

**SPEECH BY MR ONG TENG CHEONG,
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Mandarin: A Language for our Roots

The Speak Mandarin Campaign has entered its seventh year since it was first launched. For the past six years, the Singapore Government and the Chinese community as a whole have been most active in promoting the use of Mandarin at various levels of our society, with appreciable results.

Fundamental Goal

Right from the beginning, we have made it very clear that this nationwide campaign is directed at the Chinese community only and that there is no need for the involvement of the other communities. Our fundamental goal and stand in the promotion of the use of Mandarin have remained unchanged. We hope Chinese Singaporeans will speak Mandarin in place of dialects.

It is the intention of the Government, through the promotion of the bilingual education policy, to enable our people to gain access to modern science and technology through the English language and preserve their cultural roots through their mother tongue. To make the bilingual education policy a success, we must work towards the substitution of Mandarin for dialects as the mother tongue to help lighten the language-learning burden on our children. In fact, few can be equally fluent in two languages. It would be most unfair of us to expect our younger generation to achieve an effective command of two languages in addition to one dialect or two. Hence the need to completely change the perception of the Chinese community with regard to dialects and Mandarin and to transform the dialect-speaking habit. If we did not make this decision six years ago, our language environment might have got out of hand and we might have, very quickly, developed into a predominantly English- and dialect-speaking society.

Common Language

We can be proud of what we have achieved in the Speak Mandarin Campaign. The great majority of Chinese Singaporeans have now accepted Mandarin as the common spoken language of the Chinese community. Even the older Chinese, who do not speak Mandarin, have wholeheartedly endorsed Mandarin as the common spoken language of the Chinese community. At the same time, Mandarin is used more and more widely among the younger Chinese Singaporeans. Wherever they meet, Mandarin is heard. This has much to do with our bilingual education policy and the Speak Mandarin Campaign.

Having learnt Mandarin in schools or elsewhere, such young people use it in their day-to-day activities and make Mandarin a living language.

Since the Speak Mandarin Campaign was launched, our environment for learning the language has been getting better and better. Everyone may learn to speak Mandarin in a most convenient way. As a whole, the number of people able to speak Mandarin in Singapore has been increasing year after year. The standard of Mandarin has also improved generally. These are our most concrete achievements.

Dialect Strongholds

In some areas, however, the results of the Speak Mandarin Campaign are still far from satisfactory. Two strongholds where dialects still predominate are the hawker centres and the Zhongyuan Festival gatherings. There are reasons for the unsatisfactory state of affairs here. At the hawker centres, some hawkers are the older people who did not have the opportunity to attend school when they were young. They may find it difficult to pick up Mandarin as they grow older. This is understandable. However, there are many other hawkers who can but do not speak Mandarin, or who are not used to speaking it or who, not being fluent in the language, are too shy to use it. So they carry on speaking dialects. Sometimes, it is because the customers begin with dialects that the hawkers naturally respond with dialects, thereby creating a vicious circle for a dialect-speaking enclave. This in fact can be avoided. If the first party would take the initiative to speak Mandarin, the second party would naturally respond with Mandarin unless he is unable to speak Mandarin. Therefore, there is room for improvement here.

Another dialect stronghold is Zhongyuan Festival gatherings. Here again it involves the question of habit, which we should be able to change, given a conscientious effort, determination and courage.

I earnestly hope that hawkers' organisations and Zhongyuan Festival organisations will attach importance to the issue and seriously look into ways and means to encourage their members to speak Mandarin instead of dialects so as to make Mandarin more popular. Yet another kind of public places that have a bearing on the encouragement of the learning of the mother tongue are some government departments and statutory boards, especially those that have frequent contact with the public. The Chinese staff of these government departments and statutory boards should learn and speak their mother tongue so that they may be better able to serve the Chinese members of the public who are non-English speaking.

Commendable Effort

As a matter of fact, ethnic Chinese officers in the government ministries and statutory boards have been putting in great effort to learn and use Mandarin for this purpose. There has been an increase of about 10 per cent in the number of officers who can speak Mandarin well enough for their work situation since 1979 when the campaign was launched. These results are encouraging and commendable. I hope that those ethnic

Chinese officers who do not know Mandarin will make some effort to learn it, so that more of them will be able to use Mandarin in place of dialects to serve members of the public who do not speak English.

Cultural and Economic Values

English is important as far as acquiring modern science and technology is concerned, but learning and speaking one's mother tongue is no less important. The Chinese learn and speak Mandarin not only because it is the common spoken language of the Chinese community, representing our roots, but also because the economic value of Mandarin is increasing, particularly after China has started its economic transformation and adopted the open-door policy.

China, with a population of more than one billion, is a large market. With the open-door policy, there will be an increase in China's external trade and economic activities. We shall no doubt face competition in our trade and economic activities with China, but we have an edge over others in our bilingual ability. Some of the recent trade activities indicate the economic value of Mandarin. Recently, an American computer company has arranged for China's computer personnel to receive training in Singapore because our computer experts can speak both Mandarin and English. They are able to explain to the Chinese in Mandarin.

Some multinational corporations and big enterprises in Europe and America have also begun their hunt in Singapore for talents who can speak both Mandarin and English to represent them in China because such talents are able to do business with the Chinese in Mandarin directly. Singapore entrepreneurs are also going to China to invest in factories, build hotels, set up banks, tender for contracts and provide professional/consultative services. These economic activities require a large number of people who can speak Mandarin, particularly those who can speak both Mandarin and English. With further development in China, the economic value of Mandarin will increase.

Long-term Task

Promoting the use of Mandarin is a long-term task. It may take one generation or two to transform our Chinese community into a genuinely bilingual society where both English and Mandarin are used in place of a multitude of dialects. We have made considerable achievements in the past six years. It is hoped that greater effort will be made to achieve greater success to bring about an early fulfilment of the objective of the Speak Mandarin Campaign.