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MC/JUL/9/78 (Culture)

SPEECH BY MR ONG TENG CHEONG, ACTING MINISTER
FOR CULTURE, AT THE ASEAN PRESS NITE DINNER AND
DANCE AT 8.00 PM ON 8 JUL 78 AT SHANGRI-LA HOTEL

I would like to thank the Singapore National Union of Journalists for inviting me to their ASEAN Press Nite Dinner and Dance. This function, I understand, is a prelude to your Union hosting the third biennial conference of the Confederation of ASEAN Journalists (CAJ) next year.

The Confederation of ASEAN Journalists can number itself among the non-governmental groups within ASEAN helping to quicken the pace of regional co-operation. In the establishment of ASEAN community political initiative has played a necessary role - laying the skeletal framework and creating a conducive environment for the growth of a complex tissue of inter-relationships. The rest of the job - of building and strengthening the structure of regional co-operation and understanding - is really up to our several peoples.

One significant contribution made by the mass media to this development is the wholehearted support given to ASEAN throughout its first ten years. ASEAN activity has never lacked publicity. Joint projects and ventures, when formed, are given due prominence. My only regret is that ASEAN, for many, is still largely a "governmental" affair characterised by endless rounds of meetings among officials and government leaders.

This is not the fault of the mass media. As voluntary publicists co-opted to the cause of ASEAN you will no doubt have felt some satisfaction with the international recognition that ASEAN now receives as a group. It is also generally recognised that whatever slow progress made by ASEAN has been made in the face of many national difficulties. Although there are many differences between ASEAN countries, one heartening thing is that the press has been remarkably sensitive to the fine tuning of ASEAN intentions. Treatment of ASEAN topics has usually been backed by a sense of seriousness although there has been at least one attempt to provide information other than the stuff that makes headlines.

One of our newspapers made a regular column out of the choice bits of quaint and unusual examples of life and manners culled from our ASEAN neighbours. As comic relief to much serious reportage in its pages it perhaps did serve a purpose. It is natural when we do not know our neighbour well to attempt to typify his behaviour by highlighting those aspects which seem strange and even laughable to us. But the danger here is of stereotyping our already all-too-unfamiliar fellow ASEANS. If we are to understand the social and cultural nature of our friends it might be a better proposition to do so in a less cavalier and piecemeal fashion. On the other hand we should not be clouded with euphoria each time a little advance is made in ASEAN co-operation.

The point I am leading to is the power of the press to influence and mould opinion. Balance and clarity is essential to the outlook of those whose task is to discharge that duty without abusing the power. This outlook is all the more important in the wider context of regional organisation.

Some years ago when the Government introduced reserved bus lanes, newspapers, almost to the last reporter assigned to cover the story, interviewed only motorists for their comments. They forgot to ask the bus commuters for whose benefit the exercise was mounted. I suspect that this was the result of a habitual attitude among the gentlemen and ladies of the press to champion the cause of the aggrieved party, ostensibly the motorists in this case.

A habitual attitude can be mistaken, and often is, because it comes from one who is not sufficiently vigorous and alert to change. To generate original and considered viewpoints and not to contribute to useless controversy; to ensure that the interpretation of a course of events is not specious because shades of opinion and points of view have not been carefully developed and compared; all these, which I see as the proper concerns of a free press, must be put to the service of regional understanding and co-operation.

ASEAN awareness can be best nurtured by the traditional powers of the press to inform, instruct and entertain. I suggest for a start some form of news pooling among members of the ASEAN press to exchange articles of interest on

important social and cultural developments in their respective countries. This exchange need not be confined to written material but could also be in the form of fellowships or cross-attachment of selected journalists among ASEAN newspapers. No doubt you will be able to come up with more ideas.

More than any other professional group, ASEAN journalists can exploit the sense of camaraderie that seems to come naturally to any gathering of fellow practitioners. You should use this to foster the spirit of co-operation and understanding in your expanded readership. Forgetting for a moment the antics of the great, you should cast an interested glance at the common ASEAN man, trying in his own way to make ends meet. Only when you have understood him and contributed in some way to his well-being and understanding of the region, can you say you have helped build an ASEAN identity in the true sense of the term.