

**Embargoed until delivery. Please check against delivery**

**ADDRESS BY DIRECTOR OF ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE, MR CHOI SHING KWOK**

**LAUNCH OF THE ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE’S 50TH ANNIVERSARY BOOK**

**“LIGHT ON A HILL: THE STORY OF ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE 1968 - 2018”**

**30 November 2018, Friday, 4.30pm – 5.30pm**

Guest of Honour Mr Ong Ye Kung, Minister for Education

Prof Wang Gungwu, Chairman, and Mrs Wang,

Excellencies, Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to extend a warm welcome to all of you and to thank you for your presence and support for ISEAS.

In particular, on behalf of ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, I would like to extend my appreciation to Minister Ong Ye Kung for taking time out of his busy schedule to grace this special occasion as our Guest of Honour. Not many people are aware that ISEAS is a statutory board under the Ministry of Education, and that the ministry, in particular, its Minister, has been supporting and nurturing ISEAS all these years. It means a lot to all of us to have Minister Ong join us at this launch event for our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorative coffee table book.

### **Commemorating the Golden Anniversary**

ISEAS has had a very busy year, commemorating our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary while continuing with our many normal tasks at the same time. As a think tank and research institute, we have decided to mark the anniversary in ways that are in line with our academic and research pursuits.

We kicked off the celebrations with an invitation to PM Lee Hsien Loong to deliver our 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Lecture on 13 March 2018, in conjunction with a milestone exhibition on ISEAS. In his speech, PM Lee was generous with his assessment of ISEAS’ achievements. He shared his visions for ASEAN and the important role that ISEAS can continue to play to enrich our collective

knowledge of the region and, at the same time, enhance mutual understanding among all ASEAN partners.

This was followed by two other public lectures by renowned scholars on topics that are close to our hearts. The first public lecture was by Professor Leonard Andaya on the “Developments in the Scholarship on Southeast Asia”. The second by Professor Wang Gungwu entitled “Before Southeast Asia: Passages and Terrains” looked back to a time when the concept of a Southeast Asian region had not yet arrived and identified some of the ingredients that subsequently brought the terrains of our region closer together. The contents of all the three lectures are being compiled into a commemorative book that will be published soon.

We have also published a special compilation of 57 articles, carefully chosen from a total of 960 that were featured in our annual flagship publication “Southeast Asian Affairs” from 1974 to 2018. The book, entitled “Turning Points And Transitions”, should be of interest to scholars, students and those who are curious about the recent history of the region and will help contribute to their understanding of the present.

### **Golden Anniversary Commemorative Book**

While we were planning for the anniversary events last year, it became apparent to ISEAS management that we should take stock of and reflect on our own history, our growth and how we arrive at our present state. We therefore decided to commission a coffee table book to capture and record, in both text and pictures, the personalities, the key developments, the changes, the interesting anecdotes and the factors that made ISEAS what it is today.

The launch of this Commemorative Book today brings to a close the series of major events that we have planned for our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

This project has revealed various interesting facets of the evolution of ISEAS over the last five decades, many of which would not have crossed our minds if we had just focused on the present in our daily work. For example, looking at the continuum over the five decades, it is interesting to note that ISEAS started with several non-Singaporean Directors and, as both the nation and ISEAS gained maturity, Singaporean Directors were appointed from 1993 onwards, starting with Chan Heng Chee, and followed by Chia Siow Yue, K Kesavapany, Tan Chin Tiong and now myself. Equally interesting is the fact that, there has always been a sort of balance between the Chairman and the Director, in the sense that when the Chairman was a non-academic, the Director would have an academic background and vice versa. Since non-academics became Director, starting with K Kesavapany, the Chairman has been a distinguished academic, Professor Wang Gungwu.

ISEAS has gone through many changes over the last five decades, evolving from humble beginnings in improvised lodgings to what it is today as a more established Institute in a beautiful Asian-themed campus. More importantly, our research scope and focus have also expanded and evolved with the times as the regional situation changed and changed again.

The book has brought out many interesting aspects of ISEAS. I would just like to briefly highlight three events covered in the book to give you a flavour of its contents.

### **Autonomy**

The first is that while change over time is inevitable, one thing we are very happy with is that the status of ISEAS as an autonomous research institute has remain unchanged since its founding. This was what the founding Minister, Dr Goh Keng Swee, envisaged when he proposed the setting up of the Institute – that it should be “an autonomous research institute, organisationally separate from both the government and the university”. This was achieved by making it a statutory board with its own Act of Parliament. But ISEAS’ autonomous status was nearly derailed in 2015, when a study concluded with a proposal to have ISEAS placed under the National University of Singapore as one of its many research units. Fortunately, through the intervention of a few concerned personalities, this decision was reversed. This story, which is not widely known, is captured in the book.

### **Indonesians’ Suspicion**

A second interesting story is the suspicion that the Indonesians had in the beginning that ISEAS was formed to spy on Indonesia, given that its original focus was on the study of Indonesia and that *Confrontasi* had just ended in 1966, shortly before the formation of ISEAS in 1968. Sensing this, the third ISEAS Director Prof Josef Silverstein, took it upon himself to open up ISEAS to Indonesia’s then Ambassador to Singapore. This resulted in Ambassador Soenarso’s request to visit the Institute with three special Indonesian guests – General Sumitro from Kopkamtib (Operational Command for the Restoration of Security and Order), and two senior military intelligence officials, Ali Murtopo and Benny Moerdani. The visit was evidently a success as it eventually changed the Indonesian perception of ISEAS, leading to senior Indonesian officials speaking at ISEAS events soon after. It may also have contributed to the subsequent good relations between the leaders of the two countries. Benny Moerdani, who subsequently rose to become Commander-In-Chief of the Indonesia Armed Forces and Minister of Defence and Security, became a life-long friend of our political and military leaders, including former PM Lee Kuan Yew and former President S R Nathan.

Over the years since, ISEAS has had no problems having various Indonesians coming to our events as speakers and participants. Most recently, we had vice presidential candidate Sandiaga Uno speaking at our seminar just last month. Former Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is also one of our Distinguished Honorary Fellows.

### **Chin Peng's Talk**

The third interesting incident I want to mention is a historic closed-door ISEAS seminar which took place in 2004 with a very special speaker – none other than Chin Peng, the Secretary-General of the Communist Party of Malaya during the Malayan Emergency from 1948 to 1960. He was then living in exile in Thailand, but was allowed to make a 3-day visit to Singapore when then Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew wanted to meet up with him. Mr Kesavapany, then Director ISEAS, was instrumental in arranging the seminar in ISEAS. Chin Peng talked about his views on the Emergency, why he took up armed struggle against the British, the CPM's role and the factors that led to the 1989 Hat Yai peace accord that marked the end of the communist insurgency. Chin Peng's presence in Singapore was only publicised after he left Singapore. Those who were invited to the seminar certainly recalled it as a special event. Our book has a nice picture of Chin Peng in a jovial mood, accompanied by Chairman Wang Gungwu and Director Kesavapany.

### **Thanks**

Trying to capture five decades of development in a book and having to do it within a short time, must indeed have been challenging. We have therefore invited the writer, Ms Cassandra Chew, to share her thoughts with us. Before she does so, I wish to extend our appreciation to Cassandra, and also the editorial consultant, Mr Sonny Yap, for collating all the information together and delivering to us a book that is both interesting and informative.

To conclude, on behalf of ISEAS, I wish again to thank Minister Ong Ye Kung and the Ministry of Education, our board members, our staff, sponsors, partners, conference participants, research consumers and all who have contributed to enhancing the research, academic status and success of the Institute over the years. We sincerely appreciate your contributions over the last 50 years and look forward to your continued support in the future.

Thank you.