



Orchids of Singapore: A Dream Within a Dream

Speech of the President of the Max Planck Society

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At the German Embassy to Singapore

April 20, 2026

Singapore

– Check against delivery –

Excellency, dear Ambassador,

Thank you very much for hosting us here today. We much appreciate your invitation.

Dear colleagues and guests,

Tonight I had a dream. I dreamt about my visit to Singapore two years ago. In my dream, I walk through the amazing Gardens by the Bay. I enter one of the incredible greenhouses, and admire the wonderful orchids. Suddenly, a gardener puts his hand on my shoulder and says: “Do you know that here in Singapore, orchids stand for three fundamental values?” I look at him and shake my head. “Let me explain,” he says, pointing to some of the most beautiful flowers.

“First, orchids are our national flowers, so – they stand for our identity.” Of course, I ask myself: What is our identity as scientists? Clearly, what unites us all is a shared, global language – the language of reason. But part of our identity is also our quest for excellence. The gardener looks at me: “What are you talking about, what does excellence mean?” To me, excellence means to ask big, open questions. It also means to do original science at the forefront of knowledge and in a variety of fields, from the natural to the social sciences, and once in a while – it even means to open up new fields. The gardener does not seem to be satisfied with my answer. “Is this really all, is this your identity?” I quickly add: No, excellence is more than that. Excellence also means that we share results openly, that we communicate the chances and the risks of our work, and that we maintain our integrity and strengthen trust in science.”

Now the old man slowly takes me to another room with ever more beautiful plants. “The second thing that orchids stand for, is our garden culture,” he says. Now, in my dream, I imagine our research as a big garden. And I ask myself: What is our culture in science? What kind of flowers do we want to grow? And what does it need to make these flowers bloom?



“Listen,” I say, “just like you gardeners, we as scientists will only succeed when we establish the right culture. Of course, we need equipment, infrastructure and support. But what we also need is the right culture, the right mindset, the right spirit.” “So what is this culture then?” he wants to know. “Well, we have to bring the best people together and give them freedom. We have to foster diversity and allow for different perspectives. And we must pass our knowledge and our values on to the next generation.” “I understand,” says the gardener, “tell me: is this the kind of culture that can foster discovery? And you can increase your chances for good luck, right?” “Yes, we call it serendipity!” He turns to me. “Whatever you call it, it is just like new variants of flowers that arise spontaneously, but this only happens when you grow them in a healthy ecosystem.” I am smiling, and I think to myself that those scientists who share an open science culture will find each other and collaborate across borders – often driven by their shared wish to address global questions together, such as climate change, the loss of biodiversity, or public health.

The gardener takes me to yet another beautiful spot. At this time, I really hoped that my dream would continue for just a little bit longer. “There is still a third aspect about orchids that is increasingly important. Here in Singapore orchids also stand for diplomacy.” I did not know this, but the gardener explained to me that since 1956 Singapore has the tradition of giving new orchid hybrids to special guests. From Princess Diana and Nelson Mandela to Kamala Harris – well over 300 people already obtained orchids named after them. “Next time, you should see the orchid collection in the Botanical Garden,” the gardener says with pride. “It is a flowering testament of Singapore’s global network.”

Suddenly, the gardener is gone. And my alarm bell rings.

Dear guests,

As I wake up, I am totally sure: Like Singapore’s orchid diplomacy, science diplomacy is a soft power. A soft power that we can use to build bridges between people. The key to this is personal interaction, like tonight, and it is multilateralism. At Max Planck, we want to work with the best around the world. And we want to be a reliable partner. This is why we continue to work with our American colleagues, especially now, when they face anti-science attacks by the new administration. But at the same time, we will expand our interactions with Asia, the most dynamic region of the world.

Dear friends,

A lot has happened since my visit here two years ago. At record pace, we started eight new Max Planck Centers in Asia. Last week, we opened two of them in China, in Beijing and in Shenzhen. And today, we opened two Centers here, together with NTU. The Center for Biocultural Worlding will examine the intricate interplay of biological and cultural diversity. And the Center for Data-driven chemistry will harness machine learning to accelerate chemical synthesis and its automation. Really, I think we are at the right spot. And we can learn from each other. For years, Singa-



pore has been a world leader in research, but also in education. I am sure there will be more opportunities to cooperate in the future, with NTU, but also with NUS and A*Star, and in case support from the NRF remains to be so strong.

Dear colleagues,

Today, you can buy orchids not only in Singapore, but all around the world. Did you know that this only became possible when varieties from different places were combined to obtain new ones that can withstand different conditions? By now you can guess that I take this as a symbol for the importance of international cooperation. Together we can do better, but not only that. If we combine our strengths, we can also become more resilient. And together we can protect what we love so much: To carry out our research with strong passion, in great freedom, and with the unwavering desire to advance humanity.

Thank you all, and best of luck for the future!