

## **Mother's Day, Mother Tongue, Motherland Elections**

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A year ago, on Mother's Day, there was a petition held at Hong Lim Park against the lowering of the PSLE mother tongue weightage. Soon after the event, the Minister of Education apologised for the possible confusion that his earlier statement might have caused. Many were convinced that this was an unprecedented move by political leaders in the People's Action Party to apologise for lapses in their job responsibilities. Perhaps the decision was a response to the display of power among a large mass of people who were passionate and determined about a cause.

At the start of this year, there were online calls for an anniversary meeting at Hong Lim Park. However, news of the General Election (GE) arrived before plans could be set in motion, with Polling Day coincidentally falling on the eve of Mother's Day. Election Fever was still running high when this column was submitted. Whose future would Hougang SMC, where I live, secure from today? And would neighbouring Aljunied GRC "repent" under the mighty hammer or be showered with lightning rods? Whatever the results, we shall be witnessing history.

Two Mother's Days have gone by with two wishes expressed. The first was to retain the importance of mother tongue in education; the second, for a better life and future in our Motherland. The first was a voluntary act of petition; the second, a compulsory vote of civic responsibility. Both instances displayed a strength which was expressed by the gathering in numbers, and, to a certain extent, introduced a paradigm shift.

The concept of a *paradigm shift* was first introduced by the American philosopher Thomas Kuhn. Originated as a scientific revolution, the concept was later adapted into the fields of social sciences and marketing, and is currently a fashionable notion in the corporate world to induce change and transformation. A paradigm shift describes a change in basic assumptions, or paradigms, such that any previously fundamental model or perception of events can no longer deal with or explain the anomalies. A new paradigm then emerges to critically review current world views to make sense of new problems. The new paradigm that is organically evolved through dynamics of social negotiations and integrations should be viewed not only as a different paradigm, but a better, more advanced, and meticulous model. It is not an example or a copy of existing paradigms, but an organic and original archetype that moves towards setting a new foundation.

In the case of Mother Tongue education, many speakers see it as their duty to safeguard its interest, and question the effectiveness of previous efforts in promoting mother tongue education. The bilingualism policy in Singapore has evolved into an English-preferred bilingualism and this has certainly restricted the promotion of the mother tongue. In the midst of election rallies, politicians make full use of the official languages, mother tongues, and dialects

to connect with the people. Just like netizens questioned the meaning of using the gross domestic product (GDP) index as the country's key performance indicator (KPI); similarly, language policies that are based mainly on pragmatic considerations also have its shortcomings. In order to allow the mother tongue to be fully integrated into our lives, the social and cultural values of languages must be carefully reviewed, and various aspects of the mother tongue must be seriously considered: What is 'mother tongue' to you? Is it the language that your mother speaks or the language that your father speaks? Or, is it the language of your ethnic culture? Does it just mean an official language assigned to you? Or, is it the language that you would use to blurt out angry words when you are furious? Why must all Singaporeans learn their mother tongues? Is it to enhance communication, to preserve and transmit the ethnic culture, to forge cultural identity, or to latch on to the opportunities in the mainland Chinese market? A paradigm shift in language policy formulation needs to break from the mindset that speaking different languages hinders communication, and that it is necessary to denounce non-standard varieties to promote a 'good' language variety.

As for the election, there was fervent involvement of the young and middle-aged voters in social media this time. Due to heated discussions in the virtual world, some voters expressed that they realised for the first time the issues in how public housing was priced, they also realised that they could actually participate in critical review of policies and policy making processes. Some even found new courage to demand accountability from high-ranking ministers who are highly paid. Comments have been made about the political awakening of voters, that Singaporeans have finally reached some sense of political maturity and wisdom after almost fifty years of independence. Even the younger generation of Singaporeans in their twenties and thirties were able to actively and fearlessly engage in eloquent debates on national affairs. The paradigm shift displayed upsets the unilateral model of officials as rulers and people as followers, questions the "It's for your own good" line of policy making rationalisation, and even provides different semiotic interpretations of "white" as being "pure" or "white" as being "empty (promises)".

Prior to the start of the GE, the Ministry of Education announced that it would set aside \$12 million to promote its Mother Tongue Language policy over the next five years. On the eve of Nomination Day, the Prime Minister promised to set up a new taskforce to groom the next generation of bilingual and bi-cultural Chinese community leaders. Whether these new initiatives will result in a mere continuation of past efforts, and to what extent there will be a new paradigm shift to break away from old mindsets, remain to be seen. The results of the GE are out today. It is with high hopes and deep concern, that we watch the manner in which Singaporeans, with their new-found political confidence and awareness, work hand-in-hand with the newly formed parliament to push forward political maturity and a sustainable democracy.

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