PRIME MINISTER'S SPEECH AT THE CHINESE NEW YEAR RECEPTION ON 15 FEBRUARY 1984 AT THE ISTANA

Chinese New Year family reunions bring my thoughts back to family bonds and their nature in the future.

I was having lunch with three friends a fortnight ago. We discussed Chinese values and practices in a fast-changing Singapore. They told me how eagerly they had looked forward to Chinese New Year in their childhood. Their children now seem to enjoy Christmas more than Chinese New Year because Christmas is so much better packaged and presented by the shops, with decorations, and by TV with songs, carols, features and commercials.

We wondered how to keep our great festival occasions in the future : Chinese New Year, the Seventh Moon Festival, the Moon Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, and Qing Ming.

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Without crackers and the traditional foods and cakes, Chinese New Year seems bland and unexciting. Without Smith Street in old Chinatown, the bustle and lights of the street hawkers packing the roadsides selling new year fruits and flowers, the occasion seems to have lost its sense of excitement. Children find

more fun in the Moon Festival. Young adults enjoy and participate more in the hubbub and bustle of activities connected with the Seventh Moon Festival.

How much of our traditional festivals can retain their meaning? This is a problem because the Chinese have no strong religion like Islam or Christianity or Judaism with their holy books, prayers and rituals to bind people to their important occasions. Most Chinese are nominally Buddhists. They neither read holy books nor practise ancestor worship, Taoism and Confucianism. Confucianism is not a order and progress in this life. How then do we retain some of the distinctiveness of our culture?

In the past six weeks, after we announced the phasing out of Chinese-stream schools by 1987, there has been a great outpouring of editorials and articles in the Chinese newspapers. Great fears were expressed for the future of Chinese language and culture. Some expressed fears of a loss of our roots. This is a natural reaction of the Chinese-educated intelligentsia. The declining trend was obvious by 1975 and unlikely to change. It was an inevitable consequence of our economic development.

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The end of Chinese-stream schools does not mean the end of the Chinese language in Singapore. But it does mean that we must prepare for adjustments.

For example, 'A' level recruits of the Institute of Education with distinctions in CL will be competent to teach CL2 at Primary level only. For Secondary level, we may have to send 'A' level students with distinctions in CL to the National University of Singapore or Taiwan for further training. There may not be enough of them willing to do this, so we may have to recruit from Taiwan. So also journalists for the Chinese newspapers. Our graduates will not have sufficient command of Chinese to write for a Chinese paper without further training. It may be easier to recruit them from Taiwan and Hong Kong.

I do not believe we shall lose our culture and roots because Chinese is not taught as the first language. Language is related to, but not synonymous with, culture. Culture has been defined (Websters) as the ideas, customs, skills, arts, etc. of a given people in a given period. In anthropology it means all knowledge, expectations and beliefs of a group. Language gives access to the literature which expresses a culture, but language is not a culture. English is the language of Britain, Canada, Australia, Jamaica, Barbados, and the English-speaking Caribbean countries. Their cultures are all different from the British, especially those of the Caribbean.

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Further, neither language nor cultures are static and unchanging; they are found and expressed in the lives of a people and must change as the way of life

of a people changes. Take China before the 1911 Revolution. It was a tired civilization with an archaic written language. Compare the language and culture of China in 1911 with that of 1949, after the Communists had proclaimed the People's Republic. The language had progressed with the "bai-hua" (白 话) simplification since the 1919 May 4th Movement. But culture was in as poor a state in 1949 with China of 1976 at the death of Chairman Mao. The language has progressed. It has been further simplified. But Chinese culture has not recovered from the shocks of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution.

Nor have the English language and British culture stayed immutable. Their culture is not as dynamic as before the war. The people are less achievement orientated because they have become dependent in the welfare state. This loss of dynamism is also reflected in their language. British English has not developed as vigorously as American English. It is American television features, not British, which dominate world markets.

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Language and culture must both change to enable a people to solve new problems. Indeed the strength of the language and culture depends on their suppleness to help the people adjust to changed conditions. For example, Japanese language and culture of a century ago since the Meiji Restoration of

1968 have been considerably developed and adjusted to meet new needs. The Japanese people successfully adopted Western science and technology because they were supple and pragmatic about their language and culture. They borrowed new Western institutions and ideas. They introduced universal education, created a two-chamber Parliament, introduced legal codes, and revamped their army and navy on German and British models. They freely adopted Western words, adding vigour to the Japanese language. Similarly, after defeat in World War II, during and after the American occupation of Japan, American words, ideas, and social organisations were adapted and adopted by control from the Americans and improved on them, just as they had copied and improved on many Chinese innovations like the abacus.

The strongest and most durable of value systems or culture is religion. Christians, through translations of the Bible into hundreds of languages, from Hebrew and Greek, to Latin, to English, French, German, Spanish, Chinese, etc, have spread their faith through all continents. And it is the same faith, whatever the language they pray in. It proves how the content, the ideas that the language carries, endures despite changing medium or language which carries the ideas.

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I do not expect Singapore to become a purely English-speaking society. The majority of the older generation cannot speak English. They still use

dialects, although they now understand Mandarin, through TV. Next, the majority of younger generation speak Mandarin and will continue to use it if we succeed in creating a supportive Mandarin-speaking environment. Further, a small proportion of the young Chinese, perhaps as much as 10%, may not be able to master English. They will master Mandarin because it is closer to the dialect their parents speak at home. So others have to speak Mandarin to them. And there will also be some Malays who cannot master English and will have to addressed in Malay.

I ask myself, will my son educate my grandchildren differently from the way I educated my children? I am confident that both family and personal self-respect will make my grandchildren know enough Chinese and be educated in Chinese values. One difference is that for my grandchildren these values will have to be taught more at home, by parents and grandparents. My children had the advantage of their home values being reinforced by that generation of Chinese school teachers of the 1950s and 60s. The present generation of teachers is different. Now even in the 9 Chinese-stream schools (SAP), the young teachers have changed in their attitudes and values. In the generation that is under 40 years, the differences between the Chinese-educated and the English-educated have been blended and blurred by interaction in integrated schools, the schools that first started to teach Chinese-stream and English-stream students in

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the same school. Then there were many integrated families where some children went to English-stream and other to Chinese-stream schools. So cultural differences have almost disappeared.

My three children were all educated in Chinese school CL1, one for 12 years to 'A' levels, two for 10 years each, to 'O' levels, not to mention three years of kindergarten in Chinese. Not one of them is writing Chinese, either for work or social purposes. They do not need to, other than to fill up their names or the names of my grandchildren in forms. Therefore, I want my grandchildren to be competent enough in writing Chinese to pass their examinations. On the other hand, I hope they will acquire and keep up the ability to read and to speak Mandarin for life.

What the editorial writers and commentators have not noticed is that the threat to our culture comes from the fundamental social and economic changes that have taken place. Our women are all educated and have equal job opportunities. This has increased family incomes. This has also given financial independence to wives. Fortunately, the older generation had successfully transmitted their values to the present generation, or there would have been a large increase in the number of divorces. That divorces have not shot up is a tribute to the way traditional marriage values have survived.

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Working mothers who do not spend enough time with their children, plus the break-up of the extended families, these two changes are the real dangers to the transmission of our traditional values, or culture. Unless both mother and father make time to inculcate the value and to shape the attitudes of their children, or enlist the help of grandparents, the children will acquire more of their values from outside the home, their peers. And these values may not be what they should be.

Another powerful factor in shaping values is the pervasive influence of our television. Most of our TV features are imported from America or Hong Kong.

With nuclear families and working mothers increasing, our teachers will inevitably play a more important role as the imparter of values. Unfortunately, the quality of our teachers recruited in the 1960s and early 1970s is not as high as that of the 1950s. Rapid economic growth drew the able students to banking and industry, away from teaching. This was made worse because there was no comparable increase in teachers' salaries. We have to reverse this trend and recruit better qualified teachers, which means paying them what they can get in industry, commerce or banking.

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Even after we have improved moral teaching in schools by teachers of high moral standing, parents must still make time for their children in the evenings and at weekends. And those who can should maintain the extended family so that the grandparents can help bring up and influence their children. We have educated our women and want them to work. We intend to provide their children with well-run creches, nursery schools, and allow them to employ foreign domestic workers. But do our women need to value their careers more than, and at the expense of, their families?

Speaking to my three friends over lunch, I was reinforced in my view that the future of our children cannot depend on happy recollections of crackers and special Chinese New Year cakes or food. There are more fundamental attributes in our way of life than the sound of crackers, and special flowers, and new clothes connected with Chinese New Year, however much joy these memories may bring. The relationship between children and parents, between brothers and sisters, between husband and wife, and the rights and duties of parents and of children, these are crucial to the continuity of any civilisation. The day we divorce each other freely, as they already do in the West, and toss the children about like football between father and mother, although we may speak Chinese and may able to quote the classics, we would already have changed, and for the worse.

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Although Singapore, Hong Kong, Taipei and Guangzhou are different societies with different lifestyles, nevertheless, for the present, there are common features in all of them : the close-knit ties of family, where the respect for and care of parents is the mirror image of love and responsibility for the upbringing and training of children. Chinese in these societies still place the interests of family and society above those of the individual. These are profoundly Chinese traditional values. These are worth preserving.

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