

POSTSCRIPT TO PRIME MINISTER'S ADDRESS TO THE
HISTORICAL SOCIETY, NANYANG UNIVERSITY, ON FRIDAY, 10
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This raises grave questions over the kind of people and society we will become. If economics were the only consideration, then there should be no need for concern that nearly all parents are choosing English schooling for their children. But with the study and use of a language, one understands and absorbs its culture, its value systems and the philosophy of life of the peoples who speak and write or wrote in that language. We have developed and progressed not because we were a Western-Occidental type society, but because we were an Asian-Oriental type society, hardworking, thrifty and disciplined, a people with Asian values, strong family ties and responsibility for the extended family which is a common feature of Asian cultures, whether Chinese, Malay or Indian. That we also can and do use English is an added advantage.

However, with the widespread use of English, TV, the cinema, magazines, books and tourists, Western values, culture and attitudes to life have permeated our society, particularly the young. We cannot isolate ourselves from the changing moods and thoughts of the world and the no-marriage family

relationships Americans and some Europeans are experimenting with. But we can inoculate ourselves from fashionable but passing fads and fancies. We can do this by retaining the core of our own basic cultural values, a keen sense of our own identity, our different inheritance and history and the self-confidence this awareness gives. Therefore, we must continue the study of our mother tongues. It is in our long-term interests as a people, with undiminished vigour, to work and endure hardship, to have the self-confidence and drive to maintain traditional value systems.

HOKKIEN OR MANDARIN

In this connection, Singapore Chinese must decide whether they want Hokkien or Mandarin to be the lingua franca. If we do not take active steps to ensure the younger generation use Mandarin between themselves and use dialects only with the older generation who cannot speak Mandarin, then, not only in the Army, but also in the markets, buses, taxis and shops, Singapore Hokkien will become the lingua franca of the Singapore Chinese. This would be sad, not because Hokkien is an inferior dialect, but because it is a dialect. It is not congruent with the written Chinese script. Present-day written Chinese is Mandarin reduced into script. Spoken Hokkien cannot be put into "bai-hua". If Hokkien prevails, then the standard of written Chinese will go down. For the

older generation, those over 50, who did not study Mandarin in school, it may be too heavy a task for them to learn Mandarin. For them, the use of dialects will go on. Dialect films can be screened later at night for the older generation.

But for the under 30s, there is absolutely no excuse for them not to use Mandarin. It is absurd that so many who have been to Chinese school give up using Mandarin and are more fluent in Hokkien. To watch RTS features showing our workers, who obviously have gone to Chinese schools, speaking halting Mandarin is painful. It is a grave loss to themselves and to our society. If in the factories and workshops the usage has been Mandarin between the workers, we would be a better, more united, a more cultivated and educated people.

BILINGUAL SOCIETY

I do not see Singapore becoming a monolingual society, with everybody speaking in English. About 40% at present cannot pass English Primary 6 to enter Sec 1. The failure rate is 10% less in the Chinese stream – 30%. The present practice is for such people to drift back into dialect. Now with over 30% teaching in Mandarin in English primary schools, we can and must ensure that those who do not make the PSLE will at least master Mandarin and enough of a written vocabulary to read a simple Chinese newspaper. With the yearly

examinations and no more automatic promotions, we can reduce the failure rate to below 25%. They will always be literate, but perhaps only in Chinese and not English. The question is: Is it to be Hokkien or Mandarin? Surely it must be Mandarin. If it is to be Mandarin, then Mandarin must be the language in workshops, in hotels, in restaurants, in buses and on television at prime viewing time when the young are watching.

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