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Subject: (EMBARGOED) Speech by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, 21 Mar 99, 10am

Singapore Government

PRESS RELEASE

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SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER GOH CHOK TONG AT THE 80TH FOUNDERS' DAY AND OPENING OF THE
EXTENDED CAMPUS (PHASE II) OF THE CHINESE HIGH SCHOOL ON SUNDAY, 21 MARCH 1999 AT
10.00 AM

Beginnings

The Chinese High School grew out of the collective effort of the Chinese community to provide secondary education to its young in early Singapore. While numerous supporters, patrons, principals and teachers have built it up to be one of the best schools in Singapore, two persons deserve special mention.

2 First was Tan Kah Kee, a rich businessmen and leading community leader. He believed in contributing his wealth to the well-being of society rather than preserve it for his own children. It was his spirit of selflessness that led to Chinese High's founding on 21 March 1919. The second was Lee Kong Chian, Tan Kah Kee's son-in-law. He served Chinese High as Chairman of the School Management

Committee for 21 years, from 1934 to 1955.

Struggles

3 In many ways, Chinese High's history mirrors Singapore's struggles and tribulations from a colony to self-government and eventual independence.

4 Just as Singapore was a regional centre for entrepot trade, Chinese High was a beacon for Chinese education in Southeast Asia. Close to half of Chinese High students in the late 1940s came from outside Singapore - Malaya, Sarawak, Indonesia, Thailand and other surrounding places.

5 In the 1930s and 1940s, most Chinese in Singapore considered themselves "visitors" to the colony. So when the Kuomintang and the Communists fought in China, Chinese High and Singapore's other Chinese schools became offshore battlegrounds for their ideological fight. There were frequent students' strikes and disturbances. This led to raids by the colonial government and frequent forced closures of the school by the school management.

6 However, the invasion of China by the Japanese in the Second World War united the two factions. Many students and teachers took up arms and fought alongside the British to defend Singapore. But their loyalty was to China rather than to British Singapore.

7 Chinese High's students were politically active in the 1950s and early 1960s. They were at the forefront of various "examination strikes" or ba kao. These struggles were the birth pangs of a new nation.

8 With independence, the challenges to the school changed. It had to swim against the tide of the rising popularity of English education. Malay, Chinese and Tamil medium schools faced the prospect of decline and of being left out of the national mainstream.

9 The drift towards English schools would have far-reaching consequences on the character and ethos of Singapore society. Indeed, it raised the question of whether an anglicised Singapore, without deep roots in its own Asian cultures, could survive as a distinctive nation. Hence, our bilingual policy and emphasis on retaining our own cultures while embracing English as our common working language.

10 To retain the ambience of the old Chinese schools, in 1978, 9 schools were selected to become Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools. Chinese High was one of them. These schools have the important task of preserving the best traditions of the Chinese schools, though they use English as the main medium of instruction.

11 In 1988, when we started independent schools, Chinese High was chosen as one of three pioneers. And from this year, Chinese High became the 6th secondary school to host the Gifted Education Programme.

12. Today, Chinese High is one of Singapore's most established secondary schools, with good academic results and strong ECA performances.

Schools and Society

13. The key role of a school is to nurture the next generation to look after themselves, their families and friends, the larger community and Singapore. Whether Singapore succeeds and thrives in the future depends critically on how our young are taught, brought up and instilled with communitarian values. Our schools must go beyond the academic to the holistic development of the young, relating their learning to the needs of society and rooting them to their land of birth, especially as they become more internationally mobile.

14. Hence, beyond academic excellence, there are three areas the schools should focus on. First, transmitting values and culture. Second, building bonds with the wider community. Third, developing domestic talent and absorbing foreign talent.

Culture transmission

15. As a multi-racial country, Singapore's challenge is to channel ethnic pride towards the building of a national identity. This means allowing the different communities to retain their separate identities instead of forcing their different cultures and customs into one common mould. Our approach is like weaving a beautiful piece of tapestry out of different coloured strands of silk. The communities that make up Singapore retain their own strengths, colour and texture while contributing to the overall national identity.

16. Here, the use of English as a common working language makes it easier to bind the communities and build a nation. But as English is such a convenient and useful international language, Singaporeans can do well in their careers without having to master their own mother tongue. The problem of learning the mother tongue is more acute for the Chinese community because Mandarin is not the home language in most of the households.

17. Each community needs to nurture a core group of people knowledgeable in its own language and culture to preserve the uniqueness of the community. These people - the scholars, writers, teachers, journalists and other cultural transmitters - form the Singapore cultural elite.

18. For the Chinese community, SAP schools like Chinese High will provide a conducive environment for its students to understand and appreciate Chinese culture and traditions besides learning Mandarin at higher level.

19. Some people worry that SAP schools may produce future leaders who may never know Singaporeans of other races in their formative years, and hence will be less sensitive to the fears and hopes of the other communities. Therefore, it is important for students in our SAP schools to develop the correct views and perspectives on multi-ethnicity from young, so that as they grow up, they will

better understand and appreciate the multi-racial and multi-religious nature of our society. This can be done by getting them to socialise with students from other schools and in the community where they live. In this respect, I am glad to note that Chinese High makes extra effort to give their students ample opportunities to mix with students from other races. For example, Chinese High had started a Cultures Day even before MOE formally commemorates Racial Harmony Day as part of National Education in schools. This has provided students with the opportunity to learn about other cultures.

20. But more can be done. SAP schools should come up with more creative programmes to enable their students to interact with students from non-SAP schools. They could, for example, have a sister-school relationship with a neighbourhood school and hold joint activities. With the cluster school concept under which 7 to 9 schools are grouped together for sharing and interaction, SAP school students will have ample opportunities to make friends with students of other races within the cluster.

21. We should see the establishment of SAP schools within the wider context of Singapore trying to retain the enduring values and ethos of our Asian heritage while embracing the best of Western ideas. These values and ethos are our national assets. If we do not make a special effort to preserve them, we will lose them. As a society, which started out being non-homogeneous, we had a choice between throwing away our heritage or choosing to combine the main features of our national education system with the best characteristics of our old Chinese schools. SAP schools of today are essentially English schools with the best of their Chinese characteristics preserved. Their students study English as a first language and use the same curriculum for other subjects as their counterparts in other schools, while having opportunities to learn Chinese language and culture in a conducive environment.

22. What is critical is the orientation which the schools imbue in their students. Many of our national and community leaders have gone through the old Chinese school system. They do not lack understanding and appreciation of the sentiments and feelings of our minority communities. I am confident that today's SAP school students will do better.

Community Bonding

23. School days are the best time for building bonds. Bonds formed during school days last a lifetime. They are part of an interlocking web of ties which binds the community and holds the nation together. Some people say that a person is Singaporean when he misses his chicken rice and fish head curry when abroad. That may be so. But if he also misses his friends in Singapore, then he truly is a Singaporean. I assume he will miss his family.

24. In the past, when secondary schools also conducted Pre-University classes, every student could interact with six cohorts of students in the same school in any one year. The Pre-U students were looked up to as older brothers and sisters. They also provided school leadership and took on the responsibility of looking after the younger students. The better ones served as role models to younger students.

25. The establishment of the junior colleges or JCs has weakened the links

between students. Six years in the same school is better than four for building life-long bonds. And two years in a JC gives students hardly any time to develop strong bonds. Friends and families are what bring Singaporeans abroad back to Singapore. As strong friendships are largely developed during a person's formative years in school, we should consider whether some of our best schools should not revert to having Pre-U classes. Meanwhile, we should certainly explore imaginative ways to see how friendships made in secondary schools can be continued through JCs.

Domestic and Foreign Talent

26. Even as we nurture our young to learn about their cultural heritage, be Singaporean in their instincts and outlook and to build close ties with friends and the community, we must remember that Singapore can sustain its success only if it has a critical mass of talents comparable to the best elsewhere.

27. The last two weeks saw a great deal of debate in Parliament and the press on whether Singapore should continue with its liberal policy of attracting foreign talent now that the economy had slowed down. The sentiment is that we should think of Singaporeans first and not allow foreign talent to compete and take away jobs from Singaporeans.

28. I want to assure Singaporeans that the Government's main concern is in fact Singaporeans. This should be obvious. It is the Government's responsibility to look after our own people. We bring in foreign talent because we need them to help us grow the economy, create jobs through their investments and expertise, and strengthen our international competitiveness. Suppose we do away with the 700,000 foreigners now in Singapore, would the three million Singaporeans be better off? Consider this fact: Our Department of Statistics has calculated that without an increase in foreign manpower between 1994 and 1996, our GDP growth in 1996 would have been 2.2 percentage points lower, that is, 5.3 per cent instead of 7.5 per cent. That means fewer jobs and less wealth would have been created for Singaporeans.

29. The Government has stated repeatedly that it will develop the full potential of all Singaporeans. This we will continue to do.

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30. But all Singaporeans must accept the realities arising from having a small indigenous population of only about 3 million. We have to compete economically with other countries whose populations are many times larger than Singapore's. As the number of our able people is unlikely to be proportionately higher than that of other countries, it would be difficult for us to compete with them for high value-added industries and services. So we must try and increase our proportion of able people by drawing in able people from outside. Of course, some of our graduates and professionals may feel threatened by the presence of foreign talent, but let us not forget that the rest of the population are benefiting from the extra boost to our economy from foreign talent.

31. It may appear that foreign talent takes away jobs from Singaporeans. But the truth is the opposite. The presence of foreign talent helps to create more jobs for Singaporeans. Many foreign companies set up their regional HQs or operational HQs in Singapore. They send in their senior executives to fill some of the jobs.

If these foreign companies do not have operations in Singapore, there will be fewer jobs for our own citizens.

32. To have a fighting chance in global economic competition, our local companies need the best management. Most, if not all, will prefer to employ Singaporeans at the top. But if the right Singaporean is not available, we must allow the companies to recruit from abroad, or they will lose the competition.

33. Just look at our performances in sports. We do well in the Southeast Asian Games but that is competing in a small pond with small fishes. When we compete with the big fishes in the big ponds of the Asian Games, the Commonwealth Games and the Olympic Games, we barely stand a chance. Economic competition is global, not regional, not domestic.

34. We should, therefore, not slow down our recruitment of foreign talent just because the economy is slowing down. The regional economic crisis gives us a rare opportunity to widen the economic gap between Singapore and its competitors. We should not be discouraged by the temporary hardships some Singaporeans encounter. Rather, we should concentrate on how to make our economy grow faster and stronger, using talent, both local and foreign, to do so.

35. We must also take the long view on talent. We must continuously top up Singapore's own talent pool with foreign talent, starting with the schools.

36. Currently, we have about 8,500 foreign students in our secondary schools. This is about 5% of total secondary school enrolment. Chinese High has done even better, with 11% of the students from overseas. It is repeating its early role as the beacon for students from the surrounding areas. Coming from varied backgrounds, the foreign students have raised standards in Chinese High. For example, I am told that your 50 Secondary 3 foreign students bagged some 60 prizes last year in various contests, including Mathematics Olympiads, Astronomy quizzes, International Chess tournaments and essay-writing competitions. This brings home an important lesson - while we will always nurture our local talent to its maximum potential we must continue to attract and absorb foreign talent to raise our talent peak. If we do not, and as Singapore loses some of its own talent to other countries, the Singapore talent peak will become lower over the years. Our national performance will be affected and our economic pie will shrink. That will be a disaster for Singapore.

Concl usi on

37. Eighty years is more than a lifetime for most people. The Chinese High School has nurtured generations of young men to give off their best to Singapore. Today, you stand tall among schools in Singapore, having drawn deeply from your heritage as a Chinese school while running ahead in innovations in school management and educational programmes.

38. I am confident that Chinese High will live up to its motto of zi qiang bu xi and continue to strive for successes and excellence. It is now my pleasure to declare open the school's Phase II facilities.

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