

**SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER LEE KUAN YEW  
AT THE OPENING OF THE SPEAK MANDARIN CAMPAIGN  
ON FRIDAY, 21 SEP 84, AT THE SINGAPORE CONFERENCE HALL**

Few children can successfully master two languages plus a dialect. Indeed very few can speak two languages equally well. The reason why most societies are monolingual is simple: most human beings are equipped by nature to cope with only one language.

If we want our bilingual policy to succeed, we must lighten our children's learning load by using Mandarin as the mother tongue in place of dialect. Studies show that students from Mandarin-speaking families consistently do better in their examinations than those from dialect-speaking homes. It could be the parents of such students are better educated. It must also be because they have no extra load of dialect words and phrases to carry.

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We have made progress. The Ministry of Education has statistics which show that more families with young children are making the switch to Mandarin. The percentage of new primary one pupils from predominantly Mandarin-speaking families has increased from 26% in 1980 to 59% in 1984 (Validity Date for 1984 data is August 84). Within the same period, pupils from mainly dialect-

speaking families have dropped from 64% to 27%. Parents are responding because they are more aware of the benefits to their children.

We are fortunate that no single dialect is the predominant mother tongue in Singapore as Cantonese is in Hong Kong. Otherwise it would be most difficult to get Mandarin accepted other than as a stepmother tongue. Fortunately no one considers Mandarin a stepmother tongue. All the same, we do well to recognise that Chinese still have deep emotional ties to dialects. These emotions hinder our complete acceptance of Mandarin. When parents registered their children's names, between Aug 82 to Jul 84, one-fifth registered only their dialect names, a total rejection. Over one-third registered their dialect names, with full Pinyin in brackets, a concession to their identification with other Chinese of different dialects, a tentative and reluctant acceptance. Nearly one-quarter registered their surnames in dialect and their personal names in Pinyin, a partial acceptance, i.e.

they will not give up their total identification with their fathers' and grandfathers' dialect surnames but are prepared to concede an identification with Chinese of other dialects through using Pinyin, a full acceptance (Annex I). On another plane, over one-third of Chinese parents registered additional Western or Christian personal names for their sons and daughters. Twenty years ago (1964), only one-fifteenth registered Christian personal names (Annex II). Western influence has increased by five times.

These loyalties to dialect names are emotional and strong. It means that we have to accept that the home language will remain dialect for some time. And the home environment is the strongest factor in influencing the language habits of children. Even when parents choose to speak Mandarin to the children, their choice is often limited by dialect-speaking grandparents. Grandparents find learning Mandarin too difficult at their age. We have to live with this problem. Children need their grandparents to care for them. We encourage this by giving HDB priority for the 3-tier families. We accept that not all grandparents can give up dialect.

The next strongest factor is the language environment children go to outside home and school: food centres, streets, shops, buses, playgrounds. To continue the use of dialects in these places is to interfere with the process of getting our young to use Mandarin as their social language.

One abiding reason why we have to persist in bilingualism is that English will not be emotionally acceptable as our mother tongue. To have no emotionally acceptable language as our mother tongue is to be emotionally crippled. We shall doubt ourselves. We shall be less self-confident. Mandarin is emotionally acceptable as our mother tongue. It also unites the different dialect groups. It

reminds us that we are part of an ancient civilisation with an unbroken history of over 5,000 years. This is a deep and strong psychic force, one that gives confidence to a people to face up to and overcome great changes and challenges.

To be able to speak Mandarin and to reach the Chinese script, is reassuring. To look at Chinese characters, see them as mysterious hieroglyphics, is to be psychologically disadvantaged. A little effort and the magic of the characters will reveal themselves. Only a Chinese Singaporean who cannot speak or read it, and who has been exposed to discomfiture or ridicule when abroad, will know how inadequate and how deprived he can feel. By then, they would not be young enough to learn the language easily. I have personally experienced this. Therefore, I can state that its psychological value cannot be over-emphasised. Parents want their children to be successful. They also want their children to retain traditional Chinese values in filial piety, loyalty, benevolence, and love. Through Mandarin their children can emotionally identify themselves as part of an ancient civilisation whose continuity was because it was founded on a tried and tested value system.

Let me add that although language and culture are closely related, they are not identical. Some Chinese educated people got emotionally worked up when I said this earlier this year. If they stay calm and clear minded, they will be more

perceptive and convincing in their arguments for the learning of Chinese. Let me give an example which shows how Chinese culture was borrowed without the Chinese China's Confucianist culture, whilst using their own languages. So, we shall teach Confucianism through English, using only key words and phrases in the original Chinese. This can be done.

The future level of competence of Mandarin is what we choose to make of it in a society where English is the working language. By pressing on with the Speak Mandarin Campaign we underline our resolve to keep Mandarin as the social language of Chinese Singaporeans. The Government need not have mounted this campaign. We could have left it to a free evolution of language habits. Then I fear the use of dialects will persist with not Amoy but pidgin Hokkien becoming most common, and Mandarin restricted to the classrooms. That is totally unacceptable. It will not support what we are teaching in schools.

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Therefore I am glad I launched this campaign 5 years ago. My regret is that I did not launch it 10 years ago for I believe Singaporeans were ready for this emphasis on Mandarin, and away from dialects, 5 years earlier. But, there were many people who had doubts and reservations. Even as late as 1981, several MPs wanted me to restore dialect TV programmes because the old folk missed them. I felt that would be wrong and refused. Now, time has helped the

old folks to adjust. They can understand Mandarin programmes even if they cannot speak Mandarin. We have made progress. If we persist for another 10 years, we should succeed in speaking Mandarin as a matter of habit.

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## Annex I

TABLE ON TYPES OF NAMES IN THE BIRTH CERTIFICATES  
OF CHINESE CHILDREN

(AUGUST 1982 TO JULY 1984)

Period \ Type of Name	Surname & Name in full Hanyu Pinyin	Surname & Name in Dialect	Surname/Name in Dialect with full Hanyu Pinyin in Bracket	Surname in Dialect with name in Hanyu Pinyin	Total
Aug 82 - Dec 82	2510	2882	6143	2351	13886
Jan 83 - Dec 83	6475	6291	9243	7076	29085
Jan 84 - Jul 84	3199	2870	5395	4024	15488
Total	12184 (20.84%)	12043 (20.60%)	20781 (35.55%)	13451 (23.01%)	58459 (100%)

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USE OF CHRISTAIN NAMES IN THE BIRTH  
CERTICIATES OF CHINESE CHILDREN

Period	Total No. Live Births	No. with Christian Names in Birth Certificates	% with Christian Names in Birth Certificates
1964	40,937	3,105	7.6%
Aug 82 to Jul 84	58,459	20,486	35.0%

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