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SPEECH BY MR CHAI CHONG YII, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE FOR EDUCATION,  
AT THE SEMINAR ON COURTESY CAMPAIGN AT ANGLO CHINESE JUNIOR COLLEGE  
ON SATURDAY, 24 FEBRUARY 1979 AT 2.30 P.M.

Not so long ago, someone raised the spectre of an ugly Singaporean. Whether this label is deserved or otherwise is a debatable question but I feel sure that all of us would not want to allow such an uncomplimentary label to stick.

Recently, however, the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board sponsored a courtesy campaign, and from all accounts it was a success. The campaign was largely aimed at promoting a more courteous service to tourists so that they would enjoy their stay in our country and would either come back for another holiday or influence their friends to visit Singapore. It was a worthwhile effort and it did help raise the quality of service of those involved in the tourist industry.

You will readily agree that our country will be a much more pleasant place not only for tourists but also for ourselves if everyone, young and old, could establish a more civil behaviour as a way of life so that to show courtesy and consideration to others becomes our second nature. This, I believe, can be achieved over a sustained period of continual efforts in this direction.

Insofar as schools are concerned, it is natural to expect courtesy and polite conduct in the school environment. But, is this extended by our pupils beyond the confines of our schools? I don't think we can give an unqualified positive answer to that question. That being the case, we therefore need to look for the reasons why sometimes this is not so. It is confusing to have double standards in our society. Children must never practise one set of social behaviour while in school and behave differently outside it. Double standards can easily lead to hypocritical conduct which will in turn

erode the moral fibre of our people.

We cannot pretend that all is well with our young people and that they are already civil in their speech and manners. Examples of inconsiderate behaviour and rudeness are not far to find. A blatant example is the rushing scene at bus stops during busy hours; another is an unreasonable insistence on being served first at crowded food centres or restaurants. Sloven speech, in particular monosyllabic replies to questions, is a sign of poor social training. Wearing sloppy clothes in office is also an indication of lack of civility. Loud speech and uncouth manners are sad reflections of the quality of social behaviour, especially among young people.

In terms of space, our country is very small. In particular, those living in high rise flats are in close contact with their neighbours. They share common facilities such as corridors, lifts, staircases and playgrounds. Is courtesy shown to others having an equal right for the use of these same facilities? Or do neighbours demonstrate the spirit of neighbourliness by greeting one another when they meet in the corridors and lifts? Are noises unnecessarily created to the annoyance of neighbours? These and other questions of consideration and courtesy to neighbours must be in the minds of many.

Hence, we have today this seminar which will provide an opportunity to take a hard look at what can be done.

To start with, courtesy like other virtues must begin with oneself. One must therefore make an appraisal of reappraisal of oneself in that regard. It is only when one actually practises courtesy that one can influence others to do likewise. Nothing can be more convincing than setting the good example yourself.

In your deliberations, you may wish to identify specific areas where, you may have observed, courtesy is either overlooked or lacking. Some of these can no doubt be found in oral and written communications, conduct towards colleagues, dealings with the public and general behaviour towards those with whom you come into contact. In each area, you will perhaps list out the faults and the correct norms of courtesy and propriety.

It is hoped that at the end of the day, you will come up with a list of practical suggestions for raising the standard of courtesy and civility in our schools, offices and surroundings in general. In this connection, it is expected that similar efforts will be made by others in both the public and private sectors so that as a result of the concerted action of all our citizens, courtesy will become firmly established as our way of life.

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