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SPEECH BY MR FONG SIP CHEE, MINISTER OF STATE (CULTURE) AT THE
OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE ASEAN EXHIBITION OF PAINTING, GRAPHIC
ARTS AND PHOTOGRAPHY 1981 AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM ART GALLERY
ON THURSDAY, 10 SEPTEMBER 1981 AT 5.30 PM

Singapore is happy to avail herself of this opportunity in hosting the third leg of the Second Asean Travelling Exhibition of Painting, Graphic Arts and Photography organised by Thailand. The Exhibition is a project of the Intra-Asean Cultural Programme funded by the Asean Cultural Fund.

The inaugural exhibition was staged by Indonesia in Jakarta in March 1980. In this second exhibition, organised by Thailand, two new elements have been injected. The first is the inclusion of graphic arts, and the other is to have the exhibition on an Asean circuit. I have no doubt that the works on display will be an artistic feast to Singapore art lovers.

I read with interest a summary of the observations by the two Singapore representatives who attended the opening of this exhibition in Bangkok. From their assessment, I gathered that most of the works employed a multiplicity of media, many in contemporary styles, with a section conforming with the western mode of expression. Not unexpectedly, the report added that almost all the works succeeded in portraying and reflecting the artists' individual cultural environment.

It is not to say that the Asean region is devoid of its own artistic forms. Far from being so, the region has been acknowledged as being the birthplace of some of the most sophisticated art forms in the world. Batik painting, for instance, comes immediately to the mind as an unique example.

In a way, Singapore has not been endowed with these distinctive advantages. We have often been labelled as a modern City State with

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phenomenal economic breakthrough but plagued with the perennial search for an identity. This observation, though seemingly a credible debating point, is fraught with parochial short-sightedness.

I fear constant peddling of what critics frequently alleged as the decried qualities of Singaporeans - a people in search of an identity and devoid of a cultural heritage, have permeated the minds of a good many intellectuals, who, out of their concern and sincerity, have joined chorus to the endless discussions on the subject. If allowed to persist, a gradual depletion of confidence must be the consequence.

At the risk of being guilty of over-simplifying our position - which, admittedly is not without its share of problems, I am inclined to describe the picture the way it has been painted by our fore-fathers. We inherited a multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-lingual society. That's the way it was, that's the way it is, and that's the way we want it to be. Culture, after all, is the sum total of a way of life, ingrained with the people's traditional belief, standard of morality, habits, social and family values, and historical factors which must naturally have a bearing on the people's mind.

Singapore's way of life is multi-cultural, and therefore multi-culture must be our national culture. There is no two ways about it. Whilst we often lost ourselves in a familiar environment which we take for granted, little do we realise how others have been appreciative of our unique situation; and whilst critics question the relevance and value of local cultural performances, presented in what has now been adopted as the formula-4 type of a bit of everything from the Malay, Chinese, Indian and international communities, little are we aware of the acknowledgement by foreigners who watch the same performances that we are truly a successful multi-racial and multi-cultural society. Our harmony among the races impresses them, and the varieties in our way of life intrigues them. Yet we seem oblivious to the reality and advantages of our own environment.

We have yet other advantages: the ability to absorb the essence of others and our capacity to innovate. For these are the qualities with which our enterprising people have thrived.

The Americans, whatever their shortcomings, are a great multi-racial society. Their's is a society of a congruence of communities, comprising the Anglo-Saxons, the Blacks, the Jews, the Italians, the Chinese, Japanese and almost the entire European stocks. They retain their separate traditions, their culinary skills, their religious beliefs and customs. Yet, they are unmistakably Americans and proud to be so. They have emerged from frontier colonies to a community with their own identity.

Singaporeans can achieve the same. My gut feeling is that we should allow, indeed, encourage our various cultures and art forms to flourish. Let them find their pasture. There shall be natural synthesis and not artificial, still worse, forced fusion. Let time be the catalyst, and let devotion and ingenuity of our artists be the ingredients. In time, our cultural workers will find their level of acceptance and appreciation by the people. They will evolve most effective means of communicating with the people and reach out to greener fields.

I dread to think of a Singaporean being transformed into a creature who wears a Chinese scalp-cap, wraps himself with an Indian gipa, don a Malay kain pelikat and shoes a pair of Chinese sandals; sports an Indian mustache, adorn a Chinese jade necklace, shake hands in the Malay fashion, walks with the gait of a wayang maestro and speaks with Indian articulation. To complete the creation, he would probably partake his 10-course nyonya dinner, holding in his one hand a pair of chopsticks while the other hand has a choice of a fork, a spoon or a knife and most likely that free hand itself. And when he does need to speak, he would entertain a thoroughly bewildered audience with a distinctly Singapore patio. I want no part in this creation.

Commonsense and reality must be our guide. If a certain art form, whether traditional or alien, can effectively be used as a medium of artistic expression, then this art form is an effective communication tool. Take ballet for instance. An art form, it transcends all racial barriers and national boundaries. It can tell so much in its so artistic and expressive movements. Many years ago, I was invited to view a film - a dance drama - depicting the epic story of the Chinese revolution. I was pleasantly surprised that the Chinese had used the versatility of ballet instead of the traditional Chinese dance movements to tell the

story, and in an unquestionably more effective way which quite successfully evoked the emotion of the audience.

The crux of the matter lies in the people's ability in accepting any form of the arts. Our handicap really is our cultural base. Lovers of the arts are always the minority group in any given community. But they shape opinions, mould characteristics and bring out the essence of the community. The demand on our 2.3 million people is too great. Proportion of this 'enlightened minority' in our midst is comparable to any developing country, but their sheer numbers simply cannot fill the concert halls or exhibition galleries. Exponents of the arts have also a vital role to play in helping to cultivate the cultural base. People do not attend concerts or view an exhibition on government order. The artistes must find their own means of reaching out to seek concord with the people.

On the other hand, the government can help provide the amenities and facilities, create awareness, reward the successful, encourage the promising ones and give assistance to those who can contribute positively to a more refined society. I must caution, however, that the resources are limited. Such assistance must not be given out at rampant merely to appease the emotion.

While we encourage experimentation and chip in our assistance within our means, this must not be interpreted as indiscriminate aping of values which might erode our own social fabric. We must be prudent in our zeal to achieving our ideal. This is our moral obligation as a government and we do not apologise for it. It is only on this position of strength and cohesiveness of the people that we can best rest our hope in developing a wider and more appreciative cultural base for the arts and literary pursuit.

I hope this exhibition will open yet another window of knowledge and excellence to enable us to scan a wider horizon.

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