

**SPEECH BY MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS GEORGE YEO,
AT THE WORLD CHINESE ENTREPRENEURS CONVENTION
(WCEC) IN MANILA ON 20 NOVEMBER 2009**

Sweetening the Milk

Distinguished guests and friends from the global Chinese business community

Ladies and gentlemen

1 After Manila, the World Chinese Entrepreneurs Convention (WCEC) will be returning to Singapore after 20 years in 2011. As Minister for Information and the Arts, I was involved in the organisation of the first convention which was led by Mr Tan Eng Joo. It was then 2 years after the Tiananmen Incident. China was growing again with the Pearl River Delta taking the lead. Ethnic Chinese capital from Taiwan, Hong Kong and ASEAN provided much of the initial investment. Later that year, Deng Xiaoping made his southern tour, moving heaven and earth, to put China back on the path of reform and opening up.

2 Ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs outside China were the first to sense the beginning of an explosive growth phase which would eventually encompass all of China and transform its destiny. It was in that context that Singapore Chinese business leaders organised a world convention in 1991. The first meeting was a great success and saw the formation of a Founder Members board, comprising the Chinese Chambers of Commerce from Singapore, Hong Kong and Thailand, to ensure the continuity of the WCEC. Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew opened the first convention and also spoke at the second meeting in Hong Kong.

3 Since the first meeting, Asia, and China in particular, has made enormous strides. When the next meeting is held in Singapore in 2011, the world will also be celebrating the Centennial of the 1911 Revolution. I say 'the world' and not just China because the historical importance of the 1911 Revolution goes beyond China. Influenced by Western ideas and the Meiji Restoration in Japan, Dr Sun Yat-Sen and his fellow revolutionaries were determined to rid China of imperial rule and its feudal culture. It was a

revolution that had first to take place in the Chinese mind. Ethnic Chinese outside China played a major role contributing ideas, resources and manpower. In August 1905, the Tongmenghui was formed in Tokyo. Eight months later in April 1906, the Southeast Asian branch was established in Singapore. All over the world, ethnic Chinese were caught up in the great struggles on the Chinese Mainland in the 20th century, helping to change China and being changed by it. Business leaders, intellectuals, manual workers, students were all involved. To fight Japanese militarism, ethnic Chinese were mobilised worldwide, and they in turn enlisted the help of millions of non-Chinese supporters.

4 With the end of the Pacific War in 1945, the old empires were dismantled and independent nation states emerged one after another. In China, civil war ensued with the Communist gaining victory in 1949 and the Kuomintang retreating to Taiwan. In Southeast Asia, the political loyalty of ethnic Chinese to the new nation states was often called into question. There were complex divisions among the ethnic Chinese themselves - between old Chinese who were born in those countries and recent migrants, between supporters of indigenous nationalism and Chinese nationalism, between sympathisers of Communist China and sympathisers of Republican China, and between left wingers and right wingers.

5 Each country had a different story to tell of failure and success, and of pain and joy. Regardless of their political views, the ethnic Chinese retained certain cultural characteristics - unbreakable family networks, a high regard for education, and a strong work ethic combined with a high propensity to save. Often, adversity only made them stronger and more determined. Little by little, they separated their cultural identity from their political identity in each country where they lived. In many countries, ethnic Chinese took part in politics with some eventually becoming national leaders.

6 Separating our cultural identity from our political identity remains as important in the 21st century as it was in the second half of the 20th century. Mixing or confusing the two can create unnecessary problems and cause non-Chinese to become suspicious of ethnic Chinese in their midst. In all countries, ethnic divisions are often a source of social conflict and we must always be mindful of them. Separating the two identities enable us to

connect ideologically divided Chinese communities. Although relations between Mainland China and Taiwan have gone through many ups and downs over the past 60 years, Taiwanese businessmen have successfully taken advantage of their common cultural heritage with the Mainland to become one of the top investors in China today.

7 I always remember the story of the Parsees when they left Iran a long time ago because of religious persecution. Arriving in India, the local ruler made it clear that there was no room for them to settle by filling a glass of milk to the brim. In reply, the Parsee leader picked up some sugar in his hand and dissolved it in the milk, sweetening the milk without causing it to overflow. Wherever they settled, the Parsees sweetened the milk which is their host. Ethnic Chinese outside China should always endeavour to sweeten the milk wherever we live. In the Philippines, ethnic Chinese businessmen like Lucio Tan, Henry Sy Sr and Go Kong Wei, starting from humble beginnings, have contributed to Filipino society not only in the economic field but also through their philanthropic work in education, healthcare and poverty alleviation. In this way, our Chineseness can be celebrated not only by ourselves but by everyone. It was a joyous day when President Megawati announced in 2002 that Chinese New Year would be made a national holiday in Indonesia.

8 The WCEC has grown from strength to strength because it helps ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs learn from one another's experiences, discover new opportunities, work together and expand networks. In the earlier years, there was great interest in China because of its rapid growth. In more recent years, the interest has expanded worldwide as Mainland Chinese companies themselves move outwards to trade and invest in all four corners of the world. To facilitate the growing work of the WCEC, it might be opportune to establish a permanent platform for the gathering, exchange and dissemination of information. Such a platform can be in multiple locations linked by the Internet. The Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry (SCCCI) is prepared to provide one of the nodes. In 1995, it established the World Chinese Business Network website to complement the work of the WCEC.

9 While we celebrate the achievements of ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs, we must also remember our social responsibilities and do good work wherever we can. Different ethnic communities respond at

different speeds and in different ways to the challenge of globalisation and the knowledge economy. It is natural that some ethnic groups will do better than others as a result of market competition. This however can create tensions within countries and between countries. For there to be social harmony, development must be balanced and those progressing faster have a duty to help those having trouble keeping up.

10 It is good that China has been expanding its foreign aid year by year. I remember former Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing telling me about three years ago that China had treated 100 million patients in Africa. This is but one of many programmes undertaken by the Chinese Government to help other developing countries. Taiwanese Buddhist groups like the Tzu Chi Buddhist Foundation and Fo Kuang Shan Monastery are also doing remarkable work in many countries. However, precisely because many ethnic Chinese do well in the new global economy, we must do much more. This is in our own enlightened self-interest whether in this world or in the next.

11 I therefore hope that future WCECs will include social issues and helping others on the agenda. We should also learn from other ethnic communities like the Parsees and the Jews especially in philanthropic work. Our objective is not only to help ethnic Chinese but also to make a positive contribution to the greater good.

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