SPEECH BY WEE ENG HWA
AT THE LAUNCH OF
“WEE KIM WEE SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION AND
INFORMATION”

5 DECEMBER 2006 at THE ISTANA

___________________________________________________________

Your Excellency, Mr S R Nathan, President of The Republic of Singapore and Chancellor, Nanyang Technological University - our lovely and gracious Mrs Nathan - Mr Koh Boon Hwee, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Nanyang Technological University - Professor Su Guaning, President, Nanyang Technological University - Mr Kwee Liong Keng, Chairman, Wee Kim Wee Legacy Fund Committee - Dear Friends and Supporters of Dr Wee Kim Wee

Opening Remarks

My mother, my siblings and I feel so privileged and happy to be here this evening to participate in a significant event - the launch of the “Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information”.

1. The Objective of the Event

1. This event is significant, because what we do today for the School will have good, far-reaching and long lasting consequences, not only in Singapore, but also outside our country, through the graduates of the School.

The Wee Kim Wee Legacy Fund was launched to honour the memory of my father, Dr Wee Kim Wee. It is hoped that the School will become a premier communication school of international standing. It is the common objective of both the Legacy Fund Committee and Nanyang Technological University to keep alive (I quote) “the excellence, distinction and enduring values of Wee Kim Wee’s life and work”, for the present and future generations, through the activities of the School. We wish NTU well in its endeavours.
2. **Appreciation and Thanks**

We truly appreciate the gesture of the Committee and NTU in initiating the Legacy Fund and the encouragement and support of all of you, his dear friends and supporters - not least you, Mr President - for making the Wee Kim Wee legacy at NTU a reality. We thank you all from the bottom of our hearts.

Mr President, special thanks to you for your patronage, wise counsel and guiding hand on the Legacy Fund project and for allowing the Istana as the venue for this event. We very much appreciate your friendship and support.

Furthermore, you also took more than an active interest in the making of the Commemorative Book “On The Record” - this handsome and informative publication that tells the story of Wee Kim Wee - the Journalist. You have made this Book, Mr President, so special by your account in the Foreword of your personal encounters with Wee Kim Wee himself, ever since he was a badminton star in the early 1930s.

Friends, I urge all of you not to skip the Foreword when you read the Book, as it is no ordinary Foreword - it is graphic - it is interesting - and so wonderfully and warmly written.

3. **Further Appreciation and Thanks**

We would also like to place on record our appreciation for the efforts of (i) Jennie Chua, the human dynamo and great mobiliser (ii) Peter Lim (Editorial Consultant), Ng Boon Yang (Writer) Chua Chong Jin (Editor) and Epigram (Designer) for producing the handsome Commemorative Book and (iii) Marina Tan Harper, the tireless Secretary-General of the Legacy Fund and Director, NTU Development & Fund-raising Office and her team. Thank you all very much.

Marina told me that she had never met my dad, but, through meeting people for the Fund, she came to know about him, and appreciated what he really meant to people. She says that she feels she has known
my father. Well, I hope that students of the School will feel the same way about Wee Kim Wee as she does.

4. Other World Scoops of WKW

Since I have made reference to the Book “On the Record”, I thought I should mention about some achievements of Wee Kim Wee - the Journalist, not covered in the Book.

Much had been said and reported about the world scoops he had achieved, whilst he was in the Straits Times - the Congo coverage and the revelation of General Suharto’s desire to end Konfrontasi against Malaysia (including Singapore).

But, little is known about Wee Kim Wee’s world scoops during his time at United Press Associations/United Press International, totalling 14½ years from 1941. In his private memoir, my father recounted several world scoops he achieved whilst working at UP. One of his famous world scoops is his report of a military coup in Thailand, just when King Bhumiphol, the new king of Thailand, and his consort, Queen Sirikit, were sailing home for their coronation, after a brief stopover in Singapore from Europe in 1946. His “flash” report caused an immediate shock around the world, because Bangkok had then been sealed off and no news had filtered out. It caught every journalist and foreign correspondent in town unawares.

5. Reasons for Supporting the WKW Legacy Fund & NTU

My family wants me to say a few words on why we had chosen to support the Legacy Fund and NTU.

Since my father’s demise on 2 May 2005, we have received requests from organisations expressing the wish to honour him in one form or the other. However, we felt NTU’s suggestion to be the most appropriate. It has the most meaning - in terms of the life of Wee Kim Wee - the Journalist.
[1] Journalist At Heart- Wee Kim Wee became a Journalist, not by choice. Early in life, he had the notion of becoming a lawyer, a detective or even a plain police officer to help solve crimes. But circumstances and career opportunities presented themselves, leading him to carve out a long and successful career in journalism, spanning almost 40 years. Wee Kim Wee was a Journalist at heart. He always said that, of all the careers he had, he would want to be a Journalist, if he had to choose just one.

His successes and achievements rested on his training and experience as a Journalist. It prepared him for the next two phases of his career development - as a Diplomat and then as President of his beloved country - Singapore. You can read all about his career development as a Journalist in the Book.

[2] Desire to Teach Journalism - My father told us that he had one regret only, namely, that he had no opportunity to teach journalism. His formal education was terminated, because his mother needed him to find a job to help feed the family. He was then only 14 years, one month and 9 days old. One can imagine the lump in his throat, when he had to sign on the leaving certificate to discharge himself from formal education at Raffles Institution on 12 December 1929.

Yet, Wee Kim Wee was never bitter that formal education had eluded him. He accepted the situation. But, he was not going to allow circumstances to get the better of his life. His indomitable human spirit to achieve and excel shone through in everything he had to do to further his career and education.

My father was a self-motivated man. He was a life-long student in his off-duty hours. When he was 18 years old, he was taught the English language and literature and the virtues of striving after “higher and nobler ideals in life” under Sir Ong Siang Song (the author of the famous book “One Hundred Years’ History of the Chinese in Singapore”) and Mr C H Koh, at the Straits Chinese Reading Club which was formed in 1909, and whose aim was the moulding of young Singaporeans into useful citizens. The classes were held at the Presbyterian Church at Prinsep Street.
He also learnt many languages - Chinese, Malay, Japanese - to help him in his work. He even learnt French. He would listen to Chinese language tapes, even as late as one month before his death. He began to learn to use the computer (in DOS language, if you please) one month before he retired as President at the age of 78, and he made full use of the email, almost to the very end of his life, to connect with people all over the world.

[3] **Desire to Give Back to Society** - We believe that to support a school of journalism would be well within the desire of Wee Kim Wee, who had always given back to society what he had received from it.

When he was Deputy Editor of the Straits Times from 1959, my father would often stay back after office hours to coach his reporters. He gave his best to his reporters - even at the expense of his leisure and time with his family. My father did not forget that two kind souls had unselfishly mentored him in journalism, which had enabled him to rise above his circumstance - Chia Poteik, a Straits Times Senior Reporter, when he was stringing for sports events in the 1930s and Harold Guard, the UP Editor in 1941.

[4] **Appropriate Mentor Figure for the School - Outstanding Journalist with a Heart** - Wee Kim Wee - the Journalist had always shown that he had a heart for his fellowmen. This is reflected in his love of reporting and writing “human-angle” stories. Education should include the education of the heart. We hope, therefore, that presenting him as the Mentor Figure for the School would encourage its students on educating the heart, whilst training the intellect.

How did Wee Kim Wee come to have a big warm heart for people? Simply, because he never forgot his humble beginnings. Wee Kim Wee never allowed his circumstances or career successes to get the better of him or to feel ashamed of his family’s poverty. He had dignity and humility throughout his life.

(a) **His struggles** - My father’s life as a Journalist was tough. He worked very long hours; pay and bonuses could have been better; and he often had to weather the storms and choppy waters single-handedly. There were no unions to speak up for him, in those days.
For 70 days before the Fall of Singapore, he worked night and day - almost 24 hours. He even camped at the office, because they couldn’t afford to employ anyone else. He took it all for the sake of the family and for the love of journalism.

But, Praise God, there were people who came forward, during his dark hours, to lift him out of his situation.

Through his struggles and sufferings, he learnt much about journalism, and came out stronger in character and more determined to succeed. He had a bigger heart for people and the number of friends he had, grew. He learnt much - how to survive; how to stand up for himself; and it gave him the capacity to empathise with the poor, the working class, the down-and-out and the oppressed. He had a deep understanding of their circumstances. Often, he would quietly visit and bring along money, oil, sugar and rice to people known to him, who were in dire straits - to help keep their bodies and souls together - and simply to let them know that he cared.

We are very thankful that his abilities and contributions to our country were recognised by the State in the form of State Awards, appointments as our country’s High Commissioner to Malaysia and then as Ambassador to Japan and Korea, and then, as President of Singapore. And, finally, he was accorded a State Funeral.

(b) **The love he received** - The other important aspect of his life that gave Wee Kim Wee a big warm heart for people is the love and care he received from his parents and siblings. Even though they had not enough to eat or to go to school, they held together and cared for one another. This love gave him that great capacity to get along with people and to care for his colleagues and fellowmen. In short, he was loved and, in turn, he imparted love to people.

**Aggregate qualities from being Journalist shaping WKW**

All these qualities had helped to shape Wee Kim Wee - the Journalist. They are evident in his feature writings and reports, as you will read in the Book.
But he also benefited much from his work as a Journalist. He said it was “rewarding, challenging and interesting” and he had the opportunity to meet many people from all walks of life and all strata of society, and to increase his circle of friends and acquaintances. He learnt much from them.

One person he singled out in his private memoir was Lee Kong Chian - the successful businessman and great philanthropist and founder of Lee Foundation. My father described Lee Kong Chian in the following words “…A more humble and modest man, in spite of his wealth, it is difficult to meet anywhere. I learnt a great deal talking to him, especially on Chinese culture and history, of which he was extremely knowledgeable”. My father was so impressed and touched by Mr Lee that he wanted to record Mr Lee’s life story for him. Mr Lee had agreed for my father to write his biography but, before they could arrange to have the interviews recorded on tape, Mr Lee’s health failed him and he died two years later. My father felt the loss of Mr Lee and the opportunity to write his biography.

[5] **Journalistic Values and Ideals of WKW** - The values and ideals that Wee Kim Wee applied in his journalistic career remain relevant. We hope his values and ideals would be ‘caught’ by the students of the School. Wee Kim Wee emphasised on honest, accurate, objective and fair reporting. Trustworthiness and integrity were fundamental qualities a journalist must have. He despised sensationalism. He was, at the same time, a socially-responsible Journalist who was ever conscious of how a piece of news would impact the life of the individual being reported on, the reader, the society and the nation.

### 6. Legacy for Present and Future Generations

My mother, my siblings and I are privileged and happy to support the “Wee Kim Wee Legacy Fund” and “Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information”. We hope the education at the School would help nurture its students to capture the indomitable human spirit of Wee Kim Wee - of never giving up; never letting circumstances get us down; striving for excellence and upholding the values and ideals of life he held dear - but always tempered by a heart for our fellowmen, in all our endeavours.
7. Final Thanks - from the Heart to the Heart

Dear friends and supporters of Wee Kim Wee, thank you for being good to my father when he was alive; for the love that you have shown tonight; and for giving to the Legacy Fund from your heart, just as he had given to others from his heart throughout his life. We hope you will continue to support the Legacy Fund and the School.

8. Publicise Legacy Fund - Opportunity to Contribute

As many people might not know about the Legacy Fund, may I urge you to spread the news about it far and wide, so that more people would have the opportunity to contribute to the Legacy Fund. No donation is too small or too big. Even a legacy left in a Will would be highly appreciated.

Let us make this Legacy Fund a strong and viable one and the “Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information” a premier institution of learning – something that Singapore will be proud of.

Thank you for your patience in listening and have a wonderful evening.