Speech by Mr Heng Swee Keat
Chairman of the National Research Foundation
at the Launch of Max Planck Centres on 20 April

Your Excellency Ambassador Bettina Fanghänel, Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany to Singapore,

Your Excellencies,

Professor Christian Wolfrum Deputy President and Provost of Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Esteemed guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great pleasure to join you today for the launch of Singapore's first two Max Planck Centres here at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Today marks a milestone for NTU, and more broadly, for the longstanding collaboration between Singapore and Germany in advancing research, education, and scientific excellence.

2 Germany is an important and valued partner for Singapore. We have built deep and trusted partnerships with leading German institutions, including the Technical University of Munich, the Fraunhofer Institutes, and now the Max Planck Society. From academic exchanges to joint research programmes, these German institutions have worked closely with Singapore with a shared focus on cutting-edge research with transformative potential and translating knowledge into meaningful societal impact. These areas are strategically important to Singapore as we strengthen our capabilities in fundamental science while ensuring relevance to long-term economic and societal needs.

3 Singapore seeks to be the nexus where research delivers real-world impact. The establishment of the Max Planck Centres at NTU is a significant step forward in this vision. The Max Planck Society is globally recognised for its commitment to frontier science and for fostering an environment where researchers are empowered to pursue bold ideas. By partnering with NTU and Singapore's wider research ecosystem, the Max Planck Society brings a distinctive institutional philosophy that values depth, autonomy and long-term inquiry.

4 Looking ahead, I am confident that these new centres - the Centre for Biocultural Worlding and the Centre for Data Driven Chemistry - will catalyse new ideas, enable novel forms of collaboration and drive meaningful scientific advances. Beyond research outcomes, they will enrich our wider scientific community, including students and early-career researchers, who will benefit from the training programs.

5 The Max Planck–Singapore Centre for Data-driven Chemistry reflects how the practice of science itself is evolving. While advances in chemistry continue to be made in laboratories around the world, translating discoveries into scalable, efficient and sustainable processes remains a challenge. This Centre addresses that challenge by

integrating artificial intelligence, automated experimentation, and chemical and process engineering within a single, closed-loop research framework. With the current uncertainties in the global supply of energy and petrochemical, and the need to tackle climate change, this Centre seeks to strengthen Singapore's contribution in chemical innovation and sustainability, and to develop innovative capacity to move quickly from discovery to deployment to achieve impact.

6 The second Centre, the Centre for Biocultural Worlding positions Singapore as a leader in interdisciplinary art–science research on environmental futures and biocultural knowledge. Building on the legacy of the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art, it brings together scholars from the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science with creative and scientific communities in Singapore. This interdisciplinary approach is vital as addressing complex challenges such as climate impact requires not just technical solutions, but cultural understanding of how diverse communities interact with their environment. With Singapore's multicultural context and leadership in urban sustainability, this Centre positions us uniquely to develop new frameworks for decision-making on environmental issues across the Asia-Pacific region.

7 Both Centres are designed as platforms for scientific breakthrough and talent development. They create pathways for young scientists to train in world-class environments, to work across disciplines, and to build international networks early in their careers. Through joint supervision, researcher exchanges, and structured training programmes, these interdisciplinary researchers are developed to be comfortable operating at the interface of science, technology and society while shaping the future of Singapore, the region and the world.

8 Singapore appreciates the leadership of the Max Planck Society in establishing the first Max Planck Centres in Southeast Asia, to serve as strategic gateway into the region. It reflects the Max Planck Society and Singapore's long-term commitment to develop trusted partnership in frontier and interdisciplinary research. While Singapore continues to invest significantly in research and development, what we invest in is a small fraction of what the whole world invests in. Partnership like this, with the Max Planck Society and the German government will enable us to tackle common and complex challenges together.

9 By investing in both platforms and people, Singapore and Germany are laying the foundations for collaboration that will endure well beyond the lifespan of any single project or funding cycle. This partnership allows us to pool expertise, share risk, and tackle problems at a scale and depth that no nation can address alone. It will also enable us to develop a network of like-minded scientists and entrepreneurs, committed to pursuing the common good. That is why what we are launching today matters.

10 In closing, I would like to extend my congratulations to the directors of the centres and the researchers from NTU, Max Planck Society, NUS and A*STAR. Your work exemplifies the spirit of collaboration and the pursuit of excellence that underpin this partnership. Together, Singapore and Germany are building a shared scientific future, one that advances knowledge, develops talent, and contributes meaningfully to societies around the world. Thank you.