

NOT FOR CIRCULATION TILL DELIVERY

**SPEECH BY PROFESSOR CHAN HENG CHEE,
CHAIRMAN NATIONAL ARTS COUNCIL
AT THE OPENING GALA OF THE
26TH SINGAPORE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL ON
THURSDAY 26 NOVEMBER 2015 AT
SANDS THEATRE,
MARINA BAY SANDS**

Mr Mike Wiluan, Chairperson SGIFF,

Mr Yuni Hadi Executive Director of SGIFF,

Mr Gabriel Lim, CEO, MDA

Ladies and gentlemen

I thank the Singapore International Film Festival for inviting me to the opening of the Festival. I understand this Film Festival is the longest running international film platform in Southeast Asia for the discovery of independent cinema. And this is the 26th edition. Congratulations. I would like to welcome the filmmakers and film goers who have come from overseas. Your presence help make the event. I hope you enjoy November in Singapore. It is a very nice time of the year here. My very warm greetings to the Singapore film community for what you do in creating and supporting Singapore film.

Film has a very special place in our lives. No matter where we come from, Europe, Iran, China, Thailand or Singapore, before film we were engrossed by storytelling, street drama and street theatre. Then film arrived and opened the door for us to the world of enchantment and imagination. The fact that film continues to interest and intrigue us simply shows how filmmakers have successfully adapted to the changing technology, techniques and audience tastes and of course they have shaped new tastes as well.

I grew up before television came to Singapore. Imagine that! Film was our great escape but also our great educator. Whether it was seeing cowboy Westerns, King Arthur and his knights from Hollywood or the wholesome sweet musicals showing America as a land of milk and honey, or Chinese dynastic dramas and feudal dramas, or Shaolin heroes, we learned about other countries, cultures and how other people live and how we live. Films arouse our empathy and our feelings. Never mind that we saw stereotypes or romanticised versions. Now we have realism. We have seen many Singapore filmmakers make gritty films about Singapore showing life as it is, warts and all, the underbelly of society and the tough struggles some people go through. When we were young we did not understand the soft power of film, of art and pop culture. Films play a part in shaping our ideals as well as our values.

In Singapore we have seen what the young film community can produce. It all began with Mee Pok Man by Eric Khoo in 1995. I believe it was the first full length feature film made by an independent Singaporean filmmaker. The Singapore International Film Festival will celebrate the 20th anniversary of the film by showing a newly restored version at the festival. And Yonfan's Bugis Street Redux will also be shown.

This year to celebrate SG50, we saw the production of the critically acclaimed anthology film "7 Letters" by 7 of our most well-known filmmakers, Boo Junfeng, Eric Khoo, Jack Neo, Rajagopal K, Tan Pin Pin, Royston Tan, and Kevin Tong. They were heart-warming narratives from Singapore life each a commentary on a specific value or values. With artistic expression, each of the 7 films captured plausibly and authentically aspects of Singapore so that the audience identified with them. It was a Singapore film. The audiences and the critics loved it. MDA and the Singapore Film Commission fully funded the project and they should be congratulated for this.

In Singapore, the MDA and the Singapore Film Commission play the leading role in the development of the film industry. NAC will continue to play a supportive role as we recognise film as a medium of art. We will continue to support the efforts to grow film making and filmmakers, especially when their works are

presented in the arts context such as galleries, biennales and art fairs.

There is a debate out there today on censorship and whether funding for the arts from the state acts as a form of censorship on the artists. It would be remiss of me not to say a few words on this. It is not surprising at all that artists will speak out against censorship or conditional funding of any kind. We should not look on the exchange of views on this matter as a case of the state against artists, or the artists against the state. After all, we are one community, a diverse community, but one community and one country.

The government of Singapore provides the NAC a budget of \$90 million a year to support the development of the arts and artists, and arts housing. In addition, a huge sum is spent on the buildings with state-of-the-art acoustics and equipment. The National Heritage Board equally supports the arts and cultural heritage with the beautiful museums it builds and refurbishes. The National Gallery just opened its doors this week to eager viewers. We do all this with the arts community for our people to enjoy.

In thinking about arts patronage and the relationship with artists, I came across an article in the Atlantic. It was published in 2010,

that addressed this inherent conflict faced in the US. In 1998 here was a dispute between the performance artists and the National Endowment of the Arts for the withdrawal of funding for offensive art. This resulted in the National Endowment of the Arts v Finley case. The Supreme Court waded in and upheld advice to the NEA to consider decency and respect for the diverse American values in awarding grants. There was perhaps a recognition that such advisories were necessary even in the US to guide institutions.

I relate this to show governments have to deal with this conflict, this difference in points of view. Governments or states end up like it or not the arbiter. It is not just the state that sets standards. Society and subsets of society set standards too. But standards and values will evolve. Until then, there will be negotiation and compromise. Some have made the argument that state money is taxpayers' money and should not be subject to the political concerns of the government of the day. Indeed it is taxpayers' money and if taxpayers were to have their say, many may argue for more money to be spent on welfare subsidies or education and less on the arts. The allocation of resources in Singapore is something the government does on Budget day and so far for the arts and creative industries, the government has increased support over the years.

The NAC and I look forward to working with you to increase patronage, public and private and to grow the audience that is so essential to reaffirm the arts. Have a very successful film festival!

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