

**Singapore Government**  
**MEDIA RELEASE**

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**PRIME MINISTER'S CHINESE NEW YEAR MESSAGE 2008**

1. Singapore enjoyed a fruitful and productive Year of the Pig. The economy recorded its fourth consecutive year of robust growth. A record 237,000 jobs were created. Unemployment is at its lowest in a decade. All workers have something to cheer about, as they enjoyed higher bonuses and wage increments.
2. The Year of the Rat begins under more uncertain and challenging circumstances. Turbulence in financial markets worldwide has shaken consumer and investor confidence. The US economy is slowing down, and possibly sliding into recession. Worldwide energy and food prices have soared, raising prices in Singapore too.
3. We should gird ourselves for further uncertainties ahead. But we can also be confident, for Singapore is in a strong position to weather any storm. I know many Singaporeans worry about rising food prices and the cost of living. As a small, open economy, which imports almost everything we need, we cannot escape these global trends. Nor can we fix the prices of cooking oil, flour, or other essential foodstuffs as this would create artificial shortages, queues and a black market. But we can and will directly help those in need. The Workfare Income Supplement Scheme made its first payment last month, paying \$150 million to 290,000 low-income workers. With good growth, we have the resources to help ease the burden on Singaporeans, especially for the poor and elderly.
4. In the Chinese zodiac, the Rat symbolises wit, imagination and resourcefulness. Let us harness our creativity and ingenuity to tackle the challenges that lie ahead. Then despite the difficulties that come our way we can all look forward to another good year for Singapore and for ourselves.
5. Chinese New Year is a celebration of the family, a time of reunion and bonding. However busy we are, however faraway we may be from home, we should try to keep these traditions alive. If you are working abroad and cannot make it back for the New Year, at least call your parents and families back home, or better still, chat over the internet using a webcam. These customs maintain and renew our bonds of family and kinship.

6. Nowadays, more Singaporeans prefer to leave their parental homes to set up their own households after marriage. Nuclear families have long been the norm in the West, but they are increasingly the trend in East Asia too. Even in China, many young people now work and live in distant cities. But when Chinese New Year comes around, they make a special effort to travel to their home towns to be with their families, as we saw this year when severe snowstorms disrupted this huge movement of people, and caused great hardship to tens of millions determined to make it home for the reunion dinner.

7. While social norms are shifting, we must continue to preserve the filial ties and bonds that hold our family units together. Families are a great strength for continuity in bringing up the next generation, and transmitting social values. Grandparents, in particular, play an important role in our families. They are a big help to those who have children.

8. One study of Canada and Finland in the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries confirmed this scientifically. It found that women whose mothers were still living not only bore more children, but their children were more likely to survive till adulthood. This was especially so if the grandmother was still young (below 60), and was living close by (less than 20 kilometres away). The world has changed many times over since then. But even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, young parents everywhere still benefit from the experience, advice and help of their mothers and mothers-in-law. I have certainly benefited from this, and I am sure many Singaporeans have experienced the same.

9. This is why Government policies seek to preserve the family structure and foster family ties. For example, when applying for new HDB flats, couples who live with or near their parents have priority over regular applicants. Likewise, those buying re-sale flats enjoy a higher housing grant if they are staying with parents or the flat is near their parents' home. HDB has also introduced a family season ticket so that families who visit one another regularly can enjoy a discount on their parking fees. Then, even if they do not all stay under one roof, young couples can still keep in close touch with their parents, while they, in turn, can give valuable parenting advice, and help to look after the little ones.

10. More broadly, we want Singapore to be a great place to bring up families and children. It has been three years since we introduced major policies to encourage families to have more children. We have managed to reverse the decline in births, but only barely. Last year we only had 37,000 resident births, just 2,000 more than in 2004. Ultimately, this is not just a matter of financial incentives, but of social attitudes and mindsets, as well as practical arrangements like childcare facilities, flexible work options, and leave for parents to look after their children. It will take time for mindsets to change, but we are studying the practical arrangements

**carefully, to see how we can create an even friendlier environment for having and raising children.**

**11. Chinese New Year is a good time to celebrate our traditions, and remind ourselves that our family remains relevant in today's modern society. In this Year of the Rat, let us renew our kinship ties and strengthen our family bonds.**

**12. I wish all Singaporeans a happy and prosperous Chinese New Year.**