FOR REPORTING

TRANSCRIPT OF SPEECH BY MR EDWIN TONG, MINISTER FOR LAW AND SECOND MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS, TAN KAH KEE FOUNDATION SCHOLARSHIP AWARD CEREMONY 2026 ITE COLLEGE CENTRAL, TAY ENG SOON CONVENTION CENTRE, 29 JULY 2026

Mr Lawrence Tan, Chairman, Tan Kah Kee Foundation
Professor Eugene Tan, Chairman, Tan Kah Kee Foundation Scholarship Committee,
Mr Peter Lam, Chief Executive Officer, Institute of Technical Education (ITE)
Distinguished guests, donors, friends and family of the scholarship recipients, the recipients themselves. Ladies and gentlemen.

1. A very, very good evening to all of you. As Professor Eugene said, I've been here before, but only virtually so it's very nice to be here in-person and to be part of this scholarship awards. As I was watching the video earlier, I was reflecting on the occasion today, and I thought to share with you three observations about this evening, about the Tan Kah Kee Foundation, and also about the scholarship and about education.

2. First, if you look at the video, what will strike you immediately is that Singapore has been built on the efforts of our pioneers, people who were successful, who saw it fit to give back, who were generous, not just with their resources, but with their thinking, with the thought, and with the vision. That's what Singapore has been built on. I can't help but think that as we are on the eve of our 61st national day, it's fitting to give a tribute to all our pioneers, all those who have come before us, all those who have sacrificed much, and given us a Singapore today that we have inherited – one that is safe, is secure, it’s got solid foundations.

3. It also leaves us all with a duty, even as we inherit all this, it leaves us with a duty to ensure that we also pay it forward, because that's what Singapore has been doing. If we want Singapore to achieve success in the years to come -- SG100, 200 and beyond – then I think it behooves all of us to also adopt that same pioneering spirit of paying it forward, of wanting to leave Singapore better for tomorrow's generation than it is for us. To always think of the next generation. To always think that Singapore, when we plan Singapore, is not just about the people today, but about the welfare and the well-being for a generation that will come after us. If we can do this continually, one generation after another, then I think Singapore will always do well. If we leave Singapore better tomorrow than it is today, every generation which does this will mean that Singapore will continue to do well. So that's the first reflection.

4. The second, of course, is the importance of clans and foundations, again in early Singapore. Today, Singapore is multi-cultural, diverse, multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and we sometimes take that for granted. But really, it is in the efforts of our early pioneers to settle into Singapore, who form clans and foundations to help their fellow members to progress, to find a place in society, and collectively to build a Singapore that is special.

5. And again, I was reflecting with Lawrence earlier that I spent some time as the Chairman of the Chinese Liaison Group when I was in my previous term in Government, and through that responsibility, I saw a side of Singapore that I had not seen previously – or at least it was there, but maybe I had not yet, or not as deeply appreciated – which was our traditional heritage and our special culture. This is what makes Singapore distinct and unique. There is practically no other country in the world that will have the history and heritage that we have. The combination of different races with different practices and traditions and customs – of language, of religion, of the special bits that make us different, each of us. I think a lot of it is down to the efforts of the earlier pioneers as they built Singapore.

6. Today, I think that's reflected in the spirit of the Tan Kah Kee Scholarship. Earlier on, Professor Eugene made them all stand up, and I looked at all of them. If you look around the profile of our scholars, the multiculturalism is retained. We look at it not as how do we protect our own race, how do we protect our own religion, but we look at Singapore first, as the beacon of identity. I think that's ever so special, and we must always carefully and zealously guard it, to make sure we always retain this quality because if you look around the world today, it is just so easy to be sidetracked by the differences in identity. People making efforts to drive a wedge between people from different races, cultures, skin colour, language and religion. Whereas in Singapore, that's something that we have enjoyed but I hope we don't take it for granted. I want to thank the early pioneers for giving us this story. It is something that we treasure.

7. The last reflection, of course, has to do with education, which is what we are doing today. Education, or rather, scholarship, gives you access to an education. But I think it's much, much more than that. The scholarship gives you an opportunity; it gives you a chance to level up. It gives you a chance to progress, and it gives you an opportunity to develop yourself and find your space and your role to pay it forward.

8. And here, there has been more than four decades since the foundation has been set up to give the scholarships. Four decades of scholars, but its impact goes well beyond that. Here, I would like to say something about lifelong learning, which you obviously recognise

deeply in these awards. Lifelong learning, or as they say in Chinese: 活到老,学到老 (huó dào lǎo, xué dào lǎo), is something that we must embrace. Why? Well, first for practical reasons – our lifespan is just getting longer. So what we learnt in school – we come out of school in 2024, 25 or later; you have at least five decades ahead of you. Five decades where you are active professionally. Life is practicing – doing something in serious employment – and the skillsets that you have, three, four decades ago when you came out of school needs to be refreshed. Those who have the opportunity to do so should be given an opportunity to express yourself differently, test your boundaries, stretch you a little bit, and expand.

9. I would like to make a quick reference to one of the recipients this evening, Ms. Koh Seow Min. I know that her path wasn't linear, like many of those who go through lifelong learning, and I think she, herself, will tell you that it wasn't. She spent years as a public servant. Probably easy to stay on as a public servant, but she decided to challenge herself and go back to school, and decided that she should embrace something that is relevant today, perhaps unexplored because it's uncharted to go into human-AI design. She wants to build technology that people can trust, to harness technology for the good of people, and this was not what she or most people would have encountered in school some time ago because AI was not even invented at that point in time. To be able to do so now, thanks to the power of the scholarship, is an opportunity that I am sure Seow Min would cherish.

10. The other story that I would like to talk about is another of our recipients tonight, Ms. Seri Nursyakirah. I think she understands this more than others, if you look at the proposition that the path is rarely a straight one. She is nineteen, but I'm told that she lives with medical conditions that, on a hard day, can make it a struggle just to get out of bed. Not easy, let alone sit through a full day of coursework. Yet, strengthened by the power of the family around her and the village that supports her, she continues to press on and is pursuing a Work-Study Diploma in Architectural Building Information Modelling. So well done to both of you, as well as the others.

11. I would like to use these stories to illustrate the power of education and scholarship. It allows us to pay it forward. It allows us to better ourselves, but it also allows us to contribute to the overall good of Singapore. And I think that's the value of any education. It is more than just about yourself, and it is about giving back. To take a leaf out of Professor Eugene's speech earlier, there is a village that is around you, I think we see part of that village here tonight. It is important that we always understand and remember that it takes a village to do a number of things: to raise a child, to see a student through, and to support one another; and I think it is

important for that village to be acknowledged as well. I'm glad Professor Eugene did so tonight. I would also like to say thank you to that village – represented probably by family members here tonight – in supporting the student on the journey. Family is always important in whatever the endeavour is.

12. As we close off tonight, I want to leave you with one: that if you want to go fast, you go alone. But if you want to go far, then you go together. I think this scholarship, resting on the shoulders of giants or pioneers, paying it forward in the ways that we've articulated through the scholarship recipients that we see tonight, is our way of going far and going together. So, on that note, I want to say congratulations – not just to the recipients, but thank you very much to Tan Kah Kee, the members – for your foresight, your vision, and as well as generosity. Collectively, we can and we must, and we will make Singapore a much better place than it is today. Thank you very much.