

Singapore Government

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SPEECH BY MR CHAN SOO SEN, PARLIAMENTARY

SECRETARY (PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE &  
MINISTRY OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT),

AT THE SAMSUI LUNAR NEW YEAR REUNION LUNCH

ON THURSDAY, 11 FEB 99 AT 12.00 NOON AT KIA HIANG

RESTAURANT, BLOCK 201 KIM TIAN ROAD #01-400

Good Afternoon

Mr Bill Beaty

Senior Vice President and General Manager  
American International Assurance (AIA)

Management and staff of AIA

Distinguished Guests

Ladies & Gentlemen

We gather here today for a very unique reunion lunch hosted by the American International Assurance (AIA) in honour of a group of Samsui women, amahs and aged poor who have contributed much to us in the yesteryears. This is an annual gathering hosted by the AIA since 1992. I would first like to commend the AIA for remembering this group of senior citizens. They have sacrificed their youth, worked hard for their families and our society in those days when we were much poorer and our lives much more difficult.

2 The Samsui women and amahs were products of their times. They were from poor families in Southern China who came to Singapore to work. They did hard manual work, received low wages, and tried to send much of their money home. The hard earned money that they sent home gave their families a better standard of living. In some cases, the money they sent home even allowed some of their siblings opportunities to go to school, key to a better life.

3 In addition to their money, the Samsui women and amahs also sacrificed their opportunities to get married and have their own families. Those days, women who got married became members of their husbands' families. They had to stop work, stay at home, take care of the households, and would have no pay. To continue working and supporting their families, they had to remain single. As a result, they were deprived of the only social security available those days: their own families. As they got too old or sick to continue working, they had no income and had to live on their savings. Many spent their period of retirement in poverty, after having done so much for others.

4 When I was a child, there were still some Samsui women and amahs working:

.. Samsui women had made their marks in our construction sector. Their characteristic dark blue outfit with red headscarf has been immortalised as part of our social history. Today, we can buy Samsui woman dolls in souvenir shops.

.. Some of my friends were brought up by their amahs, with their characteristic white and black outfit. They recalled the loyal service of their amahs with affection, and recounted the folklore told by the amahs.

5 Both the Samsui women and amahs have become part of our society's legacy. In their own ways, they have contributed to our society's development. There is a Chinese Proverb: "The last generation planted the trees so that the next generation may enjoy the shade." As we enjoy the good living environment today, we must remember those who "planted the trees". In a traditional society, they would have been respected and cared for by the family and the community, as senior and respected members.

6 I feel we should do likewise. Not only is this a gracious and compassionate thing to do, we are also through our action and attitude educating our children on how we care for the old. How we treat our old today will have profound impact on the attitude, values, and actions of our children's generation. We cannot blame our children for not being filial if they are just following our ways. A society where the younger generations treat the older generation badly is not one that we would sacrifice ourselves to build. On the other hand, a society where we put in all our effort and commitment to build with the knowledge that, at the end, we will feel security and affection is a home indeed.

7 Today, we show our affection to the old people present. Although this may feel like just a gesture of goodwill, it is a good tradition I hope the management and staff of the AIA can continue to uphold. You will feel good and proud giving love and affection to the people who truly deserve. So you will enjoy your lunch and have a good New Year.

Thank you.

National Archives of Singapore