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SPEECH BY MR LEE YOCK SUAN, MINISTER FOR INFORMATION AND THE ARTS, AT THE LAUNCH OF " RHYTHMS: A SINGAPOREAN MILLENNIAL ANTHOLOGY OF POETRY" AT HIBISCUS ROOM, GRAND HYATT SINGAPORE , ON 27 OCT 2000, 6.30PM

Ladies and gentlemen

I am happy to be here this evening to launch the book "RHYTHMS: A Singaporean Millennial Anthology of Poetry". Many of us have looked forward to it since it was announced last year.

2 The book breaks new ground in terms of translating Singapore literature. Works written in Tamil, Malay and Chinese have often been translated into English, but it is rare to see works in English translated into all the other three languages. Here we have an integrated multilingual volume which will make it accessible to the different races in Singapore.

3 Regardless of what has often been said about poetry being lost in translation, I am confident Singaporeans will have much to gain from this anthology. It will enrich our understanding of the literary works of different languages in our multicultural society. For this we should thank our talented and skilful translators. About 100 poems have become 400 as translators or "transcreators" have done their best to enable readers to enjoy all of them as though there are no linguistic barriers.

4 I congratulate the editors and translators of the anthology.

It is an appropriate publication to celebrate Singapore's diversity at the dawn of the new Millennium. I hope it will inspire more efforts by editors, translators and publishers to bring out similar anthologies, which will contribute to cross-cultural communication and understanding in Singapore.

5 For an art form that is highly refined, poetry has had simple and humble beginnings that have over many centuries given rise to great literary traditions. In multicultural Singapore, we are fortunate to be the inheritors of several of these traditions.

6 The oldest verse form in Malay was the pantun, which was in the early days a folk pastime in which people in the kampung engaged in verbal contest of impromptu pantun to tease and entertain. This battle of words and spontaneous wit is still practised with relish by some older folk among us.

7 The Book of Poetry or Shi Jing (??) has come down to us from ancient China as a collection of folk songs, which had been edited more than 2,500 years ago by the great sage Confucius. Chinese poets since then have sought inspiration from folk rhymes and verses of their own times.

8 The earliest Tamil poetry were songs sung by and for fisherman, farmers and the common people in the villages. The great epic poetry of the Iliad and Odyssey which forms the foundation of the Western poetic tradition is said to have been composed by Homer from old tales passed down orally from ancient Greece.

9 In the course of time, some poets have come to be regarded as high priests of language because of their rare gift of turning the use of words into high art. Whatever the origin or level of sophistication, poetry enriches our lives by enabling us to perceive the world through the eyes of the poet.

10 I am glad that besides efforts by the schools to introduce the literary arts to students, the National Arts Council has been running a number of programmes and projects to help make poetry and literature more accessible to young people and a wider section of our population. Worthy of note is the current Writers-in-schools programme, which brings poets and writers to schools to talk to students about their work. The publication of a selection of classical poems by the late Pan Shou with English and modern Chinese translations, which was launched early this year, is another example of NAC's effort to popularise our poets' work among young people. There is also the Translation Grant, which provides financial assistance to those who are interested in translating good literary works into any of our four official languages.

11 You will be pleased to know that to further promote the

appreciation of the literary arts, NAC is planning to include poetry reading in the programme of its arts radio station Passion 99.5. NAC will also set up an e-literature website to publish literary works on-line and allow readers to 'chat' with their favourite writers.

12 In the fast changing age of Information Technology, its power should be harnessed to make the arts more appealing to Singaporeans. Radio and television broadcasters could make creative use of their media to present poems imaginatively to help their audience appreciate them.

13 We should also see the potential for poetry as material for cross-disciplinary artistic expressions. German composers such as Schubert and Schumann drew heavily from the poetry of Goethe, Heine and Schiller for lyrics of their lieder, which has become a special genre of art songs that combines music and poetry. There is certainly much from the writings of Singaporean poets that our composers could set to music when they want to compose songs and choral works. I would urge Singapore composers to look closely at the rich source that this anthology has to offer when writing their next piece of vocal work.

14 May I conclude by thanking all those involved in producing this anthology and wishing every one many hours of happy reading.

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