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SPEECH BY YANG AMAT BERBAHAGIA
DATIN SERI DR. SITI HASMAH BT HAJI MOHD ALI
AT THE OFFICIAL LAUNCH OF A BIOGRAPHY
ON DATUK SERI RAFIDAH AZIZ
AT THE HOLIDAY VILLA HOTEL, SUBANG JAYA
ON THURSDAY, 13 NOVEMBER, 1997
AT 11.30 A.M

Zhou Mei, biographer of the book on YB Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, is a Singaporean who has many friends in Malaysia. I learnt that she had spent nearly a score years of her adult life in Malaysia. Although she no longer calls Malaysia home, it is not possible for her to sever her bond with Malaysia or the special regard she has for our country. It was here in the 1960s where she earned first her Bachelor degree and later, her Master in Economics. It was here in the 1970s where she first learnt the ropes of journalism.

2. In those days, people in Malaysia and in Singapore read the same edition of the Straits Times. In the early 1970s, after a month's familiarisation in the Singapore office of the Straits Times, Zhou Mei was put in charge of the business section of the Straits Times in Malaysia, which became the New Straits Times later. The business section of the Newspaper would evolve into the Business Times. Later, she was the editor of Malaysian Business, a monthly journal in the Berita Publishing stable. I am told that present today are some of her former press colleagues.

3. Although Zhou Mei left for Singapore in 1980 to continue her work in the print media there, she kept in touch with her friends across the causeway and as a journalist, she kept track of developments in Malaysia. While she has since left journalism behind, she says she will always consider herself a journalist.

4. To her, to take on the role of biographer has been an effortless switch. Her book on Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz is her third biography. It is not by chance that the subjects she has focused on are women. She has long noticed that for some reason or other, people seem to ignore or under-rate the contributions made by women to society, to nation-building. She felt it was not right. But instead of drum-beating to make her case, she chose to do her bit to fill the void.

5. Her first two biographies were on Singapore women. But the history of the two countries, Malaysia and Singapore, are so intertwined that there is inevitably a Malaysian connection in each. Thus, her first subject, Elizabeth Choy, a Singapore war heroine, was born in British Borneo, now Sabah, and had spent the first 20 years of her life on the Borneo island before leaving for Singapore for studies. Her second subject, Constance Goh, a regional pioneer in family planning, married a son of Penang, Dr Goh Kok Kee. It was the advance of Japanese soldiers in 1941 that led the Gohs to move south to Singapore.

6. Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz is the youngest of her subjects but the one she has known the longest: more than 30 years. As a journalist who specialised in economics issues, Zhou Mei hardly had the opportunity to meet women professionally. Datuk Seri Rafidah was one of the rare women whose field was relevant to Zhou Mei's professional interest. Over the years, the journalist had observed Rafidah's career development and apart from editorial and columns on the Malaysian economy and developments on the Asean front, she had also written features focusing on Rafidah. Her understanding of Rafidah grew as the years went by. Increasingly, she felt that Rafidah had an inspiring tale to tell, if only someone would record it.

7. Datuk Seri Rafidah's public face is well known to all of you. But there is Datuk Seri Rafidah's other self: as a wife and as a mother. The journalist saw in Datuk Seri Rafidah a believer and practitioner of universal time-tested values. While Datuk

Seri Rafidah has proven beyond the shadow of a doubt that she firmly believes in career women, she is at the same time a firm believer in the value of the family unit. The journalist saw Rafidah Aziz as a role model for not just women, not just for Malaysians but for all people. Datuk Seri Rafidah is a dynamic woman and is known for her strong personality who will take no-nonsense from anybody. She is one of the few women politicians who manages to remain in the Cabinet today. She is a gutsy lady, very capable and always keeps her officials on their toes. Her career started as an economics lecturer in the 1970's. Soon after she joined politics, and was the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Public Enterprises in 1976. She has been the Minister of Trade and Industry since 1987. She is well known not only among Malaysians but also internationally for her forthrightness and her ability to stand tall with her male counterparts.

8. There are some other aspects of Rafidah's character not known to many, which I've personally noticed. One, is that she loves ice cream for dessert and will make sure that she has it even at official dinners within or outside of the country, especially when icecream is not included in the menu! She is well known for this idiosyncrasy that in Russia she was called "polonar" - fat lady. In Tokyo, Prime Minister Hashimoto made sure she began her official courtesy call on him in his office with ice cream! To balance this addiction to ice cream and growing fat, Rafidah Aziz is also addicted to playing golf. She is a regular player and known to come out in style at the golf course with one set of colour from her cap, short, pants to her shoes, gold bag and even the Tee, on one day and in another colour on other days. She has many sets of these. Rafidah is said to preferably tee off with the men rather than with the ladies but tells off anybody who talks of business or transactions on the golf course.

9. And so the time was right for Zhou Mei to start on the biography. According to Zhou Mei, it had not been easy to record

a moving career, especially one who is always on the move. It certainly didn't help matters when one resides in Kuala Lumpur and the other in Singapore. But it was obvious that the writer did not give up.

10. I wish to congratulate the writer Zhou Mei for successfully overcoming a challenging project and I now take pleasure in launching Zhou Mei's biography on Rafidah Aziz entitled "Rafidah Aziz, Sans Malice" dedicated to friendship.
