

# See mother tongues as living languages, not exam subjects: Minister

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Schools may actively promote mother tongues like Mandarin, but a conducive bigger environment is important for students to be effectively bilingual.

Parents should make an effort to communicate with their children in their mother tongue so that it is not seen just as an examinable subject but a living and practical language, said Education Minister Chan Chun Sing at the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre yesterday.

Mr Chan was speaking at the Singapore University of Social Sciences' (SUSS) 22nd International Conference on Chinese Language and Culture.

He said in Mandarin: "People who excel in a language are those who continue to use it outside school."

Professor Eddie Kuo, SUSS' academic adviser, told The Straits Times: "Singaporeans take our multilingualism for granted. It is part of our DNA and is uniquely



Education Minister Chan Chun Sing at the Singapore University of Social Sciences' 22nd International Conference on Chinese Language and Culture yesterday. He urged parents to make an effort to speak to children in their mother tongue. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

Singapore."

The 82-year-old added: "There is room for improvement for the standards of mother tongues, and enhancing our bilingual education policy is an ongoing journey."

The two-day conference seeks to promote research on Chinese language and culture, language and society, and to strengthen collaborations between experts in related fields. This theme for this year is Coexist and Evolve: New Perspectives of Language Policy and Language Diversity.

Mr Chan shared personal observations about his children who picked up some Korean and Spanish, saying that platforms like the Internet and YouTube can help one master a language.

With the rise of China, there is greater motivation to learn Mandarin as more people see the practical uses of the language, he said.

Building a good foundation and confidence in the language is important too, he added, sharing how he excelled in mathematics

after his confidence in the subject was boosted when a teacher complimented him in Primary 1.

He added: "Singaporeans' multilingualism will give them an edge in this polarised world, navigating between and connecting with different countries."

The conference, initiated by Beijing Normal University, the National Chinese Association of China and Hanyang University (South Korea), is being held in Singapore for the first time this year and is hosted by SUSS' School of Humanities and Behavioural Sciences and the Centre for Chinese Studies.

The event coincides with the Centre for Chinese Studies' 10th anniversary celebrations. To commemorate the occasion, SUSS launched a Chinese book titled Unity In Diversity: Language And Society In Singapore.

The 276-page book is co-authored by Prof Kuo, who gave a keynote address on language planning and nation-building here,

and Associate Professor Luo Futeng, head of the Chinese programme at SUSS.

Prof Luo, 62, said: "For a small country like Singapore to have four official languages speaks volumes of the respect it has for all races and cultures. Singaporeans have benefited from the bilingual education policy, which gives them a lot of competitive advantage when they work or travel around the world."

Professor Cheong Hee Kiat, president of SUSS, said: "Given the volatility we see in the world today, among different nationalities and language groups, there is even more impetus and urgency for appropriate language policies to be formulated."

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• The book Unity In Diversity: Language And Society In Singapore is available at \$24 (soft cover) and \$38 (hard cover), inclusive of GST, online at [bit.ly/3zcDYSI](http://bit.ly/3zcDYSI)