

## Reading, brushing up on Malay, Mandarin: 3 things DPM Lawrence Wong is doing in his spare time



DPM Lawrence Wong taking a "wefie" with participants at a Singapore World Water Day event at Marina Barrage in March 2023. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO



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SINGAPORE – In an interview in which Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong talked about his aspirations for Singapore and the challenges that lie ahead, the 51-year-old leader also gave the media a glimpse into what he does in his spare time.

### 1. He reads biographies of leaders, tech books and more

DPM Wong reads widely, mainly about current affairs and topics he wants to learn about. A recent interest is in quantum computing and artificial intelligence. Some titles he has shared on Facebook are *The Coming Wave* by artificial intelligence entrepreneur Mustafa Suleyman, and *Never Enough* by reporter Jennifer Breheny Wallace on toxic achievement culture.

He also reads biographies of leaders, both local and foreign. He is a fan of *The Singapore Lion*, a book on one of Singapore's founding fathers S. Rajaratnam, written by Ms Irene Ng, a former MP and journalist.

"When I was in college, we would take classes on political leadership, on US presidents, and you read about Teddy Roosevelt, FDR (Franklin D. Roosevelt). I remember one of the books I read on (Dwight) Eisenhower, and what he had said about leadership that always remains with me," he said.

"He distilled leadership into two things: One, knowing what to do; and two, getting people to do what is the right thing. It sounds very simple, but actually, there is a lot of wisdom in that."

DPM Wong obtained his bachelor's and master's degrees in economics from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, respectively. He also holds a master's degree in public administration from the Harvard Kennedy School at Harvard University.

To DPM Wong, the lesson is to listen to views and decide on the way forward, and then to articulate why this is the best approach and bring everyone along.

The second part is as important as the first, he said. "That's not easy to do too – that requires communication, it requires persuasion, it requires ways to inspire people, engage people, motivate them and get everyone on the same page.

"And that's just as important, otherwise the leader will be charging alone."

### 2. He is taking weekly Malay-language lessons

DPM Wong started learning Malay "off and on" from the time he was a civil servant, but began taking the lessons more seriously after he was appointed deputy prime minister in June 2022.

He now has weekly Malay classes, and hopes to become conversant in the language.

"To be able to deliver a speech, it's something I can do; to be fluent and be able to engage completely in Malay – I think that will be much, much harder," he said. "But never say never, I'll just keep on working at it and trying to get better."

### 3. He is brushing up on Mandarin

DPM Wong has also kept up with his Chinese lessons in the past one or two years, though on a lower frequency than for Malay.

He said he "struggled with studying Mandarin in school all (his) life". Compared with his friends, he was not as confident speaking Mandarin on a day-to-day basis, as he did not grow up in a family environment that spoke it regularly.

But he was serious about the subject in school and built a strong foundation in reading and writing in Chinese, he said.

DPM Wong attended Haig Boys' Primary, where his mother was a teacher. He went on to study at Tanjong Katong Secondary Technical School and Victoria Junior College.

He wants to gain confidence over time by using Mandarin more regularly, including for his work.

"With my residents, it is not difficult to do that on a conversational basis, but to start using it, going beyond that conversational Mandarin to using it for work, using it for interviews, using it for even engagements with others... that's my next phase in my Mandarin journey, and I hope I will continue to get better at it," he said.