

29 MAY 1995

# PRESS RELEASE

Release No.: 16/MAY  
03B-1/95/05/17

95-yyB-10

**SPEECH BY GEORGE YEO, MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND  
MINISTER FOR INFORMATION AND THE ARTS  
AT THE OPENING OF THE CHINESE HERITAGE CENTRE  
ON WEDNESDAY, 17 MAY 1995 AT 4.00 PM**

We are here today to open the Chinese Heritage Centre. It is a happy occasion. Our Chinese culture is a precious inheritance that we have received from our forefathers. It is right that we should preserve its positive features and build on them.

There are over 25 million ethnic Chinese living outside China, not counting Hongkong and Taiwan. Their contribution to the global economy and to international research and development (R&D) and scholarship is growing year by year. The history of the Chinese people who have left China, some many centuries ago, has been recorded in bits and pieces in different parts of the world. This Heritage Centre will attempt to pool them together so that a more complete story can be told and the right lessons from the past learned. I hope that Chinese people all over the world will contribute to the work of the Heritage Centre and give it their support.

In conceptualising this Heritage Centre, it is important that we separate the political idea of modern China from the cultural idea of being Chinese. The clearer we make this distinction, the easier and more successful will be our work in the Heritage Centre. This Heritage Centre could not have been established in Mainland China. The reason is obvious. On Mainland China, it has been a persistent tendency by the different dynasties to see all Chinese outside China as being subject to the authority of the Emperor. This is no longer the policy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) Government.

However, I remember 20 years ago, as a student in the United Kingdom, going to the Chinese Embassy in London to borrow a film about China for the Cambridge University Malaysia-Singapore Association. Seeing that I was an ethnic Chinese, the lady at the counter politely asked me to go over to the Overseas Chinese Section. I was then a young army officer with a certain view of Communist China. Her words left a deep impression on me.

Today, among Chinese people in different parts of the world, there is a revival of interest in our common values and traditions. This is a worldwide phenomenon affecting not just ethnic Chinese, but other ethnic groups as well. But in celebrating our cultural connections, there must not be any attempt to link us back politically to China. Our political loyalty must be to the countries we belong to whether Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Australia or the US. Prof Wang Gungwu, as the advisor to the Heritage Centre, is an Australian citizen, born in Indonesia, grew up in Malaysia and has worked in Singapore, Australia, Hongkong and other places. He has a deep understanding of Chinese culture but he is not a Chinese national. In the same way, Lyn Pann, the Centre Director, whose book "Sons of the Yellow Emperor" has rekindled among Chinese all over the world a renewed interest in their own culture and family histories, is a UK citizen.

Of course, this does not mean that the Heritage Centre should cut itself off from all contact with Mainland China. This would be absurd. Indeed, the picture cannot be complete without tracing our links back to the various regions of China from which our ancestors had emigrated. But we must always take care to separate our cultural and familial links from our own countries' political relations with China.

Indeed, this separation will become more important in the next century as China becomes a major economic and political power in the world. Ethnic Chinese who invest in China or trade with her or engage in academic exchanges are not her agents. I

will go so far as to say that long-term peace and stability in the Asia Pacific will partly depend on this clear distinction being made, not just by ethnic Chinese outside China but also by China herself. Otherwise, a new polarisation can take place in the world along ethnic lines with all the associated racism. The Chinese Heritage Centre must be mindful of this.

It is symbolically appropriate that the Chinese Heritage Centre should be established here in the old Nantah Administration Block. In a sense, the history of Nantah reflects the history of the Chinese people outside China this century. The Nantah spirit is an admirable one because it expressed the determination of a people not to lose its sense of self. Nantah was the result of Chinese in Southeast Asia and elsewhere wanting to preserve their language and culture despite unsympathetic colonial governments. The historical development of Nantah had both a positive and a negative aspect to it. The positive aspect was an indomitable Nantah spirit that would not cower, that persevered despite all kinds of difficulties. Hence, contributions by people from all walks of life, including trishaw-riders, to the construction of the University. This Nantah spirit is a deep source of inner strength and deep inspiration to all Singaporeans. It is this spirit which will enable us to survive in adversity and enable us to bounce back even if we are temporarily defeated.

But there is also a negative side of this historical development which we must recognise if we are not to make mistakes in the future. Because many Chinese then did not or could not make a clear distinction between the political and cultural ideas of being Chinese, some Nantah students at that time got caught up with Mainland Chinese nationalism, especially its leftwing manifestation, and instigated student unrests. In a sense, this was historically unavoidable because the idea of Singapore as a separate, independent political entity with its own national culture was still embryonic and unclear. There was no Republic of Singapore in the 50's and early 60's. When we

honour Lim Bo Seng as a national or proto-national hero, we must not forget that Lim Bo Seng saw himself as a Chinese national fighting for KMT China. Indeed, the rank he held as a major-general was conferred on him by the Chongqing Government. It is therefore only natural that the evolution of an independent Singapore should take many decades. Thus, the difficulties experienced by Nantah in the 60's and 70's were partly the result of a separate Singapore nationalism struggling to establish itself.

That history is now behind us. Today no Singaporean doubts that whatever our economic and cultural links with China, our political standpoint is solidly based on an independent Singapore in Southeast Asia. We are able to establish this Chinese Heritage Centre now because that position is clear. Twenty years ago, it would not have been possible.

What Chinese people living in the five continents should do is to achieve a position similar to that which the Anglo-Saxon and Irish peoples in the world have established over the last two hundred years. The Anglo-Saxon and Irish peoples are today nationals of different countries. They share common cultural attributes but are politically distinct whether they live in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada, the United States, South Africa, Australia or New Zealand. A similar relationship should govern Chinese peoples living in different countries. Of late, we see the same idea also being promoted among peoples from the Indian subcontinent and also among peoples of Malay stock. For example, it is heart-warming to see the interest which Indonesians, Malaysians and Singaporeans have taken in the Malay people of South Africa after the end of apartheid. I myself was thrilled to discover that a mosque I wandered into in Cape Town was the first to have been built in South Africa by Malays from the Dutch East Indies.

I congratulate Mr Wee Cho Yaw and the SFCCA for establishing this Heritage Centre. I also congratulate Nanyang

Technological University for giving its support. Indeed, NTU by changing its shortened name in Chinese from Litah to Nantah has given added significance to the establishment of the Centre. The reconstruction of the old Nanyang University Arch in the Yunnan Yuan which we are unveiling today marks the end of one chapter and the beginning of another.

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