

Launch of the Goh Keng Swee Professorship in China Studies, 16 April 2025

Welcome Remarks

By Dr Teh Kok Peng, Chairman, East Asian Institute

Distinguished guests, colleagues and friends, ladies and gentlemen: a very good morning and a warm welcome to you all. Thank you for making time to attend the official launch of the Goh Keng Swee Professorship in China Studies. A special thank you to Professor Tommy Koh, Ambassador-at-Large, for kindly agreeing to give the keynote address, and to NUS Provost, Professor Aaron Thean, for joining us.

The East Asia Institute started life with a different name and research focus, as the Institute of East Asian Philosophy, in 1983. Dr Goh was then Minister of Education (in addition to being the Deputy Prime Minister). The Institute of East Asian Philosophy (IEAP) was intended to help the Education Ministry in moral and religious education. Research on Confucian ethics and its introduction into the school curriculum proved far more challenging politically than was envisaged. Consequently, it was quietly shelved. In the meantime, China had opened up and was making rapid economic progress from 1979, after the economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping. Dr Goh was appointed by the Chinese Government to be an Adviser in 1985, after he stepped down from politics.

Far-sighted and pragmatic, Dr Goh shifted the research emphasis and changed its name first to the Institute of East Asian Political Economy, and then, in 1997, to the East Asian Institute.

EAI has been in existence now for 28 years. For much of this period, its Chair was Professor Wang Gungwu, with the late Professor John Wong, as Research Director. I would like to acknowledge their contributions to building up EAI largely to what it is today. Professor Wang and Dr Aline Wong, the widow of Professor John Wong, are with us today. Professor Wang—now in his nineties—is still actively engaged with EAI. If Singaporeans can be like him, we would not need to worry about an ageing problem! I would also like to acknowledge the contributions of Professor Zheng Yongnian, who succeeded Professor Wang as Director, when Professor Wang became the Chairman. Professor Zheng returned to China several years ago, and is an influential Adviser to the Chinese government.

Like all institutions, EAI is a continuing work in progress. The setting up of the Goh Keng Swee Professorship marks an important step in that progress for three reasons. First, it will be a constant reminder of what Dr Goh has achieved, and the qualities he embodied. Professor Tommy Koh will elaborate on this in his keynote address. The short video that follows his address will show this more vividly. Second, if sufficiently endowed, the Professorship will attract China experts from top universities in the world

to spend a few years with us. There will be knowledge transfer. Over time, we will develop and maintain a network of relationships with and through the experts. Talent attracts talent. We hope to develop and retain promising young researchers, especially in Singapore, who would be attracted to work with, and learn from, renowned experts. Third, more than ever in recent years, EAI, being in Singapore, is seen as a neutral convening institution for organizing and discussing sensitive geopolitical issues. But to be a reputable and sustainable convenor, EAI needs to be a credible content creator as well, and not mainly as an event organizer.

The purpose of this formal launch of the Goh Keng Swee Professorship in China Studies is to set the context for why we think such a chair would position EAI to better serve our policy-makers and the business community in the highly uncertain years ahead. The chaotic events of the last two weeks serve as a perfect illustration of my point.

In conclusion, I would like to thank donors for their generous donations. I am grateful that many of you found time in your busy schedules to attend this launch. I hope that some of you will find it sufficiently worthwhile to donate more, or to persuade friends and associates to do the same. Also present today are people who worked for Dr. Goh and think highly of him. I thank them as well for their presence, and would like to request them to help increase our pool of donors!