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Singapore Government

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**SPEECH BY DR ALINE WONG, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE FOR
EDUCATION AT THE OPENING SESSION OF THE NINTH
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CHINESE LINGUISTICS CUM
INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON CHINESE LANGUAGE TEACHING
ON MONDAY, 26 JUNE 2000, AT 9.00 AM AT YORK HOTEL
(CARLTON HALL)**

National Archives of Singapore

It gives me great pleasure to be here this morning to welcome all of you to the Ninth International Conference on Chinese Linguistics (ICCL) cum International Symposium on Chinese Language Teaching.

2 I understand that it was here, eight years ago in 1992, that the first conference of this prestigious international series was inaugurated and the International Association of Chinese Linguistics founded. Since then, it has carried out a series of high quality academic activities. We are happy to be the host again of the ninth ICCL.

3 Many distinguished scholars here today were key figures at the first ICCL. We welcome you back to Singapore. I would also like to extend a warm welcome to the other overseas delegates who are in Singapore for the first time and hope that besides attending conference sessions, you will be able to find some time to see a bit of the country that we call home.

4 As a multi-racial and multi-lingual society, Singapore has always placed a high priority on language teaching and learning. Bilingualism is a cornerstone of our education system. Our bilingual policy requires our children to learn two languages: English and a Mother Tongue language which could be Malay, Chinese or Tamil. English is the working language in Singapore and the medium of instruction in our schools. It is also the language of global business, scientific and technological advancement

and access to the vast realms of information on the internet. It is therefore important for our students to acquire a high level of proficiency in this language which will give them access to the world. At the same time, however, it is very important for our students to learn their Mother Tongue for as long as possible and to as high a level. Doing so gives them access to their cultural heritage and helps them to appreciate and retain their cultural identity and their roots. With the continuing rapid growth and opening up of China, there is, moreover, an important practical purpose to the learning of the Chinese Language.

5 Given the special structure of our society, the challenges we face in the teaching of the Chinese language are quite unique. In order to meet the language and cultural content needs of our students in an age of globalisation, and to balance the amount of time they spend on various subjects, we have reviewed our Chinese syllabuses, re-written the textbooks and modified our assessment modes over the last two years. We have also invested heavily in staff development to equip teachers with new approaches and more effective techniques in teaching the language. One interesting example is the use of Hanyu Pinyin. After successfully piloting a project

which introduced the use of Hanyu Pinyin from the first year of primary education, we have extended this approach to all primary schools from 1999. In this approach, our Primary One pupils learn Hanyu Pinyin exclusively during their first 10 weeks of school, before they are systematically introduced to the Chinese characters. Hanyu Pinyin is used not only as a tool for learning Mandarin pronunciation; it is also used as a phonetic tool to facilitate the learning of Chinese characters. Based on feedback from teachers, starting early has helped our Primary One pupils to be more confident in the use of Hanyu Pinyin and they have shown great improvement in their Mandarin pronunciation. Most importantly, they have picked up more vocabulary items, and are able to read short passages and nursery rhymes in Chinese with Hanyu Pinyin annotations.

6 Another means of improving the quality of Chinese language teaching is the use of IT in teaching and learning. MOE has put in a lot of effort to train our teachers to utilize IT effectively in their teaching. Besides providing adequate hardware and educational software, teachers have been given help in the development of IT-based teaching materials. These efforts have paid off and we have noticed a very high computer-literacy rate among our Chinese

Language teachers. Not only are they able to incorporate IT effectively in their teaching; some of them have even set up their very own educational webpages and test item banks.

7 What I have just described are some attempts to make the teaching and learning of Chinese more effective in our schools. However, we recognise that although we have made progress, we still have a long way to go and a lot to learn. We must continue looking into ways to get our students to become more interested in and excited about the learning of Chinese. We want them to see the richness of the culture embodied in the language and to enjoy learning and using Chinese, long after they have left school.

8 Linguistics is a field of study that offers valuable insights into the workings of a language and the process of language learning. Research findings in this area can provide useful ideas for language teaching. There is much that we can learn from the papers presented during this conference. I am sure that the participants at this conference will find food for the mind and the spirit from the sharing of information.

9 I would like to take this opportunity to wish all of you a successful and fruitful conference and a pleasant stay in Singapore. I have great pleasure in declaring open the Ninth International Conference on Chinese Linguistics cum International Symposium on Chinese Language Teaching.

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