

**SPEECH BY GUEST OF HONOUR, FORMER PRESIDENT MR S R NATHAN AT THE  
LAUNCH OF THE *SOUTHEAST ASIAN REVIEW OF ENGLISH* SPECIAL ISSUE ON  
SINGAPOREAN AND MALAYSIAN LITERATURE TO MARK ITS 30<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY  
AT THE LIVING RM, ARTS HOUSE  
ON 6<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER 2012**

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The Guest-Editors of the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary issue of the *Southeast Asian Review of English*, Prof. Koh Tai Ann and Assoc Prof Neil Murphy,

Members of the academic and literary communities,

Students,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good Morning.

1. Little did I know that a chance comment of mine a couple of years ago would lead to my presence here today to launch this special issue on Malaysian and Singaporean Literature of the *Southeast Asian Review of English* (or SARE 50, for short) in Singapore.

While hosting a lunch at the Istana for a prominent Malaysian feminist, a former classmate at the then University of Malaya in Singapore, I looked back to a time when many in Singapore had friends, former classmates or family ties across the Causeway and vice-versa, and commented that perhaps Singaporeans today could find ways to connect more with Malaysians whether at an individual or institutional level (other, I might add, than as tourists or shoppers out for a bargain!) I gather that my comment, together with news of the closure of the Malaysian or KTM railway link with Singapore on 30<sup>th</sup> June, 2011, inspired the co-editors of this issue of the *Southeast Asian Review of English* to initiate this collaboration. Without constant cultivation and renewal, such ties could well wither away over time. As the Malaysian and Singaporean co-editors conclude in their editorial (I quote):

"Memories fade, shared experiences become infrequent, paths diverge and connections end as when Singapore ... ceased to be the terminus of KTM and the trains ... now no longer run on Singapore soil. ... Perhaps what can sustain instead our more intangible intersections is the literature, the arts and cultural exchange. In these vital areas we may find links that run deep and may be more enduring."

Significantly, the peer-reviewed SARE was conceived by a former graduate of the University of Malaya in Singapore, the late Professor Lloyd Fernando, a contemporary of Singapore's own literary pioneers, the late Goh Poh Seng who was born in Malaya, and Edwin Thumboo, and thus like them, was part of Singapore's early "Malayan" literary scene. Fernando went on to become an established Malaysian novelist and literary scholar and founded the Malaysian Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies whose journal this is. The Commonwealth, a precursor of globalisation, reminds us of yet another connection – our links with the West as well as an international network of nations. Fittingly, this special issue is supported by NTU's College of Humanities, the Arts and Social Sciences as an expression of the University's

vision of the "New Silk Road", a metaphor for the 'flow [and synthesis] of ideas and knowledge' along routes where trade and exchange is not merely in material goods.

But roots (as in tree roots) and old and existing routes of exchange and the extension of knowledge are not forgotten either. The contents of SARE 50 address such complexities.

Articles on the life and work of a literary pioneer like the late Goh Poh Seng or about the works of writers both Malaysian and Singaporean who now live and publish abroad testify to both their roots in the countries of their birth and their "transnational crossings" after migrating westwards. Another brings out the relationship between traditional folklore and morality in a novel by a member of the Singapore diaspora about Singapore in the 1950s. Yet others address the current fluidity of the concept of the nation and the consequent 'complexities of transient national identity' in an era of globalisation, or the relationship between culture and power, and how fiction and poetry can serve as constructive cultural critiques of a society. Malaysian academic and well-known fiction writer, Dr Chuah Guat Eng (who is, happily, here today among us today) provides valuable insights into Malaysian society today through her sociological study of its contemporary novels in English by both home-based and diasporic writers.

Language and literature obviously, are inextricable. To the extent that both Malaysia and Singapore share a common National Language and a heritage of English – consequent upon a shared past – they serve at the same time as routes for mutual understanding, exchange and enrichment. Testifying to this is an article by a Singaporean academic on Malaysian English, poems by Malaysian Poet Laureate Muhammad Haji Salleh in Malay and in English translation, and a review of one of Singapore's leading Chinese language writers, Yeng Pway Ngon's volume of poems superbly co-translated into English by fellow poet in English, Alvin Pang, in an exemplary but still too rare a collaboration.

As importantly, SARE is thus – and this 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary issue reinforces this -- a valuable platform for both established, new or emerging writers and new books, reflecting the complex multicultural and multilingual diversity found in societies like ours. The readings that will follow celebrate this.

Apart from the leading poets of their generation, Muhammad Haji Salleh and feminist poet Lee Tzu Pheng who was his classmate at the University of Singapore, the issue features Agnes Lam, a Hong Konger awarded an ASEAN scholarship by Singapore and who took up citizenship, award-winning poet Cyril Wong, Eric Tinsay Valles from the Philippines now teaching in Singapore, and NTU graduate student poet, Zhang Jieqiang, whose craft was honed by the English Division's creative writing programme, and other new writers.

New writers may be born or made, or both, and NTU's creative writing programme can be one of the nurseries as is evident from Zhang's maiden published poem, which I was proudly told, was selected on its own merits.

On that positive nod towards the future of literature which depends both on its audience, its channels of publication and appreciation or support as exemplified by journals like SARE and fresh talent continuing to emerge and develop, I am very pleased to launch this special 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary issue of the *Southeast Asian Review of English* devoted to Singaporean and Malaysian literature.