

# Mr Lee tells of his struggle with Chinese language

New book details his own experience and S'pore's bilingual policy

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FORMER prime minister Lee Kuan Yew has come out with a book on a subject close to his heart: bilingualism. It will be launched next Monday at the Singapore Conference Hall.

Entitled *My Lifelong Challenge: Singapore's Bilingualism Journey*, the book is the story of Mr Lee Kuan Yew's 50-year struggle to transform Singapore from a polyglot former British colony into a united nation where everyone, while knowing English, knows at least one other language, his own mother tongue.

The book tackles controversial issues such as the closure of Nanyang University and the resistance of some communities and groups to the introduction of the Speak Mandarin Campaign.

"The founding prime minister of Singapore tells why he did away with vernacular schools in spite of violent political resistance, why he closed Nanyang University, why he later started Special Assistance Plan schools, and why he continues to urge all ethnic Chinese Singaporeans

today to learn the Chinese language," said a press statement from Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), which provided editorial and publishing support for the book.

"The reader learns not only about the many policy adjustments but also the challenges Mr Lee encountered - from Chinese language chauvinists who wanted Chinese to be the pre-eminent language in Singapore, from Malay and Tamil community groups fearing that Chinese was given too much emphasis, from parents of all races wanting an easier time for their school-going children, and even from his own Cabinet colleagues questioning his assumptions about language."

*My Lifelong Challenge* is also the story of Mr Lee's own struggle to learn the Chinese language, which began when he was six years old and his Hakka maternal grandmother enrolled him in a Chinese class with fishermen's children.

"In evocative detail, the man born to English-speaking parents recounts his own feelings of rebellion and humiliation at different points in his life, when faced with the Chinese language and his own inadequacy in it," said the statement.

"This book describes in matter-of-fact yet vivid fashion his steely determination to improve his Chinese and reclaim his Chinese heritage right up to the present..."



The book tells of the policy challenges Mr Lee faced, including from parents who wanted an easier time for their school-going children. It also features a collection of essays by Singaporeans whose lives have been touched by the bilingual policy in one way or another. ST FILE PHOTO

Also included in the book is a collection of essays by Singaporeans from different walks of life, whose lives have been touched by the bilingual policy in one way or another.

The essayists include Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, educationist Chew Cheng Hai and pop star Stefanie Sun.

Said Mr Patrick Daniel, editor-in-chief of SPH's English and Malay Newspapers Division: "This book recounts an important facet of Singapore's history."

"It contains insights born of experience about the challenge of ensuring that each community preserve its own language and culture in a multiracial nation, while adopting English as the working language."

The book, which was two years in the making, will be jointly launched by SPH's two flagship newspapers - the *Lianhe Zaobao* and *The Straits Times*.

It comes in separate Chinese and Eng-

lish editions which are similar, but not identical. The 400-page Chinese edition is published by *Lianhe Zaobao* and the 388-page English one by *Straits Times Press*.

Explaining this arrangement, senior executive vice-president of the Chinese Newspapers and Newspaper Services divisions Robin Hu said: "The readerships of the two editions, particularly those 45 years old and above, are different. They attended schools of two different language streams and hold quite different perspectives of the bilingual policy."

"In order to speak to these two readerships, the author decided that while the content should be similar, the approach would be slightly different."

Mr Hu headed the editorial committee that worked closely with Mr Lee on the book.

The book has received favourable reviews from foreign and local luminaries

alike (see sidebar).

Former senior minister of state for community development Ch'ng Jit Koon said: "To this day, some people do not approve of the bilingual policy... This book describes fully, accurately and clearly the background to these policies, helping us to understand why he did what he did. Whether the bilingual policy is right or wrong, history will be the judge..."

The book goes on sale from 5pm next Monday at major bookstores. Both Chinese and English editions of the book are priced at \$39.90.

Each book comes with a DVD of extracts from relevant speeches made by Mr Lee, in English, Mandarin, Hokkien and Malay, over the past 50 years.

Inquiries may be directed by e-mail to [stpressbooks@sph.com.sg](mailto:stpressbooks@sph.com.sg) or telephone on 6319-8347, Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm.

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## Extracts from the book

"I HAD long been struck by the difference between English-educated and Chinese-educated students in colonial Singapore.

"The English-educated could be certain of finding jobs after graduating, and generally led lives that were more comfortable than the Chinese-educated. But compared to the Chinese-educated, there was

something missing. I realised that it was self-confidence."

**On the contrast between the two groups, which he found hard to forget**

"When Singapore celebrated its 21st National Day on 9 August 1986... it was the first time emcees of the

event used English to lead the audience, where before they had to use three languages - Mandarin, Malay and Tamil. The crowds responded likewise in English...

"They still retained their mother tongues... but a common knowledge of English enabled them to share together the joys of the occasion. I was a proud man that day."

**On the moment when he felt that the bilingual policy had finally borne fruit**

"Nanyang University was the first Chinese-language university to be set up in Southeast Asia. Its objective was to provide tertiary education for students from Chinese schools in Southeast Asia. But from the start, it was doomed to fail. The tide of history was against it."

**On Singapore's only Chinese-medium university, Nanyang University, which lasted from 1956 to 1979**

"Hokkien was soon indispensable to me... I made it a point to speak in Hokkien during every National Day Rally because that was the language that got me the most receptive audience.

"But there came a point - in the mid-1970s - when the Education Ministry pointed out to me

that I was not setting a good example by using Hokkien when schools were trying to teach Mandarin. So I decided to stop... My last speech in Hokkien was in 1979."

**On the usefulness of Hokkien to his early political career. It was widely spoken until he launched the Speak Mandarin Campaign in 1979**

"To me the crux of the issue was not how easy or difficult the Chinese language syllabus is, but how it was taught. I wanted the Education Ministry to be more open to the idea of using English in the teaching of Chinese. The very notion was anathema to an entire generation of Chinese language teachers..."

**On his involvement in the Education Ministry's Chinese-language reviews in the last decade**

"Singapore's Muslim majority neighbours had long harboured the suspicion that I was a China-appeasing Trojan horse in Southeast Asia. My brother Suan Yew has visited our family's ancestral village, but I have decided that I will not go, even though I am no longer Prime Minister."

**On being asked in recent years if he would ever visit his family's ancestral village in Dabu in China's Guangdong province**

## Positive reviews - from Stefanie Sun to Henry Kissinger

MY LIFELONG Challenge: Singapore's Bilingualism Journey has been read with keen interest and received positive reviews from many local and foreign personages, including the following:

■ **Mr Wee Cho Yaw, chairman of the United Overseas Bank Group, who was Nanyang University Council chairman when Nantah was merged with the University of Singapore:** "To many people of my generation Nantah is more than a university. It represented the aspirations and idealism of the South-east Asian Chinese. The Nantah 'spirit' of self-reliance and strength in unity cut across social classes and national borders. In the closing line of the Nantah chapter, Mr Lee Kuan Yew advised that the spirit which inspired it (the university) deserves to be treasured and embraced by future generations of Singaporeans. I totally agree."

■ **Mr Chua Thian Poh, chairman of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry:** "This is a good book that deserves to

be read by every Singaporean, particularly parents who are still undecided over how to create a positive second-language learning environment for their children."

■ **Ms Stefanie Sun, Mandopop singer who had to brush up on her Mandarin to break into the Taiwan pop music market:** "As the world gets 'smaller', our red dot fights for its mark on the global community. If you ever wondered how we got this far or what makes Singaporeans tick, this book explains a lot through the eyes of Mr Lee Kuan Yew."

■ **Professor Eddie Kuo Chen-Yu, Emeritus Professor, Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University:** "Mr Lee's... recounting of his family background and his life experiences in learning several languages makes this book a fascinating read."

■ **Dr Henry Kissinger, former US secretary of state, who is an old friend of Mr Lee's:** "Lee Kuan Yew's memoir of his journey

toward recognition of the value of state-supported bilingualism for his polyglot nation is a fascinating chapter in the life and lessons of one of the most innovative and successful leaders of our time. Candid and illuminating, it has valuable insights for many countries struggling to absorb an unprecedented flood of new immigrants."

■ **Mr Dominic Barton, global managing director of McKinsey & Company:** "This book comes at an important time for Singapore, which continues to rigorously examine its language policies as it sets a course for its next stage of development. It also comes at an important time for the rest of the world - as other countries confront their own choices as they overhaul their educational systems to take advantage of a globally connected world."

■ **Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, Thailand:** "Now that I am studying Chinese, he sometimes prefers to talk to me in Chinese..."

"By encouraging Singaporeans to be educated in English, he has made Singapore global. By introducing Mandarin to Singaporean life, he has opened up opportunities to the new century in which Chinese will be the dominant language. I sincerely wish for the success of Mr Lee Kuan Yew's... splendid exposition."