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SPEECH BY BG (RES) GEORGE YEO, MINISTER FOR INFORMATION AND THE ARTS AND SECOND MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS, AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF ST GABRIEL'S SECONDARY SCHOOL ON 21 AUG 93 AT 6.00 PM

1. Many years ago, when I was an engineering undergraduate in England, I spent a month working at a British Army workshop near Oxford. There were a few of us, all SAF scholars, on attachment. Being Second Lieutenants, we stayed at the Officer's Mess and had our meals there. One evening at dinner, a British Army major sitting opposite us, noticing that we were talking among ourselves in English, remarked that we were a well-colonized people. I do not think I will ever forget what he said for the rest of my life, not because it was an insult, but because it came so close to a very painful truth.

2. To a greater or lesser degree, all English-educated Singaporeans who live in the West experience such feelings. However much we have learnt about the West, however well we may speak English, we are not European or American. At the same time, when we go to China or India, we do not feel fully Chinese or Indian either. In a recent interview, Dick Lee said that, as a young boy, he thought he was an Englishman until he first went to England. Then he realised he could never be. Now he calls himself a 'mad Chinaman' and a 'new Asian'.

3. I like the term 'new Asian' because it expresses both the past and the future. However much we may be influenced by the West, we will remain Asian at our very core because as Chinese, Indians and Malays, we are derived from civilizations with long

historical memories and deep traditions. But, at the same time, we cannot pretend that the last few hundred years of Western dominance did not take place. Without Western knowledge, without Western cultural and political influence, Asian societies would still be trapped in the feudal past. The West had a civilizing effect on the East as the East once had, and will soon have again, a civilizing effect on the West. We must recognise the contribution of the West and see continuing benefit in learning from the West.

4. The nature of Singapore's Asianness is changing. The same is true of other Asian societies. The Japanese were the first to modernise successfully by borrowing extensively from the West. Whenever a new Japanese Cabinet is sworn in, the Ministers wear morning coats which are very formal Western attire, once common in the West but no longer so. While the exterior may look Western, the Japanese remain Japanese. But they are no longer the old Japanese, they are modern Japanese. For China, modernisation is still an on-going process. From the last century, China has been grappling with this problem of learning from the West without becoming a part of the West. Great men like Kang Youwei, Sun Yat-sen, Lu Xun, Chiang Kai Shek and Mao Tse-tung led big movements to change China's mindset but still China remains China. Since 1978, Deng Xiaoping has made another big push to reform and open up China. At long last, a new, fully modern China now appears to be within grasp.

5. If there is to be peace and continuing progress in the Asia-Pacific, Japanese, Koreans, Chinese and Southeast Asians must learn to live with one another and with the West. If we are

backward-looking, there will be war. This is why we need a new Asian consciousness which sees the future in terms of co-operation and friendly competition. Dick Lee's 'new Asian' expresses this idea well. Indeed, political leaders and business leaders across the whole of East Asia already share much in common, in their exposure to Western ideas and in their understanding of world problems. The progress of Japan, Korea, China and Southeast Asia should pull us closer together and not push us further apart.

6. As Singaporeans, we should embody this new Asian spirit. We need both a sense of the past and a sense of the future. If we are a well-colonized people without a sense of our own past, we will not have the self-confidence to meet the challenges of the future. We will be what some people describe as 'yellow bananas', yellow outside, white inside. This is why we must interest young Singaporeans in our heritage. School principals and school teachers play a very important role here. If heritage matters are considered a distraction from the study of examinable subjects like languages, science and mathematics, our students will respond accordingly. This will be a great mistake. The purpose of education is not only to produce a doctor or an engineer. That is too narrow a view of education. The purpose of education is to mould a complete person, one who becomes an upright citizen, who in the course of his life is a filial son or daughter, a faithful spouse, a loving parent, a responsible colleague, in short, a good man who develops his god-giving potential to the full and uses it at the service of others. Thus, the basis of all education is moral education.

7. Moral education does not take place in a void. It cannot be reduced to formulas. Human beings learn by example and through parables which are passed down the generations. When we study the lives of our forefathers and the way they responded to challenges, we abstract lessons for ourselves. In this way, we build upon the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of our ancestors.

8. It is a precious inheritance. Although Singapore is a young nation, we are an ancient people, whether we are Chinese, Indian, Malay or Eurasian. We must never lose this sense of our past because it is a great source of spiritual strength in a crisis. Societies with shallow cultures are easily destroyed.

9. It should worry us that many of our students lack this sense of the past. For example, many Chinese students do not know the major Chinese dynasties. Many Malay students are unfamiliar with the stories in Sejarah Melayu. Many Indian students lack knowledge of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Our students are very good with computers but they are not very interested in history. They often prefer to go to the West, to see the Eiffel Tower or Disneyland, than to visit Xian or Jogjakarta.

10. The solution is not to make history a compulsory subject. It is common for students to start forgetting what they have learnt once the finals are over. That is not education. What we have to do is to inculcate in students an interest in heritage matters. Although the media, both SBC and the major newspapers, have been giving this area emphasis, the decisive influence comes from parents and teachers.

11. Our museums now put up very good exhibitions from China, India and elsewhere. All schools in Singapore should make museum visits an integral part of school education. Simple quizzes could be held after each visit to generate interest. In Japan, it has long been the practice of schools to organise student visits to the major historical sites. Any Singaporean visiting temples in Kyoto is bound to run into groups of Japanese students in black uniforms. It is by such means that the sense of being Japanese is passed on from one generation to the next. We should learn from the Japanese.

12. We should also make it a point to encourage our students to learn the heritage of other ethnic groups. A Chinese student should also be familiar with the heritage of Indians, Malays and Eurasians, and likewise for the others. In this way, we create a larger area of overlap among our different ethnic groups. The greater the overlap, the greater our sense of being one as Singaporeans. With mutual understanding, our diversity becomes a source of strength and a cause for celebration. The richness of our local cuisines is one example where the mix of cultures produces good results. In the arts, diversity can help feed our creative impulses. There are many other areas which can benefit from the encounter of cultures in Singapore.

13. Although we have many achievements to our credit, we should not be smug. Singapore is a young nation of only 28 years. Since independence in 1965, we have not yet experienced a big crisis. Sooner or later, there will be one. What we need to build is a Singapore that can overcome not just one big crisis but many big crises. It is only by having gone through many ups

and downs together that a people truly becomes one. Our test has not yet come. The challenge is not for us to celebrate our 29th or 30th National Day, but for our children and their progeny to celebrate Singapore's 100th and 200th National Day. That must be the long-term goal of our effort in education - to build depth into our society so that it has the strength to persevere and overcome. Only then are we fit to join the front ranks of new Asians in the next century.

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