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# *Singapore Government*

## ***MEDIA RELEASE***

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### **SPEECH BY MR LEE YOCK SUAN, MINISTER FOR INFORMATION AND THE ARTS AND MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, AT THE OPENING OF THE WORLD BOOK FAIR, SINGAPORE INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION AND EXHIBITION CENTRE BALLROOM, 9 JUNE 2000 AT 6.00 PM**

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am pleased to be here at the opening of the World Book Fair. Books have been in existence ever since human beings learnt to document their observations, thoughts and feelings through the written word.

Today, in our drive towards a knowledge-based economy, books remain as important stores of knowledge. And reading should still be a pleasure as well as a fundamental and effective means to acquire knowledge.

Since its inception in 1986, the World Book Fair has substantially grown in scale and popularity. It attracted 750,000 visitors in just nine days last year, making it one of the most popular exhibitions in Singapore.

The World Book Fair, the Asia International Book Fair and the many other

related events organised by various organisations support the Government's efforts to make Singapore a reading and learning nation. This year's World Book Fair is presenting an exhibition on the manuscripts, photographs and works of ten eminent contemporary Chinese writers organised by the National Library Board and the Shanghai Library. The Promote Mandarin Council will also launch a book to commemorate twenty years of the Speak Mandarin Campaign.

Statistics on book loans and the book trade in Singapore show that the reading habit is healthy and growing at a steady pace, despite increasing competition from other media. Between April 1995 and March 2000, the number of loans from our public libraries increased by 2½ times, from 10 million to 24.7 million. Visitorship to public libraries grew even faster, an increase of almost four times, from 5.7 million to 19.7 million during the same period. This is a remarkable growth rate. The 19.7 million visitors to our public libraries is higher than the 16.5 million cinema-goers last year.

The increase in the use of public libraries can be attributed to the rise in the general level of education, the increased awareness of the value of information and knowledge, and the government's programme to develop a comprehensive network of public libraries. Today, we have a network of 59 public libraries, comprising the National Reference Library, one regional library at Tampines, 16 community libraries and 41 community children's libraries. This year the National Library Board will open two more community libraries, one in Sembawang (in August 2000) and the other in Pasir Ris (in October 2000). In addition, four children's community libraries will also be set up before April 2001. The Woodlands Regional Library is expected to be ready in mid-2001. By 2003, when the Board's eight-year Development Plan is completed, there will be about 120 public libraries.

In the new economy, we need to be lifelong learners. Information, knowledge and skills get outdated quickly. We have to continuously learn and re-learn.

The National Library Board commissioned a study recently on the learning and reading habits of Singaporeans. It showed that 38% of the population are avid readers and 45% are casual or light readers. 17% are non-readers but are "reading facilitators", who do not read or use the libraries themselves, but have strong feelings about the positive impact of libraries on children. They are the ones who are happy to bring their children or grandchildren to libraries. 10% of the population prefer to buy books of their own, instead of borrowing from

libraries.

These findings are promising for Singapore as a reading nation. The study shows that there is still considerable market potential for the book trade in Singapore.

Leading bookstore chains of the world have been setting up mega stores in recent years. In 1997, the US Superstore chain Borders opened in Orchard Road, with 30,000 sq ft, starting a new and exciting trend. In 1999, Kinokuniya opened its largest bookstore in Southeast Asia of about 42,000 sq ft at Ngee Ann City. MPH relaunched its flagship bookstore in October 1999, expanding its capacity by more than 50%. The EPB Bookstore, occupying 23,000 sq ft, recently opened in Suntec City. The Australian bookstore chain, Dymocks Pronounced as “Dymicks”, will soon open a 7,500 sq ft café-cum-bookstore.

The Euromonitor International Consumer Market Factfile, a global research company, recorded the Singapore book retail volume at about 16.3 million copies in 1998. This represented a 7% increase from 1995, indicating the steady growth in book consumption despite the recession in 1997-98. Euromonitor also reported the overall retail sale value at S\$412 million in 1998 which was an 8% increase from 1995. In comparison, the retail sale value in Japan is estimated at US\$12 billion and in the US at US\$25 billion. The retail sales value of the global book market is estimated at US\$80 billion.

I understand that the book retailers here are benefiting from a steady surge in demand. On-line book selling is also introducing a new wave of activity in Asia, including Singapore.

In the new economy, knowledge is crucial to economic development and wealth generation. To stay competitive, societies will have no choice but to reinvent and upgrade themselves constantly. The job market is increasingly knowledge-driven. To remain employable and marketable, new skills and knowledge have to be acquired. A life-long habit of learning is therefore essential.

The quest for a reading nation also has a cultural dimension. My Ministry has developed a vision for Singapore to be a Renaissance City. The Government has agreed to provide additional funding for the promotion of the arts – amounting to S\$50 million over five years. However, funds alone are insufficient to turn the vision into reality. It takes a thinking citizenry with a deep-seated love

for arts and books. The World Book Fair will help us achieve this aim.

I am happy to declare the 2000 World Book Fair open and to wish all participants an enjoyable and successful fair.

National Archives of Singapore