

# Singapore Government **MEDIA RELEASE**

Media Relations Division, Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 140 Hill Street, #02-02, MICA Building, Singapore 179369.  
Tel: 6837 9666 Fax: 6338 3093 Singapore Press Release on the Internet (SPRIInter) URL: <http://www.sprinter.gov.sg>

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY  
PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

## **SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER LEE HSIEN LOONG AT THE LAUNCH OF THE 26<sup>TH</sup> SPEAK MANDARIN CAMPAIGN ON TUESDAY, 15 NOV 2005, 11 AM AT THE NATIONAL LIBRARY EVENTS PLAZA**

Professor Wee Chow Hou, Chairman of the Promote Mandarin Council

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen

### INTRODUCTION

1. I am happy to be here today to launch the Speak Mandarin Campaign. Through the efforts of the campaign over the last 26 years, we have succeeded in establishing Mandarin as the preferred language for Chinese Singaporeans over the use of dialects.

2. Now that we have attained this goal, the focus of the Speak Mandarin Campaign has changed. Because of the common use of English at work and in schools, younger Singaporeans are increasingly more comfortable in English than Mandarin. English is also becoming the preferred language at home – about half of our Chinese students now come from English-speaking homes, outnumbering those in Chinese-speaking homes. Therefore, the Speak Mandarin Campaign is now reaching out to English-educated Chinese Singaporeans, encouraging them to stay in touch with Mandarin and keep the language alive in our society.

### IMPORTANCE OF MANDARIN

3. There are both cultural and economic reasons for Chinese Singaporeans to learn and speak Mandarin. Knowledge of Mandarin gives us a sense of identity and roots. It enables us to appreciate and understand who we are and where we came from. It opens up a whole world of Chinese art, culture and traditions, which spans thousands of years of Chinese civilisation. If we use only English, and allow our mother tongue to degenerate, we will, in time, lose our values and cultural

heritage. The nature of our society will change for the worse. Ultimately, our self-confidence as a people will be undermined. Hence quite apart from the economic reasons or the rise of China, we cannot afford to lose our mother tongue.

4. From an economic perspective, our knowledge of Mandarin puts in a good position to tap into the growth of China and seize the many opportunities that are opening up there. Our ability to speak and write Mandarin is also a significant pull factor to draw even more Chinese tourists and companies to Singapore.

5. In my recent visit to China, I brought a business delegation with me. Nearly all the businessmen could speak Mandarin. They could interact freely with their counterparts without going through interpreters. They could explain their projects to the Chinese officials in Mandarin, and establish rapport with them. So I think our ability to speak and read Mandarin gives us a considerable advantage in China.

6. I also met many young Singaporeans who are now studying or working in Beijing. A number of them grew up in English-speaking environments in Singapore. They received a bilingual education but did not do Higher Chinese in school. Nevertheless, the years of studying Mandarin in school gave them a good foundation to build on. And they learned the correct pronunciation from teachers, with the aid of Hanyu Pinyin. So after a short time in China, all of them could speak fluent Mandarin. Some even have a distinct Beijing accent!

7. Ca-mie De Souza – Channel News Asia’s Beijing correspondent – is one example. I met her in Beijing. She told me that she had spent 10 years in Convent schools – first in CHIJ Kellock, then CHIJ Toa Payoh. She did not do Higher Chinese. Previously when she was doing reporting in Singapore, she did some Pieces to Camera (PTCs) in Mandarin for the Chinese News, and often had to check back with the Chinese Desk for translation. But after a few months in China, reading Chinese papers daily and using the language in her work and life here, she became more fluent and confident, and could report the news in Mandarin as well. She said that her vocabulary had expanded, though she was still not able to recite Chinese poetry yet!

### **KEEPING THE LANGUAGE ALIVE**

8. All of these examples show that it is possible for us to learn and speak Mandarin well. Let me suggest three ways to keep the language alive in our society.

9. First, we must treat Mandarin as a living language, and use it on a day to day basis. Many Chinese Singaporeans already have the basics of

Mandarin from school. So with practice and regular usage, we should not have too much difficulties conversing in basic Mandarin.

10. This is why the Speak Mandarin Campaign this year is emphasising the message that Mandarin can be a part of our lifestyle. The campaign aims to encourage Chinese Singaporeans to incorporate Mandarin into our daily activities, and use the language wherever we can, in shopping malls or markets, at the gym or the golf course. SPH has compiled a "Cool Speak" guidebook to help Singaporeans to get in touch with the latest Mandarin phrases and words that are being used in the workplace and various contemporary social settings.

11. Second, parents who can speak Mandarin should do so with their children and help them to master the language, especially when they are in kindergarten and primary school. The home environment is the most important factor in learning a language, and parents are the most influential role models for their children. Parents who speak to their children regularly in Mandarin will give them a solid foundation in Mandarin at an early age, which they can build on when they need to later in life.

12. Third, our schools and teachers also play an important part in helping students learn Mandarin more effectively. I am happy to see progress on this front. Our schools are developing new and innovative enrichment programmes; our teachers are evolving new approaches to make learning more enjoyable; and our students are responding enthusiastically to these changes

13. One way to deepen our students' learning experience is to set up exchange programmes with schools in China, where our students can immerse themselves fully in a Mandarin-speaking environment for a period of time. Many schools are already embarking on such programmes. Some are even starting to explore new and less familiar areas of China. When I was in Shenyang, I met a group of students from Nanyang Primary School, who were on a 9 week exchange programme. They had heard that I was in town, and came to meet me. I am sure they enjoyed their stay, and benefited immensely from the experience.

## CONCLUSION

14. Being able to speak Mandarin is fast becoming a necessity for Chinese Singaporeans. Mandarin is a window to our past, reflecting our heritage and values; and also a door to the future, opening new opportunities in a rapidly growing China.

15. But even as demand for Mandarin grows, employers should be fair to non-Mandarin speakers. They should not use this language requirement to discriminate against non-Chinese when recruiting staff. If Mandarin is not

required for the job, then it should not be made into a prerequisite. Sometimes we hear of employers who require job applicants to speak Mandarin, then when a non-Chinese shows up who speaks Mandarin the employer demands that he read or write the language as well. This is wrong, and the government will not condone it. Employers should base their hiring decisions purely on merit. Meritocracy and equal opportunities is the fundamental basis of Singapore's multi-racial society. Our whole system is based on this principle, and it is important that all citizens feel reassured that they enjoy fair and equal opportunities in Singapore.

16. I have focussed today on Chinese, as this is the launch of the Speak Mandarin Campaign. But, in fact, the Malay and Indian communities also face similar concerns in the learning and speaking of their mother tongues. Each ethnic community wants to retain its culture, language and its links to its roots. Ultimately, it is these roots and values that give Singapore our diversity, identity and unique strength. Being bilingual in our mother tongues allows us to flourish as an open, cosmopolitan society, without losing our Asian heritage and roots. By nurturing these special traits that characterise our multi-racial and multi-religious society, we can widen the common ground which we all share together, and work towards a shared vision and future for Singapore.

\*\*\*\*\*