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**SPEECH BY DR NG ENG HEN, MINISTER FOR EDUCATION AND SECOND
MINISTER FOR DEFENCE, AT THE SCCCI MID-AUTUMN FESTIVAL
CELEBRATION ON FRIDAY, 2 OCTOBER 2009, AT 7:30 PM, AT THE SUN
YAT SEN NANYANG MEMORIAL HALL**

Your Excellencies

Mr Teo Siong Seng, SCCCI President

SCCCI Council members

Distinguished guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good evening.

1. It gives me great pleasure to join you at the SCCCI's Mid-Autumn Festival Celebration this evening. At the last National Day Rally, PM Lee touched upon some challenges that this generation of Singaporeans will face as we become an ageing society, a more globalised city and a restructured economy. These challenges will have significant impacts on the roles and functions of organisations like the SCCCI. Founded in 1906, the SCCCI was established in very different times compared to today. Back then, Singapore was still a developing city under colonial rule. Community organisations like the SCCCI were formed by the different migrant communities for economic and social support, as well as to provide a platform for members to contribute back to society. Today, while its core mission remains to develop industry and commerce, promote economic prosperity, and provide cultural and educational

activities and community services to Singaporeans, the SCCCI must also confront key changes that are on-going in new generations of Singaporeans.

2. As recent as twenty years ago in the 1980s, 90 per cent of Chinese students who enter our education system at Primary 1 came from families who used Mandarin or dialects at home. Today, nearly 60 per cent of them speak predominantly English at home. This figure is expected to rise further, fuelled by the trend of English becoming the common language of the internet age. For example, we send our students to China to appreciate the culture and use the language there. But PRC students there want to practise English with Singaporean students instead! SCCIOB itself has also started a practical course to meet the needs of retail and service workers who need to brush up on their English language skills. Employers are encouraged to send their staff, many of whom may be Chinese nationals who have had minimal exposure to the English language, for such training.

3. We must accept this reality and to ensure that our bilingual policy remains relevant to today's generation, we must evolve our methods of instruction and work with organisations like the SCCCI to engage and encourage our students to use their mother tongue in their daily lives. In this regard, SCCCI has much to offer.

4. The SCCCI has been investing much of its resources in training programmes that help businessmen and other adult learners to master essential Chinese language skills and comprehend Chinese cultural norms. The Chamber's training and education subsidiary, the Singapore Chinese Chamber Institute of Business (SCCIOB), has developed an array of Chinese language courses for a variety of learners. These range from *hanyu pinyin* classes to intermediate and advanced Chinese certification programmes, to courses in China business practices, lessons in translation and interpretation skills as well as intensive immersion programmes in China.

5. I understand that MOE schools periodically invite members of the SCCC to speak at various Chinese Language (CL) seminars they have organised for their students. I would like to invite leaders and members of the SCCC to continue to regularly visit our schools, to share their experiences on how their ability to communicate in Mandarin has benefited them by opening up business opportunities. SCCC members can also share on their travel experiences in China, and bring to life Chinese traditions and culture to our students.

6. I am also happy to report that despite the growing dominance of English, more of our students are taking Higher Chinese Language (HCL) as their second language. Last year 27 per cent of our 'O' level students offered HCL compared to 15 per cent a decade ago. Our Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools have played a key role in nurturing these bilingual students in the past three decades, and will continue to provide students with a rich experience in the process of learning the Chinese language and culture through different flagship programmes and more opportunities to participate in immersion programmes in China.

7. MOE has also offered the Bicultural Studies Programme in selected schools since 2005 to nurture a core group amongst the younger generation with in-depth knowledge and understanding of the Chinese language and culture. The Programme attracts the participation of about 330 Singaporean students each year. Its first batch of students, who sat for the 'A' levels last year, has produced Singapore's first President's Scholar, who will be pursuing her studies in Peking University. Seven other students from the Programme also received the inaugural Public Service Commission's China Scholarship.

8. Over the years, the Chamber has supported the cause of education through more ways than just training. In 1997, the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce Foundation (SCCCF) established a Business Scholarship for students from local tertiary institutions as part of the Chamber's mission to

promote education in Singapore and to provide financial assistance to students pursuing business studies. I am pleased to note that the selection criteria for the scholarship are strictly based on merit with no discrimination against other ethnic groups. In past years, ethnic Malay and Indian students have also been among the scholarship recipients.

9. Since 2006, the Business Scholarship has been renamed the SCCCIF Scholarship, which is open also to undergraduates reading Chinese Studies. This evening, nine deserving students from the National University of Singapore (NUS), the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and the Singapore Management University (SMU) will be receiving the SCCCIF Scholarship. In addition, four Malay-Muslim students pursuing business management and life sciences at the local universities will be awarded the joint Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce Foundation-MENDAKI Scholarship.

10. I am also glad that you have chosen to hold your Mid-Autumn Festival gathering in the charming grounds of the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall. Earlier this year, the Memorial Hall was gazetted as a community heritage institution that would receive funding and management support from the National Heritage Board while remaining led and owned by the SCCCIF. This significant move would help to reposition the Memorial Hall and enhance its capabilities of contributing to the national education of Singaporeans.

11. I wish you all an enjoyable evening ahead.

12. Thank you.