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**SPEECH BY MR ONG TENG CHEONG, SECOND DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER,
AT THE OPENING OF THE SPEAK MANDARIN CAMPAIGN
AT SINGAPORE CONFERENCE HALL
ON THURSDAY, 4 OCTOBER 1990 AT 3.00 PM**

The National Speak Mandarin Campaign has entered its 12th year. Partly because of the Campaign and partly because of our bilingual education policy, Mandarin is now spoken by more and more Singaporeans in all walks of life. Surveys have shown that Chinese Singaporeans speak less dialects and more Mandarin now than 12 years ago. For example, the surveys conducted by the Ministry of Environment show that in the markets and food centres, 83.3 per cent of the hawkers surveyed used Mandarin in 1989, compared to 30 per cent ten years ago. The trend is clear that Mandarin will gradually replace dialects among Chinese Singaporeans.

Although the campaign aims at all dialect speaking Chinese Singaporeans, it focuses on one particular group of people each year. For the past 11 years, the focus was mainly on large and grassroots groups. We have achieved reasonable success in all these groups. Nowadays, we can hear more and more Mandarin being spoken in clan associations, community organisations and festival occasions like the seventh moon celebrations. This is a significant breakthrough because dialects have been entrenched in these organisations for more than 100 years since our ancestors arrived from China. In China, Taiwan and other parts of the world where there are big congregations of Chinese, Mandarin is more widely spoken now than before. With the advance of telecommunication and transportation, dialects, which were localised spoken languages

in Chinese provinces, have lost their significance as people travel and communicate across borders more freely and frequently.

One group of Chinese Singaporeans relatively untouched by the Speak Mandarin Campaign are the senior executives and professionals. Because of their position and nature of their work, they may feel no compelling reason to use Mandarin. Indeed, in Singapore, fluency in English has an added advantage as it is a language widely used in the administration, in doing business, in acquiring knowledge and learning technology, but in preserving the Chinese cultural heritage which gives us our orientation and self confidence, Mandarin has a definite advantage over English as a medium of transmitting Chinese values.

Singapore is made up of Malays, Chinese, Indians, Eurasians and others. They are all Singaporeans, but each group has a link to the past - the cultures and traditions of their forefathers. Besides music, dance, customs, beliefs, the food we eat and the clothes we wear, language is also an important part of that heritage. To preserve the Chinese heritage, one cannot but know and use the Chinese language. Unless Chinese Singaporeans make it a point to use Mandarin, we may, over a period of time, lose that heritage.

Senior executives and professionals, whether they are in business, industries, or the Government, play an important role in national endeavours. They are leaders in their own fields, and people do look to them for guidance and direction. If these Chinese Singaporeans take the lead in the use of Mandarin among themselves, by speaking it more often, especially in social functions, they will be setting an example for the others to follow.

It is not easy to get some of these Chinese executives and professionals to speak in Mandarin. They appear to be shy

about using the language, even though they had mastered it once when they were in school. I wonder why? Is it because, through lack of usage, they cannot express their thoughts more eloquently in Mandarin than they can in English? Or do they still associate Mandarin with the humble working class? Whatever the reasons, it is time Chinese Singaporeans who know Mandarin to make more frequent use of the language.

With economic development and social changes in Asia Pacific area, Asians no longer need to feel inferior to the Westerners. And Mandarin is not an inferior language compared to English, French or German.

There are some Chinese families in Singapore who do not speak Mandarin. Some have children who are struggling with the Chinese language in school. To these families, Chinese is like Latin. They hate it. Yet I know of some Singapore Chinese families living overseas, for example in Canada and Australia, who are eager to send their children to Singapore during school holidays to learn the Chinese language and to understand Chinese culture. They regretted not knowing the language and culture themselves. They feel inadequate and inferior when they cannot communicate in Mandarin and when their white friends expect them to know their roots and Chinese heritage. It is not difficult to understand their sentiment. None of us will take a second look at two Englishmen communicating in English, but will find it puzzling if these Englishmen converse only in Mandarin and cannot understand English.

While we must not be Chinese chauvinists, we must at least have the pride and dignity to use our language. The Japanese speak Japanese, the French speak French, the Germans speak German. Because of our unique multi-racial society, we have good reasons to continue to use English as a common language in administration, business and education, and to communicate with other races. But let's encourage Singaporean Chinese to speak more Mandarin among themselves.

The next phase of Speak Mandarin Campaign should not be just to get those who speak dialects to switch to Mandarin, but to get more Chinese Singaporeans to speak more Mandarin among themselves with pride.

On that note, I am pleased to declare the 1990 Speak Mandarin Campaign open.

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