotion of Mandarin, called guoyu in Republican China and putonghua in the People's Republic, was one of the key tasks of the 1911 Chinese Revolution. Chinese schools in Singapore had been promoting the use of Mandarin since the beginning of this century.

Despite our success, there are still some older Chinese Singaporeans who do not understand much Mandarin. Because of the success of the Speak Mandarin Campaign, we have been able in the past few years to allow more use of dialects for news on radio and entertainment programmes on subscription TV. We must do this in a manner that will not compromise our Speak Mandarin policy. We must also not send the wrong signals to our young. The Speak Mandarin campaign and our bilingual policy have established Mandarin solidly as the main language of Chinese Singaporeans. Thus when Money, No Enough, largely in Hokkien, succeeded at the box office, we did not worry too much that it would erode our efforts.

Future Importance of Mandarin

For Chinese Singaporeans at home, the choice today is no longer between Mandarin and dialects, but between Mandarin and English. Because of the common use of English in our schools, in government and for international business, many younger Singaporeans today are much more comfortable in

English than in Mandarin. If we look at the most commonly spoken language at home of Primary One Chinese students, the number of Mandarin-speaking homes has increased from 26% in 1980 to 69% in 1988. Mandarin has largely displaced dialects as the Chinese language spoken at home. However, from 1989 onwards, the number of Mandarin-speaking homes started falling from 69% to 56% this year. The drop is by about 1% a year. In a few years' time, English-speaking homes of Primary One Chinese students will outnumber Chinese-speaking homes. We have to watch this trend carefully and manage it. Otherwise, the use of Mandarin in Singapore will decline, both in quantity and in quality. If the majority of Chinese Singaporeans use Chinese, not as the mother tongue but as a second language, not used at home and taught only in school, the nature of our society will change, and it will be for the worse.

Therefore, the objective of the Speak Mandarin Campaign today is not only to establish Mandarin as the preferred language over dialects, but also as a high language for Chinese Singaporeans. We must establish Mandarin as a high language in Singapore on par with the English language. This must be Singapore's commitment to all four official languages.

It is worth recapitulating why promoting Mandarin as a high language for Chinese Singaporeans is necessary. The reasons are both cultural and economic. The use of Mandarin will help us preserve and develop our cultural roots. Chinese Singaporeans are the proud inheritors of 5,000 years of Chinese civilization, the longest continuous civilization in human history. Chinese culture and the Chinese language give us a sense of who we are, where we came from and what we can be. This is crucial as it is easy for the young to be overwhelmed by the culture of Hollywood, so pervasive in the areas of information, education and entertainment today. The culture of a people gives its members their internal strength. Without that internal strength, we will not be able to survive disasters, political turmoil and war. If we use only English, and allow our mother tongue to degenerate into a

second language, with Chinese not used at home and taught only in school, we will lose much of our internal strength and become a weak people with shallow roots.

There is also a powerful economic reason to promote Mandarin. The re-emergence of China will have a growing impact on world economics and world politics in the coming decades. Those who speak and write Mandarin, and understand Chinese culture, will enjoy a considerable advantage in the next century. Those who are able to master both Chinese and English at a high level will be much sought after.

The Necessity for a Broad Base

Unfortunately, not many Chinese Singaporeans will be able to achieve such mastery in both languages. We must accept that for most people one language will be stronger than the other, and what this is depends a lot on the family background of the individual, the schools he attended, his job requirement and his own interests.

To transmit Chinese culture and the Chinese language effectively to successive generations of Chinese Singaporeans, we need a Chinese intellectual and cultural elite. We need political and cultural leaders, intellectuals and scientists, writers and poets, principals and teachers, editors and journalists, and many others who master Chinese at a high level. For some of them, their command of the Chinese language will be stronger than their command of the English language.

We should recruit foreign talents from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, North America and other countries to help us, but they can only supplement, not replace, our own local talents. Our problem is ensuring a steady supply of local talents who

are rooted here and who understand that, although Singapore has a majority Chinese population, we are an independent country with a separate destiny from China. What we need is a new generation of Chinese intellectual and cultural elite workers to replace the present Nantah generation. To create that new peak, we must have a wide base of Chinese speakers, readers and writers among a younger generation of Chinese Singaporeans.

Some trends are worrying. I referred earlier to the declining number of Chinese-speaking households. For news and entertainment, there has been a pronounced shift among younger Chinese Singaporeans to the English media. Among younger Chinese Singaporeans (age 15 to 29), 27% read Lianhe Zaobao compared to 41% for older Chinese Singaporeans (age 45 and above). Younger Chinese Singaporeans are bilingual and have a choice between Chinese and English newspapers. This is why it is absolutely important for Lianhe Zaobao to make the newspaper more attractive to younger readers.

For television, Channel 8 continues to be more popular than Channel 5 among younger Chinese Singaporeans, but these younger viewers are now able to switch channels freely. If we had not restructured TCS and enabled it to respond to changing market trends, the position would be very different. The sales pattern of Chinese and English radio and TV times reflects this bilingual ability of younger Chinese Singaporeans. Ten years ago, radio and TV times sold 3.5 times more copies in Chinese than in English. Today, i-weekly's circulation is only 1.75 times that of 8-Days.

We see the same phenomenon in cinema attendance. Since 1993, more tickets have been sold for English films than for Chinese films. This is partly because Hong Kong and Taiwanese films have not been able to match Hollywood in new digital technology. Such a shift, however, can only take place because younger Singaporeans are bilingual and can make the switch easily.

We must monitor the base of younger Chinese Singaporeans who speak, read and write Chinese comfortably. The wider this base, the easier it is for us to create a high peak of Chinese intellectual and cultural elite at the top. But if the base shrinks, we will fail in replacing the Nantah generation, which will be a tragedy for Singapore indeed.

Fortunately, the longer term trends are favourable. The growing economic importance of China will affect the global position of the Chinese language. The Chinese language is already one of the fastest growing foreign languages being learnt in the world. In North America, Australia and Europe, ethnic Chinese are rediscovering their ancestral language and culture. There is growing pride in being Chinese. The worldwide condemnation of what President Habibie described as 'barbaric acts' against ethnic Chinese Indonesians reflects this new spirit among ethnic Chinese worldwide. However, we must remember that this international Chinese spirit can also be a threat to non-Chinese if it is imbalanced or excessive. Among many young Chinese parents in Singapore today, there is a strong desire for their children master more Mandarin than they themselves were able to. This is a good sign and a positive trend.

Thus, we see in recent years, a small but growing pool of younger Chinese Singaporeans who, while being effectively bilingual, love the Chinese language and use it well. They will help to take on the responsibilities now being shouldered by Chinese-educated Singaporeans in government, in the diplomatic corps, in our schools and universities, in the media, and in our civil and cultural institutions. We need many more of them. Then we will succeed in creating a new generation of Chinese intellectual and cultural elite workers who will in turn transmit our language and culture to the next generation. Similarly, we need intellectual and cultural elites in the Malay and Indian languages who can help maintain the standards of these languages and also pass them on to successive

generations.

The New Battlefield

Where do we go from here? It is now time for the Speak Mandarin Campaign to build on the achievements of the last twenty years and help bring Singapore into the Information Age. We must plunge into Chinese Internet. The Internet not only connects the world but has the power to influence people in a way we could never have imagined. The Internet will be a force for both good and evil. The Internet enabled reports of the May riots in Indonesia to be broadcast to the world, but it was also used to misinform and, sometimes, to terrorise.

The Chinese Internet world is expanding very fast in Taiwan, Hong Kong and the Mainland. China hopes to have four million Chinese connected on-line by the year 2000. China Economic Times reported on 13 Jul 98 that the number of Internet surfers in China swelled to 1.2 million at the end of June, from half a million at the beginning of this year. Because of the explosive growth of Chinese Internet, a huge market for Chinese on-line content, information and services will open up. MIT Prof Nicholas Negroponte predicted that, in less than 10 years, Chinese will be the dominant language on the Internet.

The most important development of the Internet in the coming years will be in electronic commerce. By the year 2001, global electronic commerce is likely to exceed US\$300 billion. Chinese electronic commerce will be a growing part of world electronic commerce.

Singapore must move into this new world. This new frontier in cyberspace will also help us to achieve the objectives of the Speak Mandarin Campaign. Indeed, cyberspace will be an important new battleground for the Speak Mandarin Campaign.

Chinese WebTop Hua Zong Wang

We are launching today an Internet platform called Chinese WebTop or Hua Zong Wang. Hua Zong Wang will provide users an easy and fun one-stop gateway to a rich collection of Internet resources in Chinese. Membership is free to all users who sign up at the website. Members will get a free Chinese starter CD kit comprising a suite of Internet browsers, plug-ins and a Chinese viewer with hanyu pinyin input. Users can also purchase very good pen and speech input tools at attractive prices.

Because of our bilingual policy, Singaporeans are in a good position to benefit from the knowledge and opportunities available in both the English and Chinese Internet. Computer penetration and computer literacy are also high in Singapore. We have excellent IT infrastructure. We should exploit all these advantages to establish a strong position in Chinese Internet. In Parliament earlier this year, I announced that MITA has set up a Chinese Internet Steering Committee to look into the promotion and development of Chinese Internet. The Committee has since adopted the National Chinese Internet Programme which is driven by MITA, SBA, NCB and NSTB.

Under this Programme, we will establish a comprehensive infrastructure for Chinese Internet in two years. Examples of specific projects include developing Chinese WebTop as a one-stop directory of local and foreign websites, marketing Chinese Internet kits to end-users at subsidised rates, and encouraging the development of Chinese Internet content by the public and private sectors.

A key area of emphasis is our schools. The Ministry of Education has embarked on several initiatives to promote Internet, including Chinese Internet. We have to

train our teachers quickly and provide them with information on the Internet resources which are already available. We are also providing one computer for every two students from Primary One upwards. Every school will be connected to the Education Ministry's area network. The National Library Board will supplement these efforts. The next generation of Chinese students should be as comfortable in the Chinese Internet universe as they are in the English Internet universe.

Conclusion

If we succeed in these efforts, Singapore will be a hub for the international media and for electronic commerce in both English and Chinese. The Speak Mandarin Campaign has come a long way since 1979. While the promotion of Mandarin has achieved certain result, we must now rise to the challenge of information technology. The success of the Speak Mandarin Campaign in cyberspace will consolidate and build on our earlier achievements. If we fail in cyberspace, our earlier achievements will also be affected. The key is the younger generation. For Chinese Singaporeans, Chinese culture and the Chinese language must be an organic part of their lives. To be effective, the next generation of Chinese intellectual and cultural elite workers must be proficient in information technology.

On behalf of all Chinese Singaporeans, I would like to thank all those who have worked so hard to bring us to where we are today. Special mention must be made of the four chairmen who have spearheaded our national efforts over the last 20 years - Dr Ow Chin Hock, Mr Ho Kah Leong, Mr Ho Kwon Ping and Prof Wee Chow Hou. It is now for Prof Wee and members of his Committee to bring us into the future.