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SPEECH BY DR TONY TAN KENG YAM, MINISTER FOR EDUCATION, AT
THE OPENING OF THE 10TH CONFERENCE OF THE INTERNATIONAL
ASSOCIATION OF HISTORIANS OF ASIA AT THE NOVOTEL ORCHID INN
ON MONDAY, 27 OCTOBER 1986 AT 9.00 AM

Let me first thank your Organising Committee for kindly inviting me to open the 10th Conference of the International Association of Historians of Asia (IAHA) and to address you this morning.

The healthy state of the History profession in Asia is shown by the record attendance of more than 200 participants from 25 countries at this Conference. Many of you have travelled long distances to come to Singapore. To all I extend a warm welcome. I hope that you will find the Conference to be fruitful and interesting and that your stay in Singapore will be pleasant and comfortable.

This meeting of the International Association of Historians of Asia is not only a conference on history but it is also a historic occasion because it is the first time that the IAHA Conference is being held in Singapore. Unlike many of the countries represented in the Association, the history of Singapore is relatively short and therefore we are very pleased that the Association at its last meeting in Manila chose Singapore to be the venue for this Conference with the History Department of the National University of Singapore as the Conference convenor.

The scope of historical studies can be seen in the wide range of the conference papers which not only deal with recent events but also delve into protohistory, archaeology

and ancient civilizations. The impact of external powers, especially from the West, on Asia and Asian societies is well documented at this Conference. Other papers deal with relationships between countries and with trade and technology, diplomacy and war and wider relations between Asian and non-Asian states. All of them lend variety and vitality to the Conference.

The papers on more contemporary historical themes illustrate the fact that we are living in rapidly changing times. There are papers devoted to revolutions in Asia. Not only the Chinese Revolution of 1911 but also the more recent "peaceful revolution" in the Philippines in February this year.

The study of History has undergone profound changes over the years. From merely chronicling the major social, economic and political changes in a country, the study of History now requires a critical and inter-disciplinary approach. This is why, in addition to professional historians, other specialists, for example, archaeologists, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, literature specialists and educationists are well represented today.

The multi-disciplinary nature of the Conference reflects the broad vision of the founders and sustainers of IAHA and the wide-ranging views they have of the concerns of historians and the character of academic research and discovery. While we cannot escape the reality that we live in an age of specialization we have to guard against the danger of over specialization i.e. knowing more and more about less and less. Hence the need for a historical perspective to add breadth and balance to the analysis and interpretation of momentous events and the experiences of ordinary men and women.

Our perceptions of the present and expectations of the future must necessarily be influenced by what we know of the past. All of us will have our own impressions of the past and the person trained in the discipline of history will have an advantage in being able to evaluate the conflicting facts put forward to justify or explain particular views.

In the last 26 years the economic and social landscape of Singapore has been transformed. Amidst all these changes it is important that our children should have a good and sound knowledge of the history of Singapore so that they can develop a sense of belonging to the nation. Our aim must be to develop in our children a sense of Singapore identity to bring about an understanding of and to instil pride in Singapore's progress and the achievements of our people. This is why historical studies are of great importance to a young nation like Singapore.

I am encouraged to see that there has been growing realization among Singaporeans that many aspects of our past are worth preserving. After all history is not only the recounting of past events. History is to be found all around us in monuments, buildings, traditions and cultural practices, the clothes which we wear and the food which we eat. All these can be considered as part of living history and as part of our heritage.

On this note I have great pleasure to declare the Conference officially open. I wish all of you a stimulating and fruitful stay in Singapore.
