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# *Singapore Government*

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**SPEECH BY DPM LEE HSIEN LOONG  
AT THE 15TH ANNIVERSARY DINNER  
OF THE  
SINGAPORE FEDERATION OF CHINESE CLAN ASSOCIATIONS**

1. I am very happy to be here with you tonight to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations.

2. Clan associations have played an important role in Singapore's development from a migrant colony to an industrial nation. In the uncertain and difficult conditions of the early days of our history, they provided important life rafts for the many Chinese migrants who came to Singapore in pursuit of a better life. The clans looked after the welfare of their members, helped them to settle down in Singapore, provided social services and ran schools. Many of the new arrivals had uprooted themselves from their homes and families, and arrived penniless and alone. The associations played an important role strengthening bonds between fellow migrants from the same village or clan, offering support, companionship, and practical help.

3. Today, Singapore is in a very different position. The economy has grown more than eight-fold since Independence, and all Singaporeans have enjoyed the fruits of growth. Standards of living have improved tremendously, and nearly every citizen now owns a substantial asset. Very few are truly poor. Other social and community organisations – self-help groups, professional associations, grassroots organisations and trade unions – have sprouted up to carry out functions similar to those of clan associations.

4. Against such a drastic change in backdrop, it is not surprising that the clans associations are asking themselves basic questions about their *raison d'être*. Do they still have a role to play in modern Singapore, or are they just irrelevant relics of the past?

5. The simple answer is, yes, clan associations continue to play an important role in Singapore society.

6. Globalisation, the advent of the Internet and technological advances are drastically changing our environment and society. They present enormous opportunities for Singapore to grow and prosper. The dot.com fever is a bubble, but the ferment and excitement are real. The new technologies promise to transform the lives of millions. Not every country will be a winner, but Singapore is well-placed to tap these opportunities. We are efficient, wired-up, rationally organised, and have the flexibility to adapt and change.

7. At the same time, this is an era of great challenges. Our society will undergo new stresses. We face intense global competition. Our workers need retraining and upgrading, to find new jobs when old industries become uncompetitive and are phased out. We have to compete for talent in the global market to supplement our local talent. We must integrate the new arrivals into our society, and at the same time assuage the concerns of Singaporeans towards the new arrivals. We also have to moderate widening income disparities in the knowledge era, where skills and talent command a premium, and those without skills risk being left behind.

8. During such times of great change and adjustment, people need mutual support and fellowship. They seek stable references to emotionally anchor themselves. While the world has changed enormously, the situation bears some similarity to the time when *sinkeh*s came to Singapore, alone and in a strange environment, seeking support and comfort among familiar reminders of home.

9. So like in the past, clan associations today can help their members adapt to the changing environment, give them a sense that they are not alone in grappling with the challenges of the 21st century, and provide them opportunities to update themselves and stay relevant in these bracing times.

10. One important aspect of this is the role clan associations continue to play in preserving the core Chinese values and heritage which are still relevant to modern Singapore, and ensuring that they are passed down to future generations.

11. To fulfil these roles in the 21st century, however, the clan associations must re-invent themselves.

12. The key challenge for the associations is to engage the younger generations of Singaporeans who are more educated, exposed to Western values and ideals, and have different expectations of society. Clan associations must develop innovative and attractive programmes and activities to reach out to more youth members, blending traditional values with the interests and aspirations of the new generations.

13. This is one reason clan associations have to induct fresh blood into their leadership ranks, and pass on the reins of leadership to the next generation in a smooth, progressive manner. The leadership must be of the same generation as the members. Then the clan associations will remain dynamic and vibrant, and will not become obsolete in modern Singapore.

14. In addition, clan associations must work to upgrade their organisational capabilities. In the past, an ordinary staff, proficient in Mandarin or dialect, and working on a part-time basis, could handle the day to day affairs of a clan association. Today, however, the associations increasingly need professional staff who are able to tap information technology and develop outreach initiatives to “connect” with the Internet generation of Singaporeans. This will mean higher costs, which smaller clan associations will find difficult to manage. It is thus important for clan associations to cooperate more closely with one another, pooling their resources and expertise wherever possible.

15. Indeed looking ahead, there is strong reason for clans to work together. Today there are over 300 clan associations in Singapore. But younger Singaporeans are no longer as acutely conscious of clan distinctions as their parents and grandparents. They know whether they are teochew, hokkien or hakka, but

they often do not know which village their ancestors came from. Already some smaller clan associations have had to close down because of dwindling membership. 15 or 20 years from now, it is unlikely that all 300 existing clan associations will still be vibrant and doing well.

16. Clan associations should therefore look beyond themselves, and work or even merge with one another in order to consolidate leadership and organisational resources. This is where the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations has an important leadership role to play. Two-thirds of the clan associations are members of the SFCCA. The SFCCA can foster greater co-operation among its members, to help them transcend traditional lines of division and serve the community together.

17. These are not easy challenges. But over the years, the SFCCA and its members have proven themselves able to adapt and stay relevant, as the world has changed and changed again. I am confident that you can work together to meet future challenges and flourish for many more years to come.

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