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SPEECH BY MR MATTHIAS YAO, MINISTER OF STATE FOR DEFENCE,

AT THE POWER & POETRY: MONUMENTS AND

MEDITATIONS IN CHINESE INK PAINTING OFFICIAL OPENING

AT THE SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM ON TUESDAY,

13 APR 99 AT 6.40 PM

This exhibition is a key event in our cultural calendar. It is a testimony to the fact that Chinese ink painting continues to flourish, and more importantly, continues to develop, in Singapore.

The challenge of Chinese ink painters in the modern world is to harness the tension between tradition and innovation, and turn it into creative energy. The artform is a very exacting one.

The artist has to have total control over his brush, ink and paper, and observe strict conventions in composition and metaphor. Every stroke does its work. Spaces left blank work just as hard. Any mistake will become obvious as it cannot be erased or covered.

A successful painting satisfies the viewer not by calling attention to itself but by releasing an intimate response from his inner psyche. It does so by simplicity in the strokes and spaces,

sometimes by invoking symbolism from Chinese philosophy and folk belief, and always by a suggestion to the viewer the spirit of a subject rather than its physical reality.

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These conventions have been well developed over 3000 years. The techniques have become refined and well understood. The skills have been passed down from master to disciple through many years of disciplined training over many generations.

The artists in Singapore are maintaining this proud continuity. Chinese ink artists have been active in Singapore since the 1920s. Painting courses in the schools of fine arts, private galleries and community centres continue to attract a steady stream of students. Many have further developed their talents and have become well known for their works.

The traditional approaches and conventions must be practised and taught to succeeding generations of students. They are the essence of Chinese ink painting. They are the result of centuries of definition and refinement. If these fundamentals are weak in a painting, it will have no depth.

Yet, the challenge facing Chinese ink artists in Singapore is to carry on the principal traditions while creating works that are resonant with a contemporary and multi-cultural society that lives in a vibrant, urban environment.

To contribute to the development and appreciation of art in Singapore, our artists cannot merely reproduce paintings using classical styles and themes that reflect the values and settings of past generations. Not only will our artists be stifled if they can do nothing more than just conform to the set styles and subjects of the past masters. The viewing public also has a need for Singaporean works of art that are a part of their lives and that they can be proud of. Furthermore, an artform that does not keep exploring its capacity to inspire is dead. As one writer put it: "If modern Chinese art is to have a significant place in the art world, it must not merely give what the world already has, but strive to supply something original."

In Singapore, there should be no fear that there is no originality.

The artists in Singapore, represented by Mr Henri Chen, Mr Chua Ek Kay and Mr Zhuang Sheng Tao, are taking bold steps to capture contemporary themes and metaphors in a traditional medium, each in his own way. Their experiments and new ideas have contributed to a fresh approach towards Chinese ink painting. The result is a right step in the development of the artform in Singapore. Tradition gives birth to innovation.

Innovation extends the reach of tradition.

I am as eager as you are to view the exhibition. I congratulate the artists and the Singapore Art Museum for a successful event. It is my pleasure to declare the exhibition open.