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SPEECH BY MR CHIN HARN TONG, SENIOR PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY
(HOME AFFAIRS), AT THE LUNAR NEW YEAR GATHERING
AT ALJUNIED COMMUNITY CENTRE
ON SUNDAY, 8 FEBRUARY 1987 AT 10.30 AM

Let me start off on this auspicious occasion by wishing all of you, who are gathered here today, a Very Happy and Prosperous New Year.

From time immemorial, getting together for the reunion dinner on the Lunar New Year's Eve has been a tradition which all Chinese faithfully observed. The importance attached to the reunion dinner is such that, in those days when transport facilities were cumbersome and not readily available, people rushed home from wherever they were for the reunion dinner, even if they had to travel day and night to do so. The reunion dinner is a function no one would have wanted to miss. In fact, the reunion dinner, until very recently, used to be such a grand family affair that it comes to symbolise the celebration of the New Year. However, in the Singapore of today, this traditional practice is in danger of disappearing. More and more Singaporean Chinese are not only staying away from the reunion dinner but are also giving up on the practice of reunion during the New Year period. You have only to read the pages after pages of advertisements in local newspapers offering special tours during the Chinese New Year period to realise it is a strange and unusual development. True, as Singaporeans become more affluent, they travel abroad for their holidays. But for Chinese to do so during this festive period, it used to be unthinkable. A few families may have

compelling reasons to travel out of Singapore during this festive season because, perhaps, all their relatives are residing overseas. But I am sure, the vast majority of Singaporeans who go on group tours during the Chinese New Year period merely want to take advantage of the public holidays. In doing so, they are helping to kill off one tradition.

Another traditional practice that is in danger of being eroded is the paying of customary visits and respects to relatives. Nowadays, teenagers and young adults do not seem willing to accompany their parents on such visits to the relatives. Compare this situation to sometime ago, when the young really looked forward to such visits. Then the visits meant a welcome break from their daily routine and environment, as there were not much recreational facilities. Nowadays they find that such visits inconveniently interfere with their favourite television shows or computer games. To many young people, and those not so young, visiting relatives has become a bore which they prefer to avoid, even though it is only once a year. In fact, parents, sometimes, literally have to drag their teenage and older children to come along with them on their visits. Worse still, with black clothes being now in fashion among some young people, it will come as a cultural shock to grandparents to be confronted by their grandchildren wearing, during this auspicious season, clothes which are associated with unhappiness rather than rejoicing. This dislike for customary visits and the disregard by the young for the feelings of their elders are a cause for concern. It is worrisome if the trend of discarding traditional practices takes root, because the traditional family ties may also become loosened in the process.

These social changes may be viewed as a necessary feature accompanying any country's programme of industrialisation and modernisation. I am not implying all changes arising out of economic development are bad or undesirable. We cannot expect to reshape our economic circumstances without affecting our social practices to some extent. The question is, should we accept changes uncritically, or should we try to modify changes, so as to minimise any social disruption?

Some traditional practices, of course, can do with a change. For example, the landing of American astronauts on the moon led to the Chinese gradually giving up their practice of worshipping the moon. But a distinction should be made between traditional practices that need to be changed and traditions that should be preserved. The reunion dinners and the visits to relatives during the New Year season are customary practices which ought to be encouraged because they serve to make the family a more cohesive and vibrant unit, thereby strengthening the fabric of society.

It is important that our young Singaporeans should not form the impression that all things traditional are bad and all things modern are good. We must not throw out traditional practices just for the sake of doing so, particularly when these traditional practices have helped to make Singapore what it is today and will continue to make Singapore a better place for us all to live and work in.

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