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Singapore's hip-hop SARS hope

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SINGAPORE (AP) - A high-pitched voice calls out over the thumping bass line and hip hop melody, "SARS is the virus that I just want to minus."

Eminem, watch out.

Singapore has enlisted its most famous television character, Phua Chu Kang, in the fight against SARS with "SAR-vivor Rap," a CD released this week by the state broadcaster and supported by the Health Ministry.

The perm-haired construction worker, with a massive mole and knee-high yellow rubber boots, is a parody of an average Singapore male engaged in a never-ending linguistic battle with the English language.

The rap urges Singaporeans to maintain good hygiene to prevent a resurgence of severe acute respiratory syndrome, which killed 32 of 206 people infected with the disease in the city-state.

"Don't 'kak-pui' all over the place, you might as well 'kak-pui on my face," sings Phua.

"Kak-pui" is Singapore slang for spitting.

"To be able to pass valuable information about handling a deadly disease in a funky and lighthearted way without losing the essence of the message was a real treat for me," said Gurmit Singh, who plays Phua Chu Kang, on the MediaCorp Web site.

But the CD came out just as the government launched a new campaign against "Singlish" - a mix of local dialect and English.

The SARS rap is entirely in Singlish - where most sentences end in "leh" or "lah."

Eighty percent of Singapore's 4 million citizens are Chinese, and Singlish mixes the Chinese dialects of Hokkien, Cantonese and Mandarin with Malay, Tamil and English.

Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong singled out Singh's Singlish-speaking character as being inappropriate three years ago when he launched the first "Speak Good English" campaign.

Singh's character began speaking proper English on TV after that.

However, Manpower Minister Lee Boon Yang said the SARS rap was an exception, the Straits Times newspaper reported.

It quoted Lee as saying the government hoped to attract Singaporeans' attention "through rap, through Singlish, through dialect."

The CD, which sells for 12.90 Singapore dollars (US$7.30), follows a video that was first broadcast last month.

"It is selling OK lah ... Some people buy, some people just look at Phua Chu Kang on the cover," said a salesgirl at a local music store.

"No, it is not as popular as Jay-Z or Eminem," she added.

Globally, the virus has killed over 800 people and sickened more than 8,400. - AP