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SPEECH BY MR LEE KUAN YEW, SENIOR MINISTER,

AT THE SINGAPORE FEDERATION OF CHINESE CLAN

ASSOCIATIONS AND THE SINGAPORE CHINESE CHAMBER OF

COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY DINNER

ON SUNDAY, 17 FEBRUARY 1991

I am honoured that the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Clan Associations are giving me this dinner. I thank the Chairman, Mr Wee Cho Yaw for his warm and generous compliments.

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The final judgement on my work depends on whether the transfer of power is successful. Only after Goh Chok Tong and his team have succeeded, will I deserve the chairman's compliments. Should they fail, much of the praise will be discounted by historians. My job is to help the Prime Minister and his team succeed so that my generation's achievements will endure.

One of the strongest factors for Singapore's success was the cultural values of the generation of the 1950-70s. That generation had been brought up to accept the need for sacrifice by the individual for the sake of family and society. They also believed in hard work, thrift and the honouring of one's obligations. These cultural values contributed to our success. Because this is my experience, I have placed great store on maintaining these cultural values in Chinese Singaporeans.

Chinese Singaporeans will change and evolve away from that generation because of different experiences, different challenges, and different environment. Indeed they have already changed significantly in the 25 years since 1965. At separation there were few differences between Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia, Today we can easily spot the differences between them. These differences are greater when Chinese in Singapore are compared with those in ASEAN countries, or Hong Kong, Taiwan and the mainland. This is natural and inevitable.

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Even if we keep the same language and retain the same culture, there will still be great changes in the course of time. When the British colonists in America revolted and became independent in 1776, they spoke the same language and had the same culture as the British. But 52 years later, American

English became sufficiently different from English English so that in 1828, Noah Webster compiled Webster's American Dictionary of the English Language. American culture has also evolved differently. However, although change is inevitable, we must try to keep the basic core values of our culture, those values that made the Chinese civilisation one of the most enduring in the world.

This can be done even though it is not possible, except for a few students, to keep up the standard of the Chinese language Singapore had in the 1940s and 50s when most students were educated completely in Chinese and did not master English. I have observed other multilingual societies. I was surprised to see how superficial was their command of the second and third languages. Luxembourg teaches French, German, English, besides using their own Luxembourghese dialect at home. Mauritius teaches English, French and the mother tongue, either Tamil, Hindi or Mandarin. Standards of all these languages in their newspapers are not high.

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When we talk about language used in society, we are really talking of people of average intelligence. A person of average intelligence cannot master two languages both at first language levels. Hence the unending conflicts in Quebec between the French and English languages and in Brussels, between the French and Flemish (Dutch) languages. But all of us can see how Malays in

Singapore have no problems retaining Malay because their language is a part of their social lives.

For the Chinese, the problem arose because of use of dialects instead of Mandarin. Fortunately in the past 11 years, we have got Mandarin to become the social language of Chinese Singaporeans. This is evident in all the HDB new towns. We have less of a problem than the Chinese in Malaysia who have to struggle to master Malay, English and Mandarin and also speak dialects at home.

Last year, some English-educated intellectuals suggested that we should blur and erase our ethnic, linguistic and cultural differences to speed up nation building. I believe this is neither realistic nor practical. People will resist uch a policy, and by their resistance they will accentuate inter-ethnic differences.

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Goh Chok Tong and his team had to spend much time and effort to get a majority to agree on our five shared values. And remember, these five values do not make up a complete philosophy of life. The Chinese must draw on their traditional values in Confucianism, Taoism and Chinese folklore to complement them. The Malays must draw on Malay custom and Islam, the Hindus on their customs and the Hindu religion. If we try to put all these different background cultures into a blender, we will end up with a nondescript melange.

The Federation of Chinese Clan Associations and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce have played an important role during British times in Chinese education. Your role today is to help maintain the essence of our culture.

One way of doing this is to ensure that certain big festivals are observed and celebrated. These great rituals are important. The festivals and rituals remind us of our past and identify ourselves with the history of our ancestors. Our history did not begin when our forefathers came to Singapore. It goes back deep into the beginnings of Chinese civilisation over 5,000 years ago. That history is a part of us because of the tradition and culture they have bequeathed us. Your associations can help remind young Chinese Singaporeans of their great heritage.

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