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SPEECH BY DR NG ENG HEN, MINISTER FOR EDUCATION AND SECOND MINISTER FOR DEFENCE, AT THE SINGAPORE HOKKIEN HUAY KUAN AFFILIATED SCHOOLS BI-CULTURAL CHINESE ELECTIVE PROGRAMME GRADUATION CEREMONY, ON TUESDAY, 10 NOVEMBER 2009 AT 10.00AM, AT TAO NAN SCHOOL

Mr Wee Cho Yaw, President, Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan

Mr Chua Thian Poh, Deputy President, Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan

Members of the School Management Committee

Principals, Teachers, Parents, Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls

Good morning.

I am happy to join you here at Tao Nan School for the Graduation Ceremony of the pioneer batch of students of the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan Affiliated Schools Bi-Cultural Chinese Elective Programme (or BiCEP).

2. For over four decades, our bilingual policy has served us well and remained a cornerstone in our education system. It was a far-sighted policy even though when it was introduced it meant disruption for various groups in the short-term. But the benefits for Singapore students today are self-evident. It allowed them to ride the wave of globalisation as English became the lingua franca of the internet and connectivity. This is why each year, large contingents of Singapore students enter into top overseas Universities. Proficiency in English has also enabled our students to perform well in international rankings in Maths, Science and reading literacy.

3. Requiring all students to study their mother tongue has provided a cultural ballast that helped them retain an Asian identity. In addition, it has helped position

Singapore as the Asian hub to connect growing regions of Asean, India and China to the rest of the World. As a result of our multi-cultural, multi-lingual society, people from all cultures feel comfortable in Singapore

4. Despite these benefits of our bilingual policy, we must be mindful that the implementation needs to evolve to respond to an ever changing landscape for new generations of Singaporean students. We cannot ignore that the language environment in our homes has changed dramatically. In 1982, only 1 in 10 of Primary 1 Chinese students came from homes that used English – the figure today is nearly 6 in 10. For Indians it has moved from 3 in 10 to 6 in 10; Malays – 0.5 in 10 to 3.5 in 10. Students are spending more time online where many platforms predominantly in English compete for their attention. The teaching of MTL has to be reviewed periodically to ensure that it can engage students. For example, as a result of our latest CL review in 2004, we have fully implemented the new Primary modular approach for CL in all schools from Primary 1 to 5. Our new modular approach provides a differentiated programme for our pupils to cater to different CL abilities. This review has succeeded. More students are taking higher CL – 27% of

O-level Chinese candidates took higher CL last year, double the proportion a decade ago. With the new format, primary students say they find lessons more interesting and are using CL more.

5. Proficiency in a language can only come through speaking and practice. We need an environment that will encourage the use of the language not just as a form of communication but as part of the thinking process. MOE cannot create this CL speaking environment alone. I am glad that stakeholders, like the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan, are putting in efforts to help create a conducive environment. It

has six affiliated schools and a total enrolment estimated at 12,000. Its initiative in BiCEP is a timely one with the rise and increasing importance of China, and the need to preserve our Singaporean identity, culture and values, particularly in a globalising climate.

6. The Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan implements the BiCEP programme in their five primary schools to produce a core group of pupils, who are effectively bilingual and have the intention to pursue the Bicultural Studies Programme (BSP) in the four schools offering the programme; namely Dunman High, Hwa Chong Institution, Nanyang Girls' High and River Valley High. These pupils should not only have an in-depth mastery of the Chinese language, but must also possess a comprehensive understanding of Chinese culture, history, literature and the arts. In addition, BiCEP students must excel in their other core subjects before being selected.

7. The mission of the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan since it was set up 169 years ago remains unchanged. The Hokkien Huay Kuan makes conscious efforts to preserve and promote the Chinese Language and culture through its cultural programme and affiliated schools. Other than pupils in the affiliated schools, who will undoubtedly stand to benefit from these efforts, I hope that the successful programmes could also be extended to, or emulated by, other schools pursuing bicultural programmes.

8. I congratulate Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan on the successful implementation of BiCEP. To our young graduates, congratulations on your graduation and I hope that you will continue to cultivate and nurture your passion for Chinese language and culture.