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TRANSLATION OF A SPEECH BY THE ACTING MINISTER FOR CULTURE,
MR ONG TENG CHEONG, AT THE OPENING OF "SEMINAR ON CHINESE
PRESS" ORGANISED BY THE SINGAPORE BAOLIN RECREATIONAL CLUB
AND THE SINGAPORE NATIONAL UNION OF JOURNALISTS AT THE MERLIN
PLAZA, BEACH ROAD, ON SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 1979, AT 9 A.M.

Let me first congratulate the Singapore Baolin Recreational Club and the Singapore National Union of Journalists for the initiative in organising this seminar. As we are on the threshold of a new decade, the seminar provides a good opportunity to review the past and present performance in order to meet the challenges of the 1980s.

I am happy to note that, in recent years, there have been some significant developments in the Chinese press. The most important of these is the change of ownership of the two major Chinese dailies from family concerns to public companies last year. This has thus placed the Chinese press in a better position to serve the nation and the people. Under the stewardship of proven leaders of business, the two newspaper companies have shown encouraging signs of growth and vitality.

There have also been some welcome changes in the contents of the newspapers. Well-written articles by academics and others on economic, cultural and political affairs of the region and of Singapore now regularly appear in these newspapers. The newspapers have also organised forums to discuss current issues. This is a healthy development, for such forums would help raise the level of public debate on crucial issues facing our nation.

These developments are indeed encouraging. However, there are certain disconcerting features of the Chinese press your seminar may wish to look into.

Of late, the Chinese press has been unnecessarily obsessed of giving gory details in their reports on crime, violence, and other tragedies. A recent example is the treatment given by some of the

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newspapers to the cold-blooded murder of four children. Admittedly, it was a human interest story that newspapers could not ignore; it was, nonetheless, a despicable crime. The question is: Should newspapers exploit the tragedy in order to increase their circulation, even to the extent of giving currency to rumours as well as splashing screaming headlines to highly speculative and inaccurate reports? Competition among newspapers to increase circulation is a healthy thing. But need it sink to that low level? Mass media are powerful weapons and have a great influence on society. The press should therefore exercise greater restraint in reporting crime and violence.

Another observation I would like to make concerns the quality of reports in the press. Although the level of education and the bilingual proficiency of the reporters in the Chinese press as well as in other language newspapers have vastly improved, professionalism is still sadly lacking. Often reports have no depth: there are mere regurgitations from press releases. Insufficient background information is provided to make the news more meaningful to the readers. Could this be due to the fact that the new generation of our reporters have been pampered too much by spoon-feeding? Whatever the cause may be, this situation should be rectified. Perhaps newspaper readers should learn to be more critical so as to keep the journalists on their toes.

The next decade will be crucial for the Chinese press in many ways. There will be revolutionary changes in the production of newspapers as well as the dissemination of news. Some countries are already experimenting with self-service electronic information system that allows a subscriber to get a facsimile newspaper from a home printout machine. Others are trying out a system that enables a subscriber to read news or information of his choice on his home TV screen by merely pressing a button.

Being a foremost centre of communications, Singapore must keep abreast with such technological advances. Already electronic editing has made its debut in Singapore. In the 1980s, television monitor terminals may move into the newsrooms of Chinese newspapers. This is not as far-fetched as it sounds. The simplification of the Chinese characters and their adaptation for teleprinter and computer, coupled with the advances in telecommunications, would certainly herald a new era for the Chinese press.

Further, the Chinese press will face an increasingly bilingual readership in the next five to 10 years. The competition will be that much keener. You will not only have to compete with your traditional rivals but also with the English newspapers for readership. In addition, the better educated bilingual readers in the 1980s are likely to be more discerning and more critical. You have therefore got to prepare yourselves for the challenges in the next decade.

To begin with, the Chinese press could perhaps make an in-depth study on their future bilingual readership to ascertain the problems and to identify the needs and interests of such readers in the light of the government's social, cultural and educational policies.

Another area in which the Chinese press, like the Malay and Tamil press, can play a more effective role than the English press is the preservation of traditional socio-cultural values and norms through the inculcation of these values in our young.

Finally, I am told that the dialogue between various government departments and the press has improved considerably, leading to closer rapport and understanding. This has resulted in more information on government policies and programmes appearing in the newspapers. If this seminar comes out with any suggestions to further improve the relationship between the government and the press, I can assure you, my Ministry will carefully study them.

On this note, I now declare open the Seminar on the Chinese Press. I wish you success in your deliberations and discussions.
