

SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT PRESS STATEMENT BYC/INFS.OC.91/57

TEXT OF AN ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MR. LEE KUAN  
YEOW, TO MEMBERS OF THE NANYANG UNIVERSITY, AT 7.30 P.M. ON  
WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 28, 1959.

A man is as good as he is, and the degrees and titles he has after his name does not make him a better or a lesser man. In the last analysis, it is what a man is worth - his innate ability, his intellectual discipline and his drive - which determines his effectiveness and usefulness in society. But because it is not practical to measure the ability of human beings individually when you have to deal with them in large numbers, they have to be classified into broad categories

One of the ways of classification is to denote a man's educational standing - he has either passed primary school, secondary school, or university.

Over a long period of time the academic standing of a school or a university acquires a reputation which is either good or bad. It is a reputation based on the sum total of opinion as a result of the performance of the graduates of either the school or the university, an indication of the degree of intellectual discipline and the breadth of knowledge which that educational

institution has infused into its pupils. And so it is that the old universities in this world, like Oxford or Cambridge in England or Harvard and Massachusetts Institute of Technology in America or Leningrad University in Russia or Peking Union Medical College in China, do not bother to ask other countries or other governments to recognise their degrees.

People know the value of these degrees and it is universally accepted that their standard of training is high, and a graduate who holds a degree from one of these old universities is a person who has attained a reasonably high degree of intellectual discipline and professional skill. Hence it is that these old universities did not have to ask their governments to pass laws to acknowledge and recognise their degrees. Their degrees won recognition through the process of time, for the acid test of the value of their degrees was what those graduates who held degrees made of themselves after graduation, either as captains in trade or industry, or by becoming leaders of men in other fields of human endeavour. The other major yardstick of the worth of a university is the contribution to human knowledge that research workers in the university in pursuit of knowledge and truth have made to mankind. The bigger the contribution, the higher the reputation of the University.

In the long run it is not whether the Singapore Government or the Federation Government recognises your degrees that decides the opinion of people on the value of the Nanyang University degrees. In the end it is what the graduates of this university do in the outside world and by way of research in this university which determines its status in the eyes of all people.

Ultimately, it is what Nanyang graduates are really worth, and not what the Government says they are worth, which counts. However in the meantime you have to face the problem of earning a living with the degree that you have got from this new university, and so to that extent official recognition of your degree can be of some assistance in helping Nanyang graduates find their feet.

At the end of this year, in about two months' time there will be anywhere up to 471 graduates, and the first problem you have to face, if you are not going on for further studies, is to find a job. How can the Government help you?

Let me first explain that there are four ways in which a degree receives recognition. First, a State recognises the degrees conferred by a university within that State. Second, professional bodies such as associations of doctors, engineers, dentists, and architects recognise the degrees of that university as entitling a person to practice in that profession or to be exempted from part or

parts of the examinations which a person must pass before he is allowed to practise that profession. Third, recognition of that university's degree by other universities as being equal to that of the other university for the purpose of going on to the other university for advanced studies for a higher degree. And fourth, which is the most important of all, is recognition by commercial and scientific institutions and the public generally that the graduates of that university have acquired a degree of proficiency and skill which makes them desirable recruits for employment in executive, administrative or scientific tasks.

The Singapore Government can help you by the first of these ways. In other words, it can recognise that Nanyang is a university and that its degrees are accepted as qualifications for employment in the Government Service. I do not wish to anticipate what the Committee which is now reviewing the Prescott

Report may say on this matter.

On principle, I can state that the Singapore Government will accept the degrees from Nanyang University as a qualification entitling an applicant to be considered for entry into the public service in competition with all other candidates who hold degrees from the University of Malaya and other recognised overseas universities.

The Singapore Government has no power to compel other governments to recognise these degrees. It is for you, by your high standards, to assist us in persuading other governments, notably that of the Federation of Malaya, to recognise your degrees for employment purposes.

It is still too early yet for us to say whether we can persuade the professional bodies such as the accounting profession to recognise your degrees in commerce as entitling you to practise as accountants or to be exempted from some of the examinations which lead to entry into the accounting profession. This is a matter in which we can help by persuasion, not by compulsion.

In January when more than 400 of you may graduate, you will be faced with the prospect of having to go out and seek employment either in the Government

Service of Singapore or in private institutions. Insofar as I can predict, the Singapore Government will be able to absorb about 50 graduates into the

Education Service and about 20 into the other departments of the public service.

This is a start.

It means that out of may be over 400 students who will be graduating, one in six may find employment in the public service in Singapore. The others must make their way into trade and commerce and other private industry, both here

and in the Federation of Malaya. I must also add that about 40% of the pupils in Nanyang University are from Singapore and 60% are from the Federation.

I think it is only fair for me to point out that where other things such as ability and merit are more or less equal first preference must be given to those graduates who are from Singapore.

The Government is also making arrangements to make available to suitable graduates of Nanyang scholarships for post-graduate training particularly in science and engineering in universities abroad. These post-graduate scholarships will provide the promising graduates with the opportunity for higher training and research which cannot for reasons of staff and equipment be provided at present in Malaya.

The performance of these 70 odd graduates who will be recruited in the public service of Singapore will determine the future of the other graduates of Nanyang coming out in 1961 and subsequent years. At present there are 471 fourth year students, 358 third year students, 417 second year students and 454 first year students. If the first batch prove your worth as able and disciplined workers, prepared to compete on par with the English educated and make your contribution to society, then you will get your worth recognised.

I have dealt with the rice bowl problems at the beginning because these are the immediate problems that you will have to face and they are ones that are bound to be foremost in your minds. Having disposed of that, I would like to spend the rest of my talk in discussing with you not the short term but the long term future of the graduates of Nanyang.

First, you must appreciate that Nanyang University can best succeed and flourish if it is accepted as a Malayan university and not just a Singapore university. In other words, by your efforts and performance you must slowly convince the people of the Federation, that you deserve approval and recognition from the Federation Government.

As I said earlier 60% of the students in Nanyang are not from Singapore, and it will be futile for us to believe that Singapore will be able to give the opportunities for fruitful and satisfying employment to all Nanyang graduates wherever they may have come from.

To do this, it means that the graduates must demonstrate by their words and their deeds that they are graduates of a Malayan university which uses the Chinese language as one of the media of instruction, not graduates of a

Chinese university which incidentally also teaches the Malay language. That is the core of your task.

All around us in South-East Asia are examples of countries where the local peoples, having wrested power from their colonial rulers and obtained the right to govern themselves, have decided to root out or suppress the Chinese distinctiveness in language and culture of the Chinese immigrants who had come to reside in these countries. Throughout the whole of Southeast Asia, where about 15 million Chinese are scattered, they are being discriminated against because they are considered as having remained distinct and separate from the local community, both in the use of their language and the observance of their customs, habits and culture.

At this moment in Indonesia a full-scale campaign has been launched to assimilate or else eradicate the Chinese people living there. Let us never forget that Singapore is part of Southeast Asia; that we are in the centre of Malaysian people ; that despite the fact that 80% of our population are Chinese we cannot escape from our environment. The isolation from Indonesia and now from the Federation, which the British colonial system has imposed on Singapore, is a man-made one and can easily be unmade by man.



Our geographical and ethnological positions are realities which we must face. If Nanyang becomes a symbol of Chinese excellence and of the supremacy of Chinese scholarship and learning, then verily we will aggravate the position of the overseas Chinese in all the other places in Southeast Asia.

A resurgent China is already the object, not just of admiration, but also of apprehension amongst the peoples of Southeast Asia. And if Nanyang were to become symbolised as an outpost in Southeast Asia of Chinese dominance, then we will only have ourselves to blame if we find the position deepened and embittered.

But if you, by what you say and what you do, are able to demonstrate to the peoples of Southeast Asia that Nanyang is a beacon for the peoples of Southeast Asia for the pursuit of truth and knowledge which has been founded by persons of Chinese descent, then you will have made a signal contribution to the cause of inter-racial harmony and peace in this region.

I would like to end on a note of optimism. Two years ago, without Government prompting or compulsion, you started in Nanyang the study of the Malay language. Today more than 50% of 2000 students in Nantah are studying Malay. In the University of Malaya, on the other hand, despite Government

patronage and influence, there are only 100 out of some 2,000 students, who are learning Malay. Although I must add that everyone of them learns it in an intensive way not just by way of an extra language.

If you, by your deeds, after you have graduated, prove that this is not just a tactical move, but a demonstration of deep and sincere convictions that Nanyang is part of Southeast Asia, and is dedicated to the furtherance of progress and prosperity for the peoples of Southeast Asia, then in the years to come, those who follow in your footsteps as graduates of Nantah, will be respected and honored as products of an institution for higher learning which has made a contribution to the pursuit of knowledge and human happiness in Southeast Asia. Your immediate worries are elementary ones like finding a job and making a living.

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But your long-term problems are the ones that really decide what happens to you and to the peoples of Southeast Asia of whom 3 1/2 million of Chinese descent are living in Malaya and Singapore. We are living in a Southeast Asia which is rapidly changing, and it would be folly to shout old slogans coined in old battles. Our problem is the future. The past are lessons from which we learn to avoid the pitfalls in the future.

There is no easy ready-made solution for the future of Nanyang or its graduates. But with self-restraint, patience and effort you will be able to make your contribution to the welfare and prosperity of the peoples of Malaya.

OCTOBER 29, 1959 (Time issued 1900 hours)

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