

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

Keynote Speech

By Ambassador-at-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Professor Tommy Koh

Professor Aaron Thean, NUS Provost

Dr Teh Kok Peng, Chairman, EAI

Prof Wang Gungwu, University Professor

Professor Aline Wong

Professor Alfred Schipke, Director, EAI

Professor Jean Oi, the inaugural Goh Keng Swee Professor in China Studies

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank Dr Teh Kok Peng

I wish to thank my good friend, Dr Teh Kok Peng, for giving me the honour of speaking at the launch of the Goh Keng Swee Professorship in China Studies.

Relationship With Dr Goh

Unlike Dr Teh, I had never worked directly for Dr Goh but he gave me many assignments when I was Singapore's Permanent Representative to the UN in New York. For example, he asked me to write him a monthly report on the movement of the US dollar. It was a scary assignment. Another assignment. He had found out that the FBI and CIA liked to recruit Mormons to their ranks. He asked me for a paper on the Mormons. I flew to Salt Lake City to meet leaders of the church. There were other interesting assignments, including this one. I was asked to contact two American banks, and to ask each of them to manage some of our savings. I won't mention their names. A year later, when he found out that both have lost some of our money, he asked to withdraw the funds. He told me that we should learn to manage our own savings. Whenever I returned to Singapore, Dr Goh would invite me and my family to have dinner with him and his family.

Lessons From Dr Goh's Life

When Dr Goh passed away in 2010, I wrote an essay for the Straits Times (23 May 2010). It was entitled, Goh Keng Swee: 10 lessons from his life. What are the 10 lessons? They are:

- (i) have courage, optimism and the can-do spirit;
- (ii) most problems have solutions;
- (iii) defy conventional wisdom;
- (iv) build institutions;
- (v) focus on Singapore's prosperity and independence;

- (vi) respect and help the poor;
- (vii) ideas are important;
- (viii) promote appreciation of music, culture and nature;
- (ix) lead a simple and frugal life; and
- (x) never stop being curious.

Dr Goh's Legacy to Singapore

In his 25 years in Lee Kuan Yew's cabinet, Dr Goh held 3 key portfolios: Finance, Defence and Education. He was the genius behind Singapore's economic miracle. Our policy of fiscal prudence came from him. He insisted that we should have a budget surplus every year, even when we were poor. He was the architect behind the Singapore Armed Forces. He built it up from nothing to what it is today. He introduced National Service. He is truly the father of SAF. Young Singaporeans should remember his name and appreciate his many contributions to Singapore. Without him, we would not have the Singapore of today.

Adviser to China: 1985 - 1990

When the Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping, visited Singapore, he was impressed by what he saw. He invited Dr Goh Keng Swee to be an adviser to the State Council on Special Economic Zones and on tourism. Dr Goh accepted the request, with Lee Kuan Yew's blessings. The period of appointment was from 1985 to 1990.

East Asian Institute (EAI)

In Singapore, Dr Goh established the East Asian Institute, a think-tank for the study of China. He wrote many articles and made many speeches on China and its development. They have been compiled and published as a book, Goh Keng Swee on China. The study of China has become essential now that China is a superpower. Singapore can make a valuable contribution to the understanding of China. It is an objective, non-Western and non-Chinese point of view.

China and Singapore

Singapore and China enjoy a very close, comprehensive and mutually beneficial relationship. China is Singapore's largest trading partner in goods. Singapore is China's largest foreign investor. China is the only country with which Singapore has three government-led iconic projects: in Suzhou, Tianjin and in Chongqing.

In 1990, I was the leader of the Singapore delegation which negotiated the establishment of diplomatic relations between our two countries. In the last 35 years, both Singapore and China have made miraculous progress. Thirty five years ago, China was poor. Today, China is rich. Thirty years ago, Singapore was a Third World country. Today, it is a First World country. However, we can learn from each other and there are many areas in which we can cooperate for our mutual benefit.

The launch of the Goh Keng Swee Professorship in China Studies is an excellent contribution to the celebration of the 35th anniversary of our diplomatic relations.

Thank you.