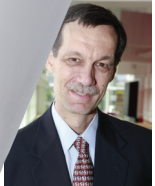
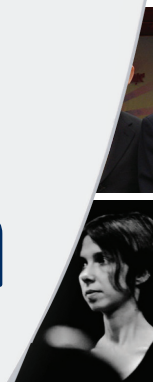


Singapore

# Insights from the Inside



Singapore

# **Insights from the Inside**

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Singapore

# Insights from the Inside

Editor: David Fedo



**Singapore  
International  
Foundation**  
for a better world

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# Foreword

TOMMY KOH

I congratulate the Singapore International Foundation (SIF) for launching this publication, *Singapore Insights from the Inside*. I am sure the publication will be a success. I am, therefore, pleased that SIF intends to launch edition 2.0 in two years' time.

Singapore has become Asia's most global city. A friend commented recently that Singapore is even more global than New York, London, Paris, Berlin and Tokyo. He reasoned that New York is too American, London too British, Paris too French, Berlin too German and Tokyo too Japanese.

In contrast, Singapore is part Chinese, part Malay, part Indian, part East and part West, and uniquely Singaporean. In the world of popular music, for example, all this mixing of cultures and civilisations has produced a composer like Dick Lee, who is equally at home in London, Tokyo, Hong Kong and Jakarta.

Singapore hosts a large international community. SIF has invited 31 members of this community, ranging from students, volunteers, short-term visitors, to professionals in both the non-profit and the corporate worlds, to contribute an essay each to this volume. I have enjoyed reading all the 31 essays as well as the insightful editorial by David Fedo which answers SIF's poser: What is Singapore to them? I was very pleased that the 31 essayists include five good friends: Sunanda K Datta-Ray, Joergen Oerstroem Moeller, Hiroshi Sogo, Marie Le Sourd and Janek Schergen.

Singaporeans are stingy with praise and generous with criticisms. In our cultural box, it seems to be the norm for employers not to praise their employees, parents not to praise their children and spouses not to praise one another. This extends to our attitude towards the nation's assets and virtues. It is, therefore, good for our foreign friends to remind us how lucky we are to live in a safe city, with great infrastructure, with full employment, with air we can breathe and water we can drink, with an efficient transport system, with good schools and doctors and hospitals, with no corruption and a strong rule of law and, most of all, with people of many races, colours and religions, living together as one harmonious family. The killing of Trayvon in Florida and the killer of Toulouse are incomprehensible to Singaporeans.

Singapore is, however, not perfect. I am grateful to our foreign friends, our loving critics, for pointing out our shortcomings and areas for improvement. The boorish behaviour of Singaporeans in our MRT, escalators and elevators is certainly one area which needs improvement. David Fedo is right when he wrote that, in some places in Singapore, the sidewalks for pedestrians are inadequate, and people with physical disabilities face many challenges. He welcomed the greater transparency of the Singapore government. He lamented that corporal punishment is a public relations disaster for Singapore.

On the whole, our foreign friends seem to have enjoyed their stay in Singapore. I am very glad that, for many of them, Singapore has played an important and positive role in their life journeys. I hope that they will always have a warm spot in their hearts for Singapore.

Tommy Koh  
Ambassador-At-Large  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs



The **Singapore International Foundation** makes friends for a better world. We build enduring relationships between Singaporeans and world communities, harnessing these friendships to enrich lives and effect positive change. Our work is anchored in the belief that cross-cultural interactions provide insights that strengthen understanding. These exchanges inspire action and enable collaborations for good. Our programmes bring people together to share ideas, skills and resources in areas such as healthcare, education, the environment, arts and culture, as well as livelihood and business. We do this because we believe we all can, and should do our part to build a better world, one we envision as peaceful, inclusive and offering opportunities for all. Find out more at [www.sif.org.sg](http://www.sif.org.sg).

# Preface

JEAN TAN

## What is Singapore?

We invited members of the international community to share their unique insights and personal experiences of Singapore so that more might know about Singapore and its people.

In this inaugural edition of *Singapore Insights from the Inside*, 31 friends of Singapore present a rich tapestry of perspectives on Singapore the cosmopolitan city-state.

These are stories about Singapore by the international community, for the international community – a smorgasbord of anecdotes on people, places and Singaporean idiosyncrasies too! The local community will also gain insights into *what Singapore is* to the international community. Written from the heart, the uninitiated will benefit from the authenticity of these narratives.

This new biennial publication is one of several initiatives by which the Singapore International Foundation promotes understanding to bridge and nurture enduring relationships between Singaporeans and world communities, harnessing friendships for a better world.

May you delight in the nuggets of insights as you discover these *heart truths* about Singapore and the Singapore community.

Jean Tan  
Executive Director  
Singapore International Foundation

# Introduction

DAVID FEDO

## Foreigners in Singapore

From the moment in 1819 that Thomas Stamford Bingley Raffles disembarked on the small and unprepossessing island of Singapura, then a remote outpost with a mix of some 1,000 Malay and Chinese fishermen, foreigners have played an important role in the growth, development and life of this tiny but increasingly influential country. Call them expatriates, laborers, domestic help or migrants, these members of Singapore's now-vital international community have helped transform the once ragtag village into a prosperous and envied city-state, and a place where, bolstered by a powerful economic engine, there is a diversity and richness of culture and quality of life that is eminently hospitable to both citizens and foreigners alike.

According to *The Straits Times* (December 7, 2011), foreigners now constitute up to 27 percent, or 1.39 million, of Singapore's current population of 5.18 million inhabitants. Amazingly, that number exceeds China's foreign population, which totals just 590,000 people out of a much larger population of 1.3 billion inhabitants.

Expatriates (from the Latin *expatriatus*, literally "those out of country or fatherland") – or those constituting the international community, whatever they may be called – are often major contributors to and have had a lasting impact on the history and legacy of the countries in which they have inhabited, for whatever length of time. Think of Marco Polo in China, Hannibal in Italy, Christopher Columbus in the New World, Sun Yat-sen in Singapore and elsewhere, and the great novelists Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in the United States and James

Joyce in Paris and Zurich. And speaking of writers, in the United States, the word ‘expatriate’ even today conjures up romantic musings over a contingent of American fictionalists – F Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein among many others – who went to live in France in the 1920s to find their authentic ‘voices’. Woody Allen’s latest film, *Midnight in Paris* (2011), lovingly perpetuates this infatuation.

### **Singapore’s Diversity and Character**

Of course, today’s foreigners in Singapore and around the globe are abroad for a wide range of reasons, and reflect lives and employment choices that are increasingly diverse. In this new collection of essays, *Singapore Insights from the Inside*, published by the Singapore International Foundation (SIF) in collaboration with Ethos Books of Singapore, our 31 contributors come from 19 countries and have found work in Singapore in a broad range of professions and occupations. They have also busied themselves in many of the leisure activities and have submitted themselves to the various amusements, parks and recreation venues and general entertainment offerings, of which there is a treasure trove (the Gardens by the Bay and two casino mega-complexes being the latest), that engage and bring pleasure to both Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans alike. Independent for less than 50 years, Singapore has in some ways marched ahead faster, and on more fronts, than any other comparable country, and many of our contributors are quick to salute this astonishing progress. Here is the UK writer Chris Davies (in “Celebrating Diversity”) capturing in the book what I think is the essential character of the country:

*But of course, modern Singapore is so much more than a grown-up child of the end of post-war colonialism. Always a polyglot place, founded on trade and commerce, it has transformed itself into one of the world’s great global cities. Singapore, as it always has, still straddles the crossroads of East and West. This does indeed invite some disdain – “Asia for Europeans” or even “Europe for Asians”, some of my non-Singaporean colleagues would say. I found such comments insulting (to Singaporeans and other Asians) and, after a while, irritating. It is certainly fair to say that Singapore, and most Singaporeans – at least in the*

*business world – do not wear their hearts on their sleeve. Singapore does not grab you round the throat like some other Asian cities. But give it a little time, and its charms become apparent, subtly, for me, being a virtue. And those charms are all the more beguiling for being rather unexpected.*

### **Not Perfect, but with Many Virtues**

Is Singapore perfect? Of course not. As an American, having lived in this country for almost five years, I still get annoyed, like so many other expatriates, by MRT travellers pushing to get onto trains before those leaving the carriages have gotten out. (The same is true of elevators.) In some places on the island, sidewalks for pedestrians are inadequate, and people with physical disabilities face many challenges. The Singaporean government has become much more transparent. Punishment by caning may make sense in the country's judicial system, but it is globally a public relations disaster.

Still, the contributors to this new SIF volume find many virtues in this island republic. Of course there is the fabulous cuisine, and the mostly splendid infrastructure (leaving aside the embarrassing MRT stoppages in December 2011), and the quality of the schools and universities, and the low crime rate, and the near lack of homelessness and unemployment. In addition, one should not overlook the apparent racial and religious harmony that exists in this country. And I myself have been the beneficiary of the extraordinary healthcare network, for which I will always be grateful to Singapore.

Our contributors cite these merits and dozens of others. Here are only some of the examples, more fully explored in the essays in this wide-ranging collection:

Rhoda Myra Garces-Bacsal (Philippines) writes that Singaporeans value the virtues of “hard work, discipline, and that constant striving toward excellence – [there is] absolutely no space for mediocrity”, which certainly helps explain the enormous progress made by the country in recent years (but which may be stressful to some), while Christine Edwards (Australia) claims that “Singapore has to be one of the most [globally dynamic] cities right now”, with entertainment options satisfying

the most seasoned appetites. Joergen Oerstroem Moeller (Denmark) finds Singapore's virtues in the ease by which new businesses can get launched in the republic: "Singapore's brand is efficiency, reliability, good corporate governance, good government, and the rule of the law [which makes it] attractive for multinational companies." And Dave Chua (Malaysia) elucidates the 'soul' of Singapore.

In a felicitous metaphor, Clifford Wong (New Zealand) equates Singapore to a carefully cultivated flower:

*If Singapore is anything, it is a hothouse flower. A flower that has grown between a rock and a hard place, sprouting despite early stormy weather. And ever since, that flower has been constantly tended to, monitored and cultivated. Each new leaf and petal is a conscious decision rather than an organic one. But cultivation is precisely why this flower has thrived and flourished despite the conditions.*

Over and over, our international community contributors refer to the resourcefulness, diligence and determination of Singaporeans to make (in my paraphrase of Voltaire in *Candide*) their Singapore "gardens", literally and figuratively speaking, grow.

A number of our writers – Janek Schergen (Sweden), Judith Kamm (US), and Marie Le Sourd (France), to name only three – extol the expanding (and one might even say exploding) arts scene in Singapore. Gregory Bracken (Ireland) admires the restored shophouses, but does not overlook the pleasures of the famous chilli crab delicacy; Jason Pomeroy (UK) praises Singapore as a "vertical garden city"; Ben Slater (UK) profiles the extraordinary lives of four Singaporeans; Ron Kaufman (US) gives us a fascinating account of his chance meeting with Lee Kuan Yew; Shirley Ngo (Canada) writes about the festive Chinese New Year and the somewhat enigmatic (to foreigners) "Hungry Ghost Festival".

Grace Lee (US) explains the differences between Americans and Singaporeans, and Hiroshi Sogo (Japan) does the same with Japanese and Singaporeans. Richard Hartung (US) and Ronald Stride (US) write movingly of the amazing Food from the Heart charity, which provides donated staples to nearly 72,000 needy individuals. One of the most delightful articles is Paul Rae's (UK) humorous analysis of the mystery of

why Singaporeans back into their parking spaces, even when there is no apparent need, at least to foreigners, to do so. I was touched by Edsel Tolentino's (Philippines) riveting portrait of the odd but remarkable "Uncle Eddie", a true Singaporean character, who battles back from adversity. Moch Kurniawan (Indonesia) tells us what it was like to be a minority on campus in Singapore, and Zhou Ji (China) speaks about his happy experience in Singapore as a Young Business Ambassador participant.

The above will give you some of the flavour of this rich book, but there is much more. As editor, I hope that you will discover, as I did, the genuine affection that our foreign contributors have for Singapore, their adopted country for some months or years, as well as their assessments of and insights into what makes this city-state so unique.

### **How Singaporeans View Foreigners**

But if our international contributors are overwhelmingly upbeat about living and working in Singapore, are Singaporeans themselves happy to see us here?

In Meira Chand's artful and in part fictionalised book, *A Different Sky* (2010), about pre- and post-World War II Singapore, Howard, a key Eurasian character in the novel, comes across a letter in *The Straits Times* complaining that "local-born races are denied the right of advancement to the highest posts and influential positions or equal remuneration with Europeans for the same work". In more recent years, the Singapore government seems to have sought a balance between the need to enhance the country's employment pool with talented and skilled "outsiders", while at the same time insuring that its citizens have the opportunity to assume a myriad of positions, including leadership roles, in the country's businesses and professions.

This calibration has not always been easy, and there are assuredly some Singaporeans who see foreigners as taking on too many of the plum jobs in the country, as well as simply making the MRT trains and restaurants too crowded. Despite these feelings, it is hard to find many foreigners in Singapore who perceive that they have been themselves treated rudely or coolly by its citizens. Happily, most of our authors, and

I suspect most non-natives living in this country, find that the majority of Singaporeans do extend to them a welcoming hand.

### **Acknowledgments**

For over 20 years, the Singapore International Foundation has been bringing Singapore to the world, and the world to Singapore. Through the sharing of insights, observations and experiences by the international community, *Singapore Insights from the Inside* will connect and promote understanding between the different people that make up the Singapore community, and Singaporeans with world communities. I wish to thank the SIF team for its dedication and determination in seeing this project through efficiently and in a timely fashion. Co-producing this publication has been Ethos Books of Singapore. This book, which could not have happened without the leadership of both parties, reflects the commitment of both to SIF's mission, to the benefit of both. I also have appreciated the assistance of my valued Wheelock College staff, Germaine Ong and K Rajeswari.

Finally a word of thanks to all of our contributors. Representing many countries, places and positions of employment, and a wide range of interests and experiences in Singapore, they all have sought to provide their personal insights into and observations of a country that was not their original home. I believe they have accomplished this task “from the inside”, wisely and interestingly, and sometimes with a sense of humour, too. I hope that you will agree.

Happy reading!

David Fedo  
Executive Director and Visiting Scholar,  
Wheelock College Center for International Education,  
Leadership, and Innovation, Singapore  
April 2012







# **Singapore: Heart and Soul**

# Born Again Asian

CLIFFORD WONG

There is a town called Taupo, a few hours north of the city where I grew up, on the North Island of New Zealand.

Taupo is primarily known for its lake, which is 605 km<sup>2</sup> in size. The lake, without a doubt, is beautiful and chock-full of trout, yachts and activity. Once a year there is a bike race around Lake Taupo, in which the many participants – social and professional – start and finish in Taupo, heading in an anti-clockwise direction around the lake. For 160 km, the cyclists skirt the shore and cycle over the undulating hills and the always scenic terrain. Most times, the riders are pedalling too frantically to notice the great expanse of shimmering water on their left and with crowded trees, while bristling shoulder to shoulder with the jostling local media on their right.

## **Singapore is Small**

When I first heard of Singapore, the imagery that seized me was that it was a country of such small geographic dimensions, it could fit within Lake Taupo. Knowing this, I would picture a giant's gristly hand hovering over Singapore, swooping, digging deep and plucking the land mass out of Southeast Asia. Clumps of soil would be falling between monolithic fingers, and the hand would carry Singapore over Australia, the Pacific Ocean and bring it to hover, casting a shadow over the centre of the North Island of New Zealand. And then the hand lets go and Singapore is dropped into Lake Taupo.

Imagine the splash.

Like a large Chinese dumpling dropped into a bowl of soup.

After almost a decade living in Singapore, I know that it is small no longer. Singapore has grown, literally and substantively, in my eyes and on the world scene. Some people refer to Singapore as the little red dot, but it is not a blip on the world's radar. It is many things at once.

### **Hothouse Flower**

I am in the Marine Parade Public Library.

I pick up a business magazine and browse through a few articles. One is about legal and financial services, and touts Singapore as an alpha city with excellent infrastructure, year on year economic growth and the gateway to Southeast Asia.

I turn to my left and a travel magazine catches my eye. One of the phrases on the cover, in cool white font, proclaims Singapore as a top luxury getaway destination.

If Singapore is anything, it is a hothouse flower. A flower that has grown between a rock and a hard place, sprouting despite early stormy weather. And ever since, this flower has been constantly tended to, monitored and cultivated. Each new leaf and petal is a conscious decision rather than an organic one. But cultivation is precisely why this flower has thrived and flourished despite the unforgiving conditions.

It's another balmy tropical evening as I walk through the manicured streets of this modern Shangri-La. I am reminded of its history and how so many people of such diverse backgrounds are able to live in this small city-state. I walk through the old neighbourhoods and through the shadows of two- and three-storey *Peranakan* shophouses with their exquisite Straits styling. Almost suddenly, the startling modern Singapore skyline comes into view, with looming skyscrapers, skyparks and rooftops. But it is not these iconic buildings and engineering marvels that interest me. It is the fact that during my evening stroll, I have walked past mosques, churches, temples. To me, this seldom happens anywhere else in the world. That is what I truly appreciate.

### **Yong Tau Foo and Chilli, Please**

I used to dream of racks of lamb and well-seasoned steaks. But that has all changed since arriving in Singapore. The local food scene has played the mad scientist to my docile taste-buds, which have not just been awakened, but brought to life in the most electrifying way. I have moved from the bland to the big band of spices, chillies and hot herbs that highlight each meal, and I cannot go back.

Besides the gourmet dining and sumptuous buffets that Singapore has in spades, it is the food courts and hawker centres that really capture the essence of Singaporean eating culture. These are the melting pots of so much good food and of so many different races. Rows of stalls with owners who roll their *poppiah*, lather their *rojak*, pull their *teh*, flip their *prata*, assemble their *nasi padang*, serve their chicken rice and brew their *laksa*. And, hallelujah, everything comes with chilli!

Like the old Hokkien saying, the knives and forks striking the plates and of chowing down the food sound like clapping thunder and falling rain. If that is the case, it's always a monsoon at a hawker centre.

### **Born Again Asian**

When you arrive in Singapore, the first thing you notice is the heat. Though the temperature is what leaves the biggest impression on most visitors, it is the warmth of the people and their customs that are also part of my Chinese ancestry, which stays with me.

Growing up in New Zealand, my mother would make us celebrate Chinese New Year – it was her way of reaching back to her own heritage and passing it on to us. As children, it was difficult for us to appreciate the occasion and its traditions, especially since our environment was more geared towards Christmas and rugby.

Coming to Singapore has been a homecoming of sorts. Learning about the tossing of *yu sheng* (or *lo hei*) during Chinese New Year, the giving of red packets and oranges – all these

traditions and more used to be a faint echo in my life, but now reverberate within me.

Singapore is my home and the people, my own. The compass within me has shifted and I have been reoriented by the orient. I am now less an Aries and more a Dragon of the Chinese zodiac. I have planted roots in this hothouse and I am now a born again Asian.

**CLIFFORD WONG**

Clifford Wong is ethnically Chinese, a New Zealander and a Permanent Resident of Singapore. He did not intend to live in Singapore, only meaning to visit his younger brother for a week. After almost a decade, he finally realised Singapore is his home, when one day, while watching on TV the Singapore team play in the Youth Olympic Games football tournament, he asked “Are we winning?” An avid sportsman, he has also represented Singapore in touch football, loves muay thai, and constantly seeks new adventures with his native Singaporean wife.

# A Haven in The Little Red Dot: Home Away from Home

RHODA MYRA GARCES-BACSAI

*"I long, as does every human being, to be at home wherever I find myself."*

*~ Maya Angelou*

It was our first trip away from our home country, the Philippines, and to say that we did not know what to expect from Singapore would be an understatement. We were warned about the usual things: do not chew gum, do not spit on the sidewalks, avoid jaywalking, be extremely cautious of controversial issues and do not openly discuss them in public because, among others, Singapore is a 'fine' city (or rather the infamous 'city of fines') after all.

## **Initial Impressions and the Multi-Coloured Layers of Singapore**

The first thing that struck me, and my then 6-year-old daughter and my husband, was how clean everything seemed to be. Even the trees, no matter their shape and size, seemed to be gnarled in a pretty uniform manner – trimmed into being just so. I understand how others might be uncomfortable with the quiet, the tidy lines, and the clearly-delineated structures, but it was something that we welcomed and, in fact, yearned for. Things made sense; I felt a sense of comfort and safety that I have never found anywhere else (and I managed to visit more than ten countries after living in Singapore for a little over three years), and I am breathing fresh air

oozing out from the greens that surround my university.

I came to Singapore because I felt that burning hunger to be challenged further – to test my limits and stretch my boundaries. I needed to start all over again, rework everything that I thought I have learned in the face of a totally different social reality and context, and earn the faith and trust of my teacher-students, my colleagues, my collaborators – things which are not very easy to come by.

Despite all this, my equanimity has allowed me to be gracious towards things I (sometimes still) fail to understand, to smile bemusedly at startlingly low expectations from someone coming from a developing country (note to self: there's nowhere to go but up), and has permitted me to see glimpses of honourable and kind intentions of various people I come across.

Notwithstanding cultural differences, it became very clear to me that there are several things that Singapore clearly valued: hard work, discipline, and that constant striving towards excellence – with absolutely no space for mediocrity. Being an educator on giftedness and talent development, I embrace this with bursts of radiance and passion. I also came to Singapore at a point in my life when I knew my place in the larger scheme of things and my own worth as an individual, an educator, a psychologist, a mother, a friend, a wife. There was that solid – yet transient and slightly luminous – sense of self I could come home to within me, providing me with foresight, humility, and the infinite possibilities that this country seemed to be offering in various strands of life, art, and beauty.

No doubt, challenges did come – one after another – all packed with deadlines (to beat the deadlines), donned in appropriate attire, and executed in flawless fashion (no room for errors). And I literally felt myself evolving – I learned how to play hopscotch with a blindfold on – tempering my passion and harnessing my creative energies towards goal-directed activities. And I am grateful that each kindling spark of an idea has been affirmed, encouraged, and supported in various ways by colleagues, students (who



are teachers themselves), and friends. On the whole, I feel that Singapore has been kind to me and my family – despite the initial struggles, the occasional misunderstandings, and the inevitable cultural stereotyping.

### **Books, Basketball, and Theatre**

Being a celebrated geek, one of the things I love most about Singapore is its libraries. I know that I won't be able to stop talking about the books, books, books here in Singapore as soon as I begin. While there are quite a number of initiatives to encourage reading among young people, the test-driven culture, high-stake academic assessments that the students need to prepare for, leave them little space for reading that fills one's senses, allowing them to taste the texture of the word, and affording the book to speak to them in its fluttery-leaves-flipping way. There is discomfort in layered ambiguity, multi-coloured abstractions, and cacophony of voices; there seems to be a pragmatic need to once again form lines, spaces-in-between, and definitive answers to well-considered and logical questions.

Yet, as I walk through the corridors of the well-tended, bright, ridiculously well-stocked libraries, my hands running along a number of rare titles that I am just dying to read (either for myself or to my daughter), I feel comforted that Singapore's infrastructure allows that space for passion for the written word to gradually emerge – just go to your community library and you shall literally be taken to a visual smorgasbord enough to fill one's palate. Yes, there are selected books that may be banned or unavailable in Singapore, but these are few and far between, and these days easily acquired through Amazon or Book Depository.

I also feel that my husband has found his little corner here in Singapore, given his daily basketball games (almost ritual-like in its consistency) with students from the university. I often kid him that he knows more people than I do. He has recaptured his youthful energies through games played with the people on campus and reunited with his first real love – basketball. I am also happy that Singapore has taken my daughter under its wings. Some of my

colleagues spoil her, she gets first dibs on seats on MRT trains, strangers would approach her and give her sweets and little trinkets, especially during local events/festivities. I know very few countries that value children in this way. She has space to play, she gets to know a lot of people from different countries, and she enjoys the vibrant theatre scene – both at the Esplanade (one of our favourite places here) and annual theatre events targeted for children’s delectation and enjoyment.

### **Transients, Gypsies, and Fleeting Rootedness**

*At the college where I teach, I'm surrounded by circus people. We aren't tightrope walkers or acrobats. We don't breathe fire or swallow swords. We're gypsies, moving wherever there's work to be found. Our scrapbooks and photo albums bear witness to our vagabond lives: college years, grad-school years, instructor-mill years, first-job years. In between each stage is a picture of old friends helping to fill a truck with boxes and furniture. We pitch our tents, and that place becomes home for a while. We make families from colleagues and students, lovers and neighbors. And when that place is no longer working, we don't just make do. We move on the place that's next. No place is home. Every place is home. Home is our stuff. As much as I love the Cumberland Valley at twilight, I probably won't live there forever, and this doesn't really scare me. That's how I know I'm circus people.*

*– Cathy Day from “The Circus in Winter”*

There are many transients in Singapore; given its competitive edge, high cost of living laced with must-dos or should-haves, there is a high rate of turnover in various fields/disciplines. It actually speaks to the gypsy in me, thus the quote I cited above. Most of the expatriates in Singapore also seem to naturally gravitate towards one another as all of us struggle with being neither here nor there – the boundaries of what signifies one and the other being somewhat tenuous.

One thing I realised, though, is that the tangibles – the things you buy, your house, your car, the stuff that you collect through the years – might come and go in sealed boxes, but you ultimately live with yourself, that which you bring with you wherever you may go. It becomes important, then, to not only make friends with the community in which you currently belong, but also to be a friend to yourself, and to find that sense of home within. Then, it would not matter where your geographical boundaries are, because you have established a sense of who you are relative to the rest of the world, wherever you may be.

### **RHODA MYRA GARCES-BACSAI**

Dr Rhoda Myra Garces-Bacsal is a Teacher Educator and Coordinator of the Bachelor's and Masters Programme in Gifted Education at the National Institute of Education in Singapore. She came to Singapore in July 2008. Her research interests include psychology of artists, socioemotional concerns of the gifted and talented, identification of the disadvantaged gifted, experiences of flow among creatives, and bibliotherapy. She also has a website ([www.gatheringbooks.org](http://www.gatheringbooks.org)) on children's literature and young adult fiction.

# Volunteering in Singapore

RICHARD HARTUNG

I've been a volunteer with non-profits in Singapore since I arrived at the end of 1992. And while I learned about Singapore in the business world, I learned perhaps even more from working with these non-profits and have developed friendships that will last for many years to come.

When I worked for an American multinational in my initial years in Singapore, it was easy to become involved in American community organisations. I served with the American Chamber of Commerce, for example, and eventually became vice-chairman. The longer I stayed here, though, the more I've ventured into other opportunities.

## **The Jane Goodall Institute (Singapore)**

One of the most fascinating volunteer experiences I've had evolved from a business trip to Northeast Asia in the late 1990s. A former colleague living in Taiwan asked if I could help with arrangements in Singapore for renowned primatologist and conservationist Dr Jane Goodall. It was easy to help, and I set up her first-ever video-conference in 2002. I eventually met her when she visited Singapore, for the first time in 2004, to be the keynote speaker at a conference, and then thought it unlikely I'd see her again.

In 2006, out of the blue, I received a phone call from the former colleague asking if I could help "just a little" with her next visit to Singapore. Within days, I somehow became the schedule

coordinator for her upcoming whirlwind visit and then volunteered as her chauffeur when she attended meetings and speaking engagements. She has a gift for story-telling, and her tales of people “taking action” were infectious.

After Dr Jane left, a small group of us decided to take action, and we set up a branch of the Jane Goodall Institute (JGI) here to support conservation and the establishment of green groups in schools. And it was then that we found out more about the challenges and benefits of setting up a non-profit in Singapore.

It turns out, for example, that the Registry of Societies requires a majority of the ‘Committee Members’ in any organisation that promotes human rights, environmental rights or animal rights to be Singapore citizens. JGI’s mission is to promote caring for animals and the environment, so we needed lots of Singaporeans. A core group of Singapore citizens, permanent residents like myself, and a few foreigners quickly stepped up to serve on the board and eventually registered JGI Singapore in 2007.

We were also looking for funding, and that’s when we learned about another benefit of living here – the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre (NVPC) has a New Initiative Grant specifically to fund new initiatives. We discussed our plans with NVPC, and they suggested that we be even more ambitious. We submitted a grant proposal and eventually received funds that carried us through the early days of JGI in Singapore.

As momentum grew, we asked Dr Jane to come back for another visit in 2007, and she agreed. We set up visits to schools, scheduled a keynote address for her at a conference, arranged a meeting with a minister, and even organised a parade in the Botanic Gardens that attracted nearly a thousand students, all dressed up as animals. From that simple beginning, JGI has grown and expanded its reach to include activities such as primate research and education.

### **Food from the Heart**

Another organisation I’ve volunteered with is Food from the Heart

(FFTH). In 2002, an Austrian couple saw bakeries throwing away bread at the end of the day, and thought it would be far better if that bread went to voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) that needed food for their beneficiaries. That was how FFTH came about.

By the time I volunteered to help out in 2005, over 1,700 other volunteers were delivering bread from nearly 200 bakeries to VWOs seven days a week. I continue to pick up and deliver bread when FFTH needs a stand-in for someone who can't make it to a bakery on the assigned day. I've delivered bread to HDB flats, homes for the elderly, orphanages and other locations I'd seldom seen despite my long stay in Singapore. And I've watched as FFTH grew to its current strength today, in which it also provides food supplies for needy families and even toys for children during the holidays.

Along with volunteering at JGI and FFTH, I've served with other non-profits. I've led activities and events for my alumni clubs, for example, and I've volunteered with one that supports microfinance institutions in Asia.

### **The Benefits of Volunteering**

Having been so involved in the non-profit community, I've been fortunate to meet many other volunteers along the way. While my focus is more on education and conservation, the people I've met have interests ranging from pre-school education for low-income families or support for the elderly, to feeding migrant workers or supporting the visually handicapped. Whatever their interest, there's a need they can serve.

While it would be easy to come up with a multitude of excuses not to volunteer, I believe it's important to give back to the community, and non-profits have been flexible with regard to the time I can contribute. Even though I travel frequently for business, for example, the non-profits understand if I miss a meeting when I'm away. And while volunteering has meant giving up precious time with family, it also provided a positive role model for my children.

Even as I've tried to do my part to give back to the community,

I've also received a multitude of benefits. I've had fascinating conversations with everyone from primary school students to government ministers, visited new places, made friendships that will endure for many years, and learned lots about fields like education and conservation. And along the way, I've developed an even stronger attachment to Singapore.

I've also become an advocate for volunteerism in Singapore. Whether it's telling stories about how easy it is to help non-profits or writing about organisations for the media, I let people I meet know about the benefits of volunteering. Even if they can only give a little time around busy work schedules, volunteers can still make a tremendous difference.

For me, the experiences and opportunities in volunteering are a key part of what makes Singapore so attractive and what has kept me here so long.

## **RICHARD HARTUNG**

Richard Hartung is a consultant who works with financial services companies on payments strategies, and a freelance writer who writes regularly for various publications. He actively volunteers with community organisations, including the Jane Goodall Institute (Singapore) and the American Club of Singapore. Richard has a BA from Pomona College, an MBA from Stanford University, is proficient in Japanese, and has lived in Singapore since 1992.

# Finding the Singapore Soul

DAVE CHUA

As someone fortunate enough to have lived overseas, it is inevitable to compare Singapore with other cities. One particular point, often repeated, annoys me. Besides the usual remarks one hears about Michael Fay and the ban on selling chewing gum, one of the oft-repeated comments is that Singapore has no soul.

I suppose it is annoying, like hearing that a friend is lacking humanity.

## **Measuring the Soul: Is it Possible?**

What kind of soul does a city have, really? It is hard to quantify what this means, being one of the vague fallbacks of the Singapore critic.

For a city, I feel that it means a kind of self-examination, and I do not mean in terms of statistics. It is a matter of looking at its own unique entities, traits and special qualities, and a willingness to tap into its conscience and confront questions of its own existence.

I think one could spend hours trying to defend or rip apart that statement, but as a writer who finds himself writing about Singapore and Singaporean life, my reply is that yes, Singapore has a soul, even if it is not always easy to perceive. Like so many immaterial things, you have to look hard to find it, and each individual would have his own response.

I believe you can find it in the small entrepreneurial shops one occasionally stumbles upon, where the individual or the little



is more important than the collective or monolithic. Shops like BooksActually, Objectifs or The Pigeonhole, which strive to be something more than the mundane or making a quick Singapore dollar. These are shops that exist because of the passion of their founders, who strive to offer something not in the regular landscape of look-alike retailers.

It can be found in events such as the monthly flea market, known as MAAD, where one can find scores of illustrators, and excellent ones to boot, waiting to paint a portrait for ten dollars.

### **The Poetry of Singapore**

To me, it can, most of all, be found in the poetry of Singaporean writers, such as Alvin Pang, Alfian Bin Sa'at, Lee Tzu Pheng and so many others. They examine what it means to be Singaporean, and place a mirror for Singaporeans to peer into.

Poetry is an underappreciated art form here, but if there needs to be proof of the city's understanding of itself, it can be found here, in such poems as Daren Shiau's *How to Fly a Singapore Flag*, in which the last stanza asks:

*"- we cannot decide how a flag is to be flown;  
we can only raise it, give it winds  
and let it make change, on its own"*

I have seen Singaporeans reduced to tears when reading Alfian's visceral *Singapore, You Are Not My Country*, a blistering Howl-like poem that rages about Singaporean identity and existence.

*"You are not a campaign you are last year's posters.  
You are not a culture you are poems on the MRT.  
You are not a song you are part swearword part  
lullaby.  
You are not Paradise you are an island with pythons."*

In Lee Tzu Pheng's poem *Singapore River*, she questions the damage that the country's incessant need for progress has inflicted on its heritage:

*We have cleaned out  
her arteries, removed  
detritus and slit,  
created a by-pass  
for the old blood.  
Now you can hardly tell  
her history.*

In quieter moments are poems such as Arthur Yap's *2 mothers in a HDB playground* that offers a look into Singlish and captures aspects of Singapore life. And this is just scratching the surface of the many poems, in all four languages, that lay out the questions of being Singaporean.

Where better to find evidence of what is going on under the city's addiction to statistics and figures? Beyond the touristy pictures, the shopping centres and the eating spots we constantly see featured, there are many poets here who look beneath the skin of the country, and are the voice of its conscience.

Still, discussions of the soul are always futile, and it is hard to convince someone without the person having experienced it. It is indeed a pity that these poets are not more widely read by students and adults here.

I firmly believe that Singapore does have more of a 'soul' than might be apparent. Rather than always putting on a front of mechanical efficiency, perhaps it would be appropriate to celebrate and study the small things, in particular the words, which make this city unique.

**DAVE CHUA**

Dave Chua was born in Malaysia and came to Singapore at the age of ten. He was educated in schools in Singapore and later studied at the University of California, Berkeley. An award-winning author, Dave now resides in Singapore as a freelance writer and has previous working experience in the media industry.

# A Hugely Successful Charity Story

RONALD STRIDE

In November 2002, an Austrian couple, Christine and Henry Laimer, read an article in *The Straits Times* about the amount of unsold food that was “junked” each day in Singapore by bakeries and fast-food outlets. From this article sprang an idea that was to grow over the ensuing years to become a potent force for doing good in the community – Food from the Heart (FFTH).

## Getting Started

Christine and Henry wondered if the discarded food could be systematically picked up and distributed to needy families in Singapore. Consequently, the Laimers came up with a way to collect the unsold loaves from bakeries at closing time and deliver them to nearby charities. Initially, there were 100 volunteers who picked up the bread in their own cars and vans. By February 2003, this humble undertaking had quickly grown to 37 outlets owned by four bread companies and deliveries to 40 children’s and old folks’ homes. The number of volunteers grew to 400. These volunteers were students, professionals, blue-collar workers, housewives and retirees; the vast majority were Singaporeans.

It became apparent that a more advanced method was needed to track collections and deliveries as the operation expanded. Hence, a computerised system was developed by Fujitsu Asia to record SMS messages from volunteers indicating the amount of bread collected. Fujitsu Asia was kind enough to donate the system which had cost \$100,000 to develop and install.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of FFTH's early days was the overwhelming response from Singaporeans who had never volunteered their time before. This outpouring of kindness defied the generally accepted belief that Singapore did not have a tradition or culture of volunteering. It showed that a worthy cause can attract grassroots support even in a society where the government is very visible. Another key element in FFTH's success was the professional way in which the charity was run from its inception.

By mid-2003, the volunteers were collecting from 70 bakeries and delivering to 68 welfare homes each day. The volume of bread collected grew from 6,800 kg to 11,000 kg per month. An office was rented in Goldhill Centre on Thomson Road and three full-time employees were hired to manage the large pool of volunteers, track collections and deliveries, and sign up more bakeries. Another volunteer resource, consisting of 50 CityCab drivers, signed up as volunteers to deliver bread or ferry fellow volunteers to the delivery points.

### **Becoming Established**

Ever ambitious, the Laimers then turned their attention to processed foods and approached 50 food companies for stocks such as test batches, dented canned food and items near expiry. Also, during this time, the need for funding became more acute, so the Laimers put their energies into finding sponsors and donors to help fund the operation. Events such as a theatre show, a charity fund-raising gala and other ideas were explored to raise money. In June 2005, FFTH's first charity gala dinner was held at the Island Ballroom at Shangri-La Hotel. The then President Nathan and Mrs Nathan graced the event with their presence. Since that initial gala, the Passion Ball has become one of the major fundraising and social events of the year.

By 2005, FFTH was supporting families facing financial woes by distributing bread and non-perishable food items directly through six self-collection centres which had tied up with Residents' Committees and Family Service Centres. These goodie bags with

basic food items are geared to the size of the family receiving the packages. Items include packets of instant noodles, bags of rice, cooking oil, cereal, condensed milk and the like.

In addition, through collaboration with neighbourhood schools, goodie bags were distributed to families with school-going children. The schools have proven to be very reliable and trustworthy partners as the principals and teachers are very concerned about their students' welfare. It also demonstrates that if the pressing problem of having food on the table is solved, the family situation generally improves, domestic violence abates, children are able to attend school on a regular basis, and their performance at school improves as well.

During this time, a project involving the giving and receiving of toys among students was launched. This evolved into a new annual program, Toys from the Heart, whereby toys are collected and distributed to needy neighbourhood school children in Singapore as well as affiliated charities in Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia. Monthly birthday bashes were also held in which corporate sponsors and their staff brought gifts for the birthday kids in welfare homes.

### **Extraordinary Growth and Stability**

In the ensuing years, FFTH has continued to expand its operations. Today, FFTH is a well-established organisation with an office in Goldhill Shopping Centre, seven full-time staff, one warehouse, three delivery vans with drivers, and an operating budget of over \$1.3 million from sponsors, donations and fundraising events. These donors and sponsors are from a diverse group, including individuals, local and foreign companies, as well as income from events such as the Passion Ball and Shanghai Yue Opera.

Altogether, 1,700 active volunteers and staff deliver Food Goodie Bags to over 7,200 needy individuals each month directly through 23 self-collection centres and 16 schools. In addition, 28,000 kg of bread are distributed to an astounding 14,300 beneficiaries in 150 welfare homes in Singapore. In the Toys from

the Heart programme, more than 7,000 toys are given annually to underprivileged children from over 26 neighbourhood schools.

My first involvement in Food from the Heart was through attending the Passion Ball and my wife's association with the programme. Two years ago, the Leimers asked me to join their Board of Directors and I accepted with enthusiasm. Little did I realise that this would lead to my becoming Chairman in November 2011 as the Leimers, quite unexpectedly, had to return to Austria after 15 years in Singapore. However, they remain the heart and soul of FFTH to recipients, volunteers and sponsors.

### **Lessons Learned**

The Leimers proved that there is much unlocked potential for volunteering in many people, given the right situation. Also, foreigners can make a lasting impact on a society not their own. Finally, the success of FFTH demonstrates what vision, dedication and hard work can achieve!

### **RONALD STRIDE**

Ronald Stride has been the President of the American Association of Singapore for the past four years. He is also Chairman of the Board of Supervisors of Afghanistan International Bank and Chairman of the Board of Directors of the charity, Food from the Heart. Ronald is also active in other business, community and charitable organisations in Singapore and serves on several businesses' boards of directors. Ronald and his wife have lived in Singapore for 25 years.

# The Five-Foot-Way

GREGORY BRACKEN

## Arriving in Singapore

I moved to Singapore in 1997 to work as an architect. The city-state became my home, on and off, for the next ten years. Originally from Ireland, I had previously been based in Bangkok before deciding it was time to make my move down south. The late 1990s was a time when the job market for foreigners in Singapore was in transition. Previously dominated by the lucrative expatriate contract system – which paid for lavish perks such as flights home for whole families and children’s school fees – this was a time when it was also possible, as I did, to simply visit the city, look up the classified ads in *The Straits Times*, and apply for a job.

Moving to the city marginally ahead of the financial meltdown that affected Asia from the summer of 1997 onwards, I was lucky enough to find myself in a fascinating position, with an excellent salary (and, of course, Singapore’s low tax rate). Not yet thirty, I was living on the other side of the world from where I grew up, earning far more than I could back in Europe, and engaging in real work that saw my designs move from sketch to site and construction – sometimes within days.

Compared to Bangkok, Singapore was Asia lite. The Thai capital, though a wonderfully fascinating place, suddenly seemed like a distant muggy fever dream compared to the fresh, green openness of the equatorial paradise I had moved to.

## The Shophouse

The company I worked for was a medium-sized local firm, long established, and engaged in medium- to large-scale jobs all over the region (though work became limited to Singapore once the crisis began to bite). We worked from a charming little shophouse just off Selegie Road, close enough to stroll to Orchard Road for lunch, as well as a stone's throw from the fragrant fascinations of Little India, or the more colonial-style entertainment that were beginning to pop up between Bras Basah Road and the Padang – such as old schools that were being renovated into art galleries and shopping malls, breathing new life into what had traditionally been a somewhat staid part of the city.

The shophouse was cool and airy and full of polished wood. The front door even had a *pintu pagar*, which always reminded me of spaghetti westerns; I half expected to see a tall cowboy push his way through and snarl for a shot of red-eye. The street on which the shophouse was located was a particularly well-preserved one. It was also still mainly residential. Within a few days of starting work, I was walking back to where I had parked my car and was puzzled by a strange clicking sound. I gave it no further thought until I heard it again a few days later. From then on, I grew increasingly curious as to what this peculiar sound could be. Rapid and supple, it sounded like someone trailing a stick across a pebbly beach. Sometimes, the clicking would be accompanied by gusts of raucous laughter or just slightly less ear-piercing conversations in guttural Chinese, most likely Hokkien.

## Mahjong

Having been brought up in rural Ireland, the last thing I wanted to be seen doing was peer in through an open window. Tantalising and all as this sound was, to give in to vulgar curiosity would never do. What if somebody should see? Eventually, curiosity did win the day and I steeled myself to glance into the window the next time I heard this mysterious sound. And what did I see? A group of four elderly Chinese, three males and a female, all wearing pyjamas, sitting around a wooden table and rummaging through a pile of



what looked like oversized sugar cubes. I hurried on, none the wiser.

I asked at the office the next day and was told that they were playing mahjong – the clicking sound was the tiles being ‘washed’ in preparation for another game. The next few evenings saw me linger as long as I dared to take in this remarkable scene. It seemed like something from another era: the aged and venerable Chinese folks divvying up the pieces and laying them out on their trays with a rapidity and assuredness that numbed the mind.

### **The Five-Foot-Way**

As a part of their regular evening ritual, the mahjong players and I came to know one another, at least enough to nod and smile to one another. What was fascinating to me about this encounter was the feeling of intimacy a passer-by could experience with those inside the house from being on its five-foot-way. You were neither in the house nor quite out of it, and it was only as I got to know other surviving enclaves of shophouses, in places like Little India, Emerald Hill Road, Chinatown and some of the more suburban parts of the city where they survive, like Katong, that I began to realise the sheer versatility of this space.

Generally credited as the invention of Singapore’s founding father, Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, the shophouse’s most remarkable feature is its five-foot-way. This narrow, covered walkway runs along the front of all houses and provides shelter to passers-by. Widely constructed throughout Southeast Asia from the 1820s onwards, it was typically, though not always, business premises with residential accommodation above. Although usually two to three storeys, higher ones can occasionally be seen in the city. Traditionally, the width of the shophouse depends on the length of timber available (usually five metres), and the five-foot-way itself is about 1.5 metres wide.

The ready intimacy this space provides, nestling between the street and a house’s interior, was at first startling to me. So startling, in fact, that I didn’t even register what was going on until

a few months had passed. Finally, my eyes began to open and I got an insight into the rich and nuanced uses of space in Asia, where distinctions between public and private are less clearly drawn than, say, in the West. The fact that it was such a versatile typology also helped to foster its multi-valency – acting as home, shop, *kopitiam* and restaurant, as well as, increasingly, office.

During my last trip back to Singapore, I went out for dinner with a friend. We chose one of those fabulous seafood places just off Beach Road, all fluorescent lighting, formica-topped tables and wobbly plastic stools. For a couple of dollars, you can enjoy the best chilli crab this side of Suez. And even though I didn't get to hear any mahjong tiles being washed over the sound of the happy eating, the blurred boundary between interior and exterior was still there in all its mysterious intensity. And around us, the sounds and smells of the wider city, home to the five-foot-way and its remarkable mix of inside and out, old and new.

Long may it continue.

## GREGORY BRACKEN

Dr Gregory Bracken was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1968, and is currently a lecturer at the Architecture Faculty of the Technical University of Delft in the Netherlands. He worked as an architect in Singapore from 1997 to 2000 and has written and illustrated a number of guides to the cities of East and Southeast Asia. He is also a Research Fellow at Leiden University's International Institute for Asian Studies. He lives in Amsterdam.





**Onward  
Singapore!**



# The Singapore Frontier

CHRISTINE EDWARDS

Fleeing the prospect of a hugely expensive renovation of our inner-city terrace in Sydney and a dull job to boot, my mister and I arrived in Singapore in 2007. We had no real idea where we were headed, and apart from its war-time history, famous efficiency and staid reputation, we knew very little of the island-state of Singapore. What we found was quite different.

Singapore has to be one of the most dynamic global cities right now. It is evolving at such a rapid pace, you might find it challenging, as residents or onlookers, to keep up with it. Maybe it's because of the driven government who are determined to see Singapore continually grow and adapt, or maybe it is because of Singapore's 'East meets West' location on the world map.

Whatever the case, Singapore is a dynamic beast of a city and country. It is as if much of what the world has to offer have converged upon this island-state.

## **Singapore, the World in Microcosm**

Take, for example, the nightlife. As I type this, Kevin Spacey is performing on stage, as is Sir Elton John. Just in the last month, we have had internationally renowned DJs, comedians and musicians performing at one of the numerous live entertainment spaces in the city. The quality of international performers that drop by Singapore is second to none. You need to keep your finger on the pulse because, blink, and you will miss it.

## **The Design and Creative Hub**

In the designer world, you only have to walk down Orchard Road to see that Singapore can boast of all the international big names. Upping the glam-oh-meter is the fabulous new Louis Vuitton floating glass island boutique. With its amazing architecture and its opening party attended by international celebrities (including Cate Blanchett), this store is currently the brightest jewel in Singapore's shopping tiara.

We are also drawn to the vast number of boutique up-and-coming designers such as Kaitie Manani and Rosie Jansen. Both designers and creative entrepreneurs have launched a boutique fashion label based in Singapore. Manani is the creative director of VamaStyle, an independent all summer fashion label, and Jansen the brains and beauty behind Tribe – a new label renowned for their stylish and practical totes and bags, allowing us to carry a Singapore Sling instead of just sipping one.

There are also many creative hubs in Singapore, such as the The Old School. Formerly the Methodist Girls' School, and located on Mount Sofia, this is now a creative hub designed to knit art and commerce, imagination and simplicity, and traditional with contemporary. Here, you will find pop-up markets, an independent cinema, a gallery, a bar (with live music on Friday nights), and a cosy restaurant along with eclectic events and activities.

## **The Gourmet's Paradise**

Of course there is the Singapore food scene – something the country is renowned for. There are often fierce debate among locals and expats alike as to which food stall has the most delicious, authentic, fresh or simply outstanding *bak kut teh*, *laksa*, chilli crab or Hainanese Chinese rice. Often, you can tell by the length of the queue.

On the other end of the scale, in recent months, we have seen some of the most famous international celebrity chefs open restaurants here, including Waku Ghin by Tetsuya, Cut by Wolfgang

Puck, db Bistro Moderne by New Yorker Daniel Boulud and Salt Grill by Australian Luke Mangan.

The café scene has completely evolved in the five years we have been here. When we arrived, we got blank stares when we placed our order for a skinny flat white. Now you can order a weak skinny mocha decaf flat white to your heart's content. And if you really want to suss out the independent and oh-so-serious bean roasters and coffee nuts in Singapore, you can grab a disloyalty card and pop around to these funky cafes that are promoting one another through this disloyalty programme. A most innovative approach to coffee indeed.

### **Leisure and Pleasure**

Spa experiences is another true measurement of a city's worth according to us girls. Singapore doesn't disappoint here either. Whether you choose a 6-star resort and spa like Capella and their award-winning Auriga Spa, or single-room boutique spas like the cute and quirky Lark the Spa Atelier, I can promise you no one would ever have an excuse for un-manicured nails in this town!

You can also find amazing four-hand massages, to impressive and almost exhausting Thai massages and Chinese reflexology foot massages by staff with disabilities; with so many options to try, it's hard to go back to the same place twice.

### **Launchpad for the Travel Bugs**

Singapore's geographical location also adds to the dynamic nature of the city. Not only are you a two-hour flight away from some of the world's most spectacular beaches, lime-stone cliffs, Southeast Asia's highest mountain and lush tropical jungles, this diversity of cultures can all be found, too, in the various enclaves of the city. From Chinatown to the Arab Quarter, Tiong Bahru, Little India to Dempsey Hill, if you are seeking a culture shock, you only need to hop on an ever-so-clean MRT train and pop out at any one of locations during festivals or even on a Sunday to see another side to this exciting thriving beast called Singapore.

With little or no expectations (besides amazing chilli crab on offer), Singapore has surprised and excited us. With its richly diverse art, culture, design and nightlife, and now with amazing coffee to boot, we will have a very difficult decision to make, if we ever decide to return to our Australian homeland.

## **CHRISTINE EDWARDS**

Australian Christine Edwards came to Singapore in 2007. After a brief stint in the local publishing industry, she started the online portal [www.thehoneycombers.com](http://www.thehoneycombers.com), a go-to guide to Singapore's thriving and diverse entertainment, food and leisure scene.



# The Power of a Positive Role Model

RON KAUFMAN

I moved to Singapore in 1990. For two decades, I have helped upgrade Singapore's service skills and shared Singapore's success all over the world. I was first hired by the National Productivity Board (now SPRING) and Singapore Airlines to help create and launch the well-known Service Quality Centre. I served as the curriculum project manager and then later as a 'master trainer' for scores of Singaporeans who then became service quality teachers, trainers and consultants. The courses we created were taught at the 'Bootcamp' in Sembawang for years, introducing fundamental service principles to many Singaporeans from government agencies and private organisations.

Later, I wrote the book *UP! Your Service* and built another Singapore-based service education and consulting company, UP! Your Service Pte Ltd. It now serves clients worldwide, with our service improvement courses translated into 13 languages.

I have always been an ambassador of Singapore, explaining the country to interested people in business, education, and community life in other countries. Changi Airport has become a second home, as I average a hundred plus flights annually for the past 20 years.

## Meeting Lee Kuan Yew

On the first day of 2009, I met Singapore's first Prime Minister and then-Minister Mentor, Mr Lee Kuan Yew. Our family was strolling

by the Merlion statue before dinner when I saw something unusual pass in the opposite direction. My wife and daughter, Jen and Brighten, were several steps ahead, so I kept walking. Suddenly they both spun around and exclaimed in a hush, “That’s Lee Kuan Yew!” I spun around too. There independent Singapore’s founding father was, enjoying an evening stroll on New Year’s Day along the waterfront of the nation he had led for so many years. He was surrounded by four security guards, who were clearly on alert.

I said to Jen and Brighten enthusiastically, “I’m going over to say hello!” They looked at me in doubt, but I took off quickly to catch up with this extraordinary man... and his security guards.

As I approached, one of them heard me coming. He turned and raised his right hand to signal me to stay back. But my intention and momentum were already in high gear. I took one step closer and whispered, “I just want to say thank you!” The guard nodded and smiled. He turned his hand gently and waved me forward.

I approached Mr Lee and introduced myself. I thanked him for the vision and guidance he has given to Singapore for so many years. He smiled, thanked me, and asked what I was doing in the country.

I replied, “For 19 years, I have been teaching customer service to help raise Singapore’s standards to truly world-class levels.” He nodded, “Very good.” And then he asked, “Where do you come from?” When I answered, “The United States”, he smiled and nodded again. And then he said, “Good. Stay here.” We shook hands, and bid each other farewell and a successful new year ahead.

As I walked back to Jen and Brighten, I thought how special it was to meet this pragmatic visionary on the first day of an extraordinary year. Lee Kuan Yew had turned a small tropical island into one of the most effective cities and best-practice nations in the world. But vision alone is not enough. It takes an educated and motivated team to turn great visions into reality. Role modelling from the top helps attract, retain and motivate that team.

Forty-three years after leading the nation to independence, Mr Lee Kuan Yew is still a powerful role model for this small but service-focused country. He uses every opportunity to help Singapore attract talent, be a better nation, and serve the world with ever greater value.

Post-script: Only later did I appreciate the security guard's impeccable service. He was vigilant, but he also understood what his 'customer' might enjoy hearing on New Year's Day. His gentle shift from 'keep back' to 'come forward' was excellent service indeed.

## RON KAUFMAN

Ron Kaufman moved to Singapore in 1990 from the US to help Singapore Airlines and the National Productivity Board create and launch the Service Quality Centre. Today, he is a much sought-after educator in improving customer service and building service cultures. Ron is author of *Uplifting Service* and the founder of the Singapore-based consulting firm, UP! Your Service Pte Ltd.

# My Singapore

SHIRLEY NGO

Singapore, it is hard to describe how much I have missed you.

For three years, I lived a perfect, almost surreal existence in the lush-green, vibrant city and had planned to spend the rest of my life there. However, shortly after I got married, my husband's job took him back home to Canada and I packed my bags once more, this time to say goodbye.

Since my departure, I did not allow myself to think about my time there. In fact, this is the first time I am reflecting on my life in Singapore and everything I miss and love about the city. My heart feels a bit broken. Were the past three years just a fantastically warm tropical dream with amazing food, shopping and culture at every corner? I miss the spirit and energy of Singapore.

## Discovering Singapore

I discovered Singapore due to an overnight layover while travelling in Asia. It was my first trip to Asia and even though I loved every city that I dropped by, Singapore made a definite impression on me. I had never been to a place that was as lively, diverse and colorful as Singapore. I saw people of all ethnicities conversing in a wide range of unique accents. Street lights were lit up with colorful decorations and I loved ordering food in my rusty Mandarin at the hawker food stalls. *Laksa* for \$2! Chicken rice for \$3! Exciting trinkets and treats in Chinatown for the whole family! Truly, you can find anything your heart desires in Singapore!

In the few hours spent wandering around the city by myself, I discovered why Singapore has such tremendous international magnetism; in a heartbeat, I decided to move there.

A year after my layover, my request to be relocated to Singapore was approved when my dream role in online marketing opened up at work. Though I arrived without knowing a single person, my coworkers welcomed me into their homes for dinners and parties. They always made sure that I would not be alone for any festival or celebration – this is the great thing about Singaporean hospitality.

They were also excited to share with me some of their unique traditions!

### **Yu Sheng**

One of my favourite memories of Singapore is celebrating Chinese New Year. Raised in a Chinese household in Alberta, Canada, I always looked forward to receiving a red packet and eating special delicacies around the Lunar New Year period. These were entertaining times but such activities did not match up to my first *yu sheng* experience in Singapore.

A tradition found only in Singapore, eating *yu sheng* is a memory that I cherish and love sharing with my friends in Canada. I watched and participated in amazement as the host introduced and highlighted the significance of each ingredient. I still smile fondly at the memory of my colleagues and I standing around the dish, laughing and shouting out phrases to wish for wealth and fortune, as we tossed and mixed the various ingredients into the air with our chopsticks and watched it all splatter over the table. More than 30 *yu shengs* later, I am still excited by the boisterous tradition, and will think of it this upcoming Chinese New Year, my first one back in Canada after leaving Singapore. Perhaps I can even host my own *yu sheng* feast!

### **Hungry Ghost Month**

Reminiscing of exciting events in Singapore, I experienced quite a

fright after coming home from work one July evening, and jumping at the thunderous voice of a man shouting out numbers in Hokkien into a microphone right outside the HDB complex. Was he mad? Was someone going to call the police to complain about the noise?

The louder the man shouted into the microphone, the more anxious I felt. I knocked on my neighbour's door and asked him if he knew what was going on. He laughed and told me that every July in Singapore, the Hungry Ghost Festival is celebrated, during which Chinese Singaporeans pay respects to their ancestors. The man at the microphone was holding an auction, and the *ge tai* performances were part of the fun. Running back into my room, I immediately called my girlfriends in Canada – they had to experience this over the phone as well! Only in Singapore would something so unique happen on a random evening in July! And this was all part of my new cultural experience.

### **Love for the Perfect Dish**

Ask any visitor to Singapore what they remember about the city, and you'll most likely get a response about its amazing food. Singaporeans take pride in being food connoisseurs and will go out of their way to get to the best plate of chicken rice, prawn mee, chilli crab and so on. Need a recommendation for a hotpot place? You'll get an enthusiastic reply and a list with detailed descriptions of the top places in the neighbourhood. Better yet, let them take you to their favourite food haunts. Even running out for *kopi* is special and everyone has their favourite spot!

Any time you take the chance to leave your home city, your new destination opens up a world of new opportunities. Singapore became my new home and allowed me the platform to grow both professionally and personally. Fast forward to three years later, I watched the movers pack up two truckloads of belongings, with my new husband and puppy and a lifetime of memories in tow. I left Singapore as a much more culturally-minded, confident and appreciative person.

Back in Canada now, I am once again back at work. Life here

is very different – it is minus six outside right now and I’m wearing winter boots and a thick down jacket – so it is difficult to dwell on all the things I miss and grew accustomed to in Singapore. However, I will never forget and never stop missing beautiful Singapore. Perhaps my love affair with Singapore is not over and will continue another time.

## SHIRLEY NGO

Shirley Ngo was born and raised in Alberta, Canada and certainly more accustomed to wintry weather than the tropical heat of Singapore. As a digital marketing manager with an international company, she feels fortunate to have the chance to live and work in Singapore. Some memorable experiences during her Singapore stint included hosting *Singapore Discovered!* on TV, bathing elephants at the Singapore Zoo, performing ‘live’ standup comedy and every moment spent exploring the country with her dog, Alphy.

# A Love Letter to Singapore

KAY VASEY

“Where you from?”

“England.” I paused to assess if the old man had understood me. “But my mum is from Singapore,” I continued.

While having lived in Singapore for only the past three years, I take great pleasure in telling people I have been coming here since before the MRT was built (in 1987). Back in those days, buses ran without air-conditioning and things were cheap. I’m proud to say my five aunties and three uncles know I can tell my *mee pok* from my *kway teow*.

Being able to switch seamlessly between a cut-glass English accent and a Singlish lilt which would impress Phua Chu Kang offers endless amusement for local and expatriate friends. I have also taken to doing a solid rendition of the Chinese opera performances that are held in my Tiong Bahru neighbourhood from time to time, despite not being able to speak any Mandarin.

I had always wanted to live in Singapore since visiting as a child. I loved the hustle and bustle of the wet markets; the tingling sensation of chilli on my palate; the perfume of pandan cake in the air; and my doting grandparents who cared for me one Yakult (probiotic drink) at a time. Every taste, every fruit and every game we played was different from those in England. Uncle Stanley had told me that “life in Singapore, very boring,



nothing to do". When I discovered his idea of a good holiday was winter in Europe, I began to take his words with a pinch of salt.

My expatriate friends miss the changing seasons, familiar shades that mark the passing of time, and just about everyone complains of the insufferable heat and humidity. Personally, I love parading on the streets in the national uniform: shorts, t-shirts and flip-flops. Granted, the office air-conditioning can be a little over-zealous at times, but as far as I'm concerned, better too hot than too cold. Maybe I was a reptile in my former life.

In recent years, Singapore has been compared by American writer Mark Jacobson to a "warm bath" ("You sink in, slit your wrists, your lifeblood floats away, but hey, it's warm") and been named by British actor and author, Michael Simkins, as "Marmiteland" ("You'll either love it or hate it"). The idea of Singapore as a retail-driven, edgeless wasteland where commercial advertising is the population's brain food is endlessly rehashed by the critics. While brand names are indeed plastered all over the main streets of Singapore, if you look beyond the billboards, you will find there is more depth to the city than you could ever have guessed.

The city nation is tight for space and when it needs to stretch out, it does so vertically, replacing towers with skyscrapers one lot at a time, and digging deep to create giant underground spaces, such as the ION Orchard mall with no less than four floors in its basement, or the upcoming Marina Coastal Expressway, which will be twenty metres below the seabed. William Lyttle, dubbed the 'Mole Man of Hackney', who spent forty years digging a network of tunnels under his house in East London, would have been inspired by Singapore's approach to building life underground.

If it's cultural depth you seek, you will find a vibrant underground scene, spectacularly hidden from tourists' prying eyes. At secret dining clubs like [secretcooks.org](http://secretcooks.org) and [undergrounddining.sg](http://undergrounddining.sg), guests have the chance to mix and

mingle with like-minded people whilst enjoying experimental gastronomic delights. Plenty of food for thought is found at off-beat events (such as [blinkbl-nk.com](http://blinkbl-nk.com) and [farm.sg/rojak](http://farm.sg/rojak)), where leading Asian intellectuals debate everything from politics to sex and history to technology. Independent creatives at [kult.com.sg](http://kult.com.sg), [phunkstudio.com](http://phunkstudio.com) and [theasylum.com.sg](http://theasylum.com.sg) organise pop-up shops, host art and music mash-up nights and publish magazines showcasing raw talent from across Asia. There is a 'Little Shoreditch' in Singapore - which you will find as soon as you start looking for it.

Of course, not all is perfect in paradise. Which city in the world doesn't have a dark side? With no welfare state like in the UK, and no upper age limit for retirement, it is not uncommon to catch yourself staring at the bald head of an octogenarian taxi driver, marked with age spots, garnished with scarce strands of snow-white hair, and wondering if you might need to jump forward and grab the steering wheel from his arthritic gnarled hands if he has a 'senior moment'. Similarly, at the hawker centres, half-blind men and women, with their backs bent double, clear and wipe tables for the next diner. The adage of 'growing old gracefully' seems not to apply to those who lack the means of a supportive family or who never made much money in their younger days.

*The Straits Times* recently reported that daily, "four or five people in Singapore attempt suicide. At least one succeeds... The trigger is often failed relationships and huge debts". This provides another perspective to the often-held view that Singapore is a sterile place where nothing much happens and life is just 'easy'. In reality, Singapore is a melting pot of people from all over the world and all walks of life. From the super-rich to the migrant worker, lives are being played out daily, with the same ups and downs as in any other city.

The Singapore Tourism Board encourages people to make it 'Your Singapore'. This city will always have a special place in my heart, especially Tiong Bahru, the neighbourhood where my

mother grew up. The little things make this place feel like home, such as the market stall-holders who give me twenty cents off for being a regular customer; the smile from the old man who collects cardboard for a living; and the illegal rickety wooden cart of our local satay man. These are just some of the things in 'My Singapore', which have touched my soul and will stay with me forever.

## KAY VASEY

Kay Vasey came to Singapore in 2009. She is now Director of Arts at The British Council, Singapore, which aims to tie up creative organisations and individuals between the two countries. She is also the founder of Mesh Minds, a platform for artists based in Southeast Asia and the UK to showcase their work internationally.

# Sky(court)s the Limit: Designing a Sustainable Future in Singapore

JASON POMEROY

## **Building a Business in Singapore**

Relocating from the United Kingdom in 2008 to establish an Asian presence for an international design practice was always destined to be an exciting experience and a significant challenge. Descriptions of Singapore being ‘Asia 101’, ‘Asia for beginners’, or ‘Asia lite’ failed to lull me into the false sense of security one would expect of such comforting descriptions of the city-state. Building a business in a new country at a time that has been coined ‘the Asian century’ (given the economic prospects of China and India), belie the sleepless nights of waiting for the first project appointment to arrive during the worst financial catastrophe since the Great Depression.

We were, however, able to weather the storm, and in fact grew through the recession from an office strength of three then, to one of 70 today. From a business establishment point of view, this would not have been possible if it wasn’t for the famed efficiency of ‘the system’ – the complete antithesis to what the poet John Keats called “negative capability, or the ability to survive with uncertainties, mysteries or doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”. It also owed much to the city state’s inherent need to be self-sustaining. After all, Singapore’s lack of natural resources and its continued urbanisation to cater for a population growth from the current five million people to six million people

by 2020 provided unique opportunities to implement our skills in the field of sustainable design and to apply ideas of a new vertical urbanism to a constantly changing skyline.

### **Sustainable Development**

For the uninitiated, sustainable development “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”, as explained by Gro Brundtland in his report *Our Common Future* (1987). Such was (or should I say, is) the zeal for the green agenda that it quickly became apparent that our evidence-based approach to sustainable design – an approach that allowed us to measure building environmental performance as well as the slightly more ephemeral social and cultural implications of design – struck a chord in Singapore. This allowed us to go beyond the simple brandishing of a black sketch pencil and hypothetical assertions of untested green designs, and was a constant reminder of ‘the system’; and how Singapore’s commitment to educating/ forging a modern progressive workforce/economy was and is very much a (measurable) result of such an ethos.

Singapore’s strategic geographical position provided further opportunities to engage with Asia’s leading developers and led to an appointment to design the first zero carbon house in Asia (located in Malaysia) – a project that went on to receive multiple awards, was featured in a television documentary, and became the subject of a 208-page book that documented the process of designing the house from start to finish, which is an achievement that I am immensely proud of and an experience I am incredibly thankful for. The prototype structure’s very own sustainable credentials spoke for itself, and opened doors to many a green project in the region from thereon, ranging from the micro-scale of green bungalow developments to the macro-scale of complete eco-cities in Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia and India. This would not have been possible if the efficiency of the ‘system’ or the transport infrastructure were not similarly of a world-class standard.

## **Vertical Urbanism**

So what of vertical urbanism and my spatial experience of Singapore? Having studied in Cambridge, UK, and having spent the majority of my childhood growing up in London, Singapore was far removed from the low-rise environment that I was used to. Granted that I had spent the previous 15 years of my working life living out of a suitcase in Amsterdam, Brussels and Bahrain, but even these cities could hardly compare to the high-rise nature of Singapore. Nevertheless, the idea of high-rise living, working and playing, and the notion of a vertical urbanism, was something that I was all too familiar with academically, and I relished the challenge to apply the very like in practice.

Vertical urbanism is the concept of employing the 'kit of parts' that makes the city work (for instance, the streets, the squares, the transport infrastructure, the landmarks and focal points, the green open recreational spaces, the diverse mix of buildings' uses to sustain one's everyday life) and applying vertically over the multiple layers of a high-rise/density city whilst integrating the very same with its horizontal cousin. Singapore is no stranger to this, and its postcolonial redevelopment saw the eradication of much of the centrally located low-rise colonial shophouses in order to make way for a 'city of towers' for international institutions, and the outlying villages cleared to make way for public housing. With this came the removal of many of the social spaces that afforded the individual a means of social interaction, and whilst the hotel lobby and the retail mall provided an opportunity for transient, international groups of expatriates and tourists to escape the tropical climate via its air-conditioned confines, the open space of the void decks beneath the public housing blocks became the localised opportunity for social interaction for the re-located Singaporean. The incorporation of the efficient Mass Rapid Transport (MRT) system has created a greater cross-cultural interaction through a freedom of movement through the island.

The urban vocabulary of the street and square, as well as the ground-scrapping/subterranean social-spaces of the mall, the void

deck and MRT system, are now being increasingly lifted to loftier heights in order to cater for physical and social growth, and to address the depletion of social space through heightened densification. The Singaporean government's advocacy of above ground-level social spaces within tall buildings allows us to see the traditional void deck being vertically extrapolated to form intermediary and/or rooftop social spaces through legislation and consequent guidelines in the form of skycourts and skygardens respectively. Indeed, these skyward open social spaces, which are often densely foliated, have helped define Singapore as a garden city.

The Marina Bay Sands skypark, and the many other examples of skycourts and skygardens, demonstrate Singapore's commitment to creating a vertical garden city and a willingness to implement planning policy guidelines for onward physical realisation. Socially, the incorporation of such alternative social spaces in the sky is meant to complement the existing ground and subterranean open space network of street, square, void deck and the more alternative social spaces of the integrated retail mall and MRT concourse. With increasing densification and the continued move skywards, the roof top garden should also allow open spaces to be used by its occupants of high-density environments and negate the need to go to the street level to engage in recreational activities. It also provides the opportunity for the visitor or local to be actors in their public interaction with others, and to be spectators of a rapidly changing skyline.

However, the premise of creating sustainable designs within a new vertical urbanism isn't without scrutiny. A fundamental component of sustainability is the social element which, alongside the economic and environmental parameters, forms what the academic Mark Mawhinney refers to as a balance theory of sustainable consciousness. The social efficiency of these alternative open spaces in the sky has yet to be fully tested to see whether they will be successful in the future. For instance, the Marina Bay Sands skypark may prove successful given the succession of tourists that pass through each day, but there are stringent restrictions on the use of the space - above and beyond

the already restricted 'public' spaces on the ground, which are increasingly privatised spaces controlled by corporations and thus not truly 'public'. In this case, it could be argued that the freedom of passage and the ability to use skycourts and skygardens, as one feels free to socialise in the street and square, has yet to be fully embraced. Hopefully, the government will continue to find legislative mechanisms to make these spaces more habitable. After all, if anyone has the tenacity and single-mindedness to create a world-class city-state in such a short period of time, and lead by example in creating a vertical garden city, surely this would be Singapore? I will happily continue to take up the urban challenges this small but rich and diverse island faces, and hope to continue to tell of my experiences, though next time via bricks and mortar.

## JASON POMEROY

Prof Jason Pomeroy is an award-winning architect and academic, and founding Principal of Pomeroy Studio – a design studio of international architects, urbanists, designers and theorists. Jason also lectures and publishes widely, and is the author of *Idea House: Future Tropical Living Today*. He is an adjunct professor at Mapua Institute of Technology, honorary professor of the Nottingham University, and also sits on the editorial board of the Council for Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat.



# Outlooks from a Singapore Outsider

FREDRIK HÄRÉN

“As an author of creativity books, how on earth can you live in Singapore?” I have lost count of the number of times I have been asked this question. And when I reply, “Because I think it is the best place in the world to live for a creative person”, most people think I am kidding and everyone asks me to explain.

But no, I am not kidding. And yes, let me explain.

I moved to Beijing from my native Sweden in 2005 because I wanted to be in Asia when Asian countries truly started to embrace creativity. The defining moment for me was when Hu Jintao gave a speech to the Chinese people in which he said that “China should be an innovative country 15 years from now”.

Since I write books on business creativity, I just had to move to Asia and see this shift happen. After two years in Beijing, I learnt two things: Firstly, I wanted to leave Beijing, which is a fascinating city, but has too much traffic, too much pollution and too little water for a Swede brought up in the Stockholm archipelago; and secondly, I wanted to remain in Asia.

So I went on a grand journey. While doing research for my book *The Developing World*, I constantly travelled over a period of more than ten months. I went to 20 developing countries and when I came to each new city that I thought had potential to

become my new home, I made sure my schedule allowed me to stay a few extra days to get a feel of life there. I spent two weeks each in Seoul, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Shanghai, Mumbai, New Delhi, Istanbul, and Singapore. Then I made a list of positives and negatives about each city. Obviously, Singapore won in the end.

### **Singapore Virtues**

Why? Well, for many reasons.

Such as quality of life – I now drink as much fresh mango juice in Singapore as I did beers in Beijing, weather (no, I do not mind the heat; I love it), security (I love countries where there is a good chance you will get your iPhone back if you left it behind in a restaurant), and convenience (like the fact that Changi Airport has extensive connections to the world, since my work involves a lot of travelling to different countries on a frequent basis).

Those are the usual reasons that attract most people to Singapore.

But the main reason I live in Singapore is because this city-state, to me, is the one place on earth where it is the easiest to have a globally creative mindset.

Some people say Singapore is “Asia for beginners”. I do not agree. I think Singapore is ‘globalisation for beginners’, or rather, ‘globalisation for early adopters’. With a diverse mix of races, religions and nationalities, Singapore not only represents the cross-section of the world, it is also a time capsule of what the world will look like in the future. And I love that.

New York may call itself ‘The Capital of The World’, but Singapore is the world. Unlike New York, which is a global city in the United States, Singapore is a global city – a global city-state. Singapore is a city in the world, not a city in a country in the world. And this makes it easier to have a global outlook here since nationalistic barriers do not block the view as much.

## **A Beautiful Mix**

A positive side-effect of this is that Singapore is one of the least racist countries in the world. Now, that does not mean that there is no racism in Singapore, but I have worked in more than 40 countries, and I have never experienced less racism than I do in Singapore.

That is important to me. Not only because we are a mixed-race family – I am from Sweden, my wife from the Philippines and my son a happy mix of Stockholm, Manila and Singapore.

As an European, I am ashamed and disappointed when European leaders recently proclaim that “the multi-cultural society does not work”.

I just wish they would come to Singapore.

To live in a place that is celebrating ‘Western New Year’ and ‘Chinese New Year’ is not only twice as fun, it also gives you the feeling that there is more than one way of doing things.

On a recent New Year’s Eve party, we realised our group consisted of ten people with ten different passports. A friend told me how they had had an after-work beer at his company and 14 people – from 14 different countries – showed up. At our wedding, we had 40 guests from eight countries, comprising at least four religions and four races, and, at the time, no one was counting.

It all just felt as if it was the most natural thing in the world. The point, of course, is that it is not the most natural thing in the world. Unfortunately, in most places in the world, it would be rare, strange and exotic to have such a natural mix of backgrounds. For people living in Singapore, it is so natural you do not grasp how unnaturally natural it is, and how valuable.

Now, don’t get me wrong. I am not saying that knowledge of your own culture and background is not important. It is.

It is often said that a person without roots is fickle, doesn’t know how to connect to who he is, and easily can be manipulated,

because there are no basic values keeping him grounded. Roots are important.

But if one is going to use a metaphor (in this case, of likening a human being to a tree), one has to use the whole metaphor. Because it is equally true that a tree without branches also perishes. A tree that does not spread its branches out in all directions to gather as much sunlight and energy as possible might have deep and strong roots, but it will eventually still wither and die.

In other words, to be rootless is dangerous, but so is being branchless.

And if your own culture is the roots, the cultures of the rest of the world is the energy that your branches need to reach out to, so that you can get new ideas and ways of doing things by learning from others, be inspired to try new foods, acquire new habits and try new customs. It will make you curious about other ways of doing things, be inspired by different ideas and energised by alternate points of views. And that is what creates creativity.

And nowhere in the world is it easier to let your branches spread out than in Singapore. Want some exposure to American influence? Watch *American Idol* the same day it airs in the United States. What about a dose of Indian culture? Join in the Deepavali celebrations together with thousands of Indians in Little India. Want to practise your Chinese? Go and order frog in Geylang.

## **Heimskur**

The Icelandic Vikings, who lived a thousand years ago, had a word for people who never left their farms on Iceland and never ventured outside. The word was *heimskur*. It means moron. As they saw it, a person who did not open up to the world to find new ideas from other cultures was a moron. I think the Vikings would have loved Singapore. I sure know that I do. It is the one place with the fewest *heimskurs* that I have found.

Too many people limit their potential, their creativity – and in the end – their lives, because they are not embracing the whole

human spectrum of creativity. They are not taking full advantage of the potential of the world, because they are not living in the world. They are stuck in their own corner, looking inwards, seeing whatever that is different as 'foreign'.

And I think that answers the question of why I am living in Singapore – because Singapore makes me more human by making me more a part of the world, a part of humanity. And by being part of the world, I have a bigger chance to be inspired and have new ideas.

Ideas that will benefit us all.

## FREDRIK HÄRÉN

Fredrik Hären has lived in Asia since 2005, first in Beijing, and has been in Singapore since 2008. Fredrik is an author and speaker on business creativity, have spoken on the subject in more than 40 countries. The author of eight books, his *The Idea Book* has been included in 'The 100 Best Business Books of All Time' list.



# **Celebrating Diversity**

# Discovering the Real Singapore

CHRIS DAVIES

“Where is it you stay?” Worryingly, our first-ever Singaporean taxi driver clearly had no idea where he should be taking us.

It was my family’s first night in Singapore, having landed at Changi Airport a few hours earlier. We were on a family reconnaissance trip in 2007, staying in a work colleague’s small black and white colonial-era bungalow, while he was away on holiday. On his advice, my wife and I had taken our three children – aged 13, 12 and 9 – to Clarke Quay for a rather hectic and sweaty curry. Now it was dark, everyone was exhausted, and although we knew the name of the road we were staying at, the taxi driver seemed confused.

“It’s near VivoCity, on Mount Faber,” we explained. “No problem, no problem,” the driver assured us, until it became clear that, friendly though he was (as indeed almost every taxi driver subsequently proved, over the two years we lived in Singapore), the man clearly had no idea where our road was. This caught us completely by surprise, having lived in London where licensed cab-drivers have to know their way around thousands of streets across the city.

We peered anxiously at the exotic landscape outside, every tree-lined street and impressively-designed road junction looking alike. After thirty minutes, with panic rising, I suddenly noticed a roadmap under the dashboard. “Er, is it worth looking in there?” I

hazarded. “Ah yes, yes, yes,” the driver replied, seeming to notice the map for the first time himself. Shortly afterwards, we safely reached the location for our first night, in a hot, sweaty, and fragile state. We cranked up the old, noisy aircon – and there for several hours I lay, jet-lagged, hot and bothered, convinced our Singapore adventure was going to be a very short one indeed.

### **Singapore: A Polygot Place**

Fortunately, matters quickly improved. This first night was the untypical overture to what became the most exciting, touching, and ultimately, bewitching years of our family life. Singapore was my first experience of a posting overseas; for my wife and children, their first visit to Asia; and for all of us, our first experience of living anywhere remotely near the equator. A year after our ill-fated taxi ride, now settled in Singapore, we embraced our role as immigrants, and living as part of a small, close-knit minority community in a foreign, albeit welcoming, land.

The Singapore we quickly came to regard as home was very different from what we had been led to expect, both from the guidebooks and old ‘Singapore hands’.

Naturally, living abroad gives you a privileged insight denied most tourists. It is a chance to walk in other people’s shoes, to understand other perspectives, and gain an extraordinary amount of insight into one’s own culture. Looking back, what is perhaps most vivid is how rich the experience was, and how fascinating.

As a Brit in Singapore, many aspects of everyday life are disarmingly familiar, starting with the pleasant surprise of driving on the left, just like back in the UK. There are even pedestrian crossings where the simple presence of someone waiting to cross the road causes vehicles to stop, with no traffic signal other than the round orange ‘Belisha’ beacon shining permanently by the roadside – a hangover from more polite times, introduced by the British and, to Singaporean drivers’ great credit, still almost always respected.

But of course, modern Singapore is so much more than a



grown-up child of the end of post-war colonialism. Always a polyglot place, founded on trade and commerce, it has transformed itself into one of the world's great global cities. Singapore, as it always has, still straddles the crossroads of East and West. This does indeed invite some disdain – “Asia for Europeans” or even “Europe for Asians”, some of my non-Singaporean colleagues would say. I found such comments insulting (to Singaporeans and other Asians) and, after a while, irritating.

It is certainly fair to say that Singapore and most Singaporeans – at least in the business world – do not wear their hearts on their sleeve. Singapore does not grab you round the throat like some other Asian cities. But give it a little time, and its charms become apparent; subtlety, for me, being a virtue. And those charms are all the more beguiling for being rather unexpected.

### **Reading Lee Kuan Yew**

In my first week as a Singapore resident, I bought, out of a sense of duty I admit, Lee Kuan Yew's *From Third World to First*, a sort of political history of Singapore. It's a weighty tome, and, to my surprise, I found it utterly compelling. Of course, it is Mr Lee's personal version of history, but as I read the story of how Singapore came into being, the wonderful tales of those first few years struggling to create a nation, the economic challenges, the half-bluffs of international diplomacy, suddenly, much of what I saw and experienced around me fell into place.

But I must admit the book which convinced me to bring my family to Singapore was a far less lofty one – *Notes From an Even Smaller Island*, the punning title of a slim volume of humorous vignettes from British immigrant, teacher and journalist, Neil Humphreys. Humphreys' affectionate tales from the heartlands, where most Singaporeans live, helped me understand that there is much, much more to this place than the glitz of Orchard Road or the cliché of the Long Bar at Raffles Hotel, great fun though both of these are.

It's impossible to capture the kaleidoscope of experiences from our two years in Singapore. From glamorous drinks receptions for the F1 night race, to hiring a tandem bicycle on Pulau Ubin and spotting wild boar; tennis tournaments with expats and golf matches with locals; wildlife-watching from our sofa – monkeys, bats, and an extraordinary array of colourful and noisy bird life – and cheering at the Padang on Singapore's National Day; family trips to Australia, Hong Kong, Thailand, Indonesia; discovering wonderful local food virtually on our doorstep at Tiong Bahru food court and open-air local restaurants. And making some life-long friends from around the globe – French, Chinese, Zimbabwean, American, Dutch, Ecuadorean and, of course, Singaporean.

We quickly came to love our frequent taxi journeys around this small island. Singapore taxi drivers are a sort of metaphor for their homeland – safe, efficient, single-minded, but also charming, a little eccentric sometimes, and full of tales and wisdom. It's a heady mix, and one we shall always remember with gratitude.

## **CHRIS DAVIES**

Chris Davies works in corporate communications and PR for leading national and international blue-chip organisations. He moved to Singapore with his family in 2008, heading the Asia-Pacific network of a major international PR group. The Davies family returned to the UK in 2010, and Chris continues to provide specialist advice to UK companies seeking to export and expand into Singapore and Southeast Asia via his company, Pender Group.

# Boiling Pot of Races

SUNANDA K DATTA-RAY

The Education Ministry wanted to see me. It was late 1993. We had recently arrived in Singapore where Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) had appointed me editorial consultant. Deep, our 14-year-old son, had joined Raffles Institution (RI). His school headmaster chuckled when I repeated the joke SPH colleagues told me about Anglo-Chinese School owning Singapore and RI running it. It was dated, he said. “Now, RI both owns and runs Singapore!”

## Hindi for Deep

Everyone said Deep’s getting into RI was an achievement. An additional cause of satisfaction was that he wouldn’t lose touch with India, as had seemed likely in our last stop, Honolulu. He would learn Hindi at the Sunday school that two public-spirited worthies, Mr Sivakant Tiwari and Mr Shriniwas Rai, ran just off Serangoon Road. There remained the small matter of getting official clearance to sit for his ‘O’ Levels a subject that RI didn’t offer. I was assured it was a only formality.

The unsmiling young Chinese lady at the Ministry stared at us through gold-rimmed glasses.

“You’re Indian,” she said.

Unsure whether it was question, statement or accusation, I managed a “yes”. What else could we be, I wondered, not

realising what a minefield the matter of definition of 'Indian' is in Singapore.

"Then why isn't your son taking the Indian language?"

"But he is!" I exclaimed.

"He has asked for exemption from Tamil!"

At least, she didn't say "Indian" like my university dean in England had done apropos of the compulsory foreign language.

I explained that while Tamil is an Indian language, Hindi is the Indian language. Hundreds of millions of people all over India speak or understand Hindi which shares official status with English. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee even addressed the UN General Assembly in Hindi.

Had Bengali, our mother tongue, been available, Deep might have considered it, but Hindi would help him more at the national level. Bengalis are tucked away in eastern India just as a few million Tamils out of a billion Indians are concentrated in the southern state of Tamilnadu.

Neither language is exclusively Indian. Bangladeshis speak Bengali though they pepper it with Persian words. Several million Tamils live in Sri Lanka. Some are Indian Tamils, though not Indian nationals. Others are Sri Lankan.

But Hindi belongs to India alone. No other country can claim it. I once asked Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, the ethnic Indian Prime Minister of Mauritius, if he spoke Hindi, and he replied proudly he spoke Bhojpuri. Some Indians call Bhojpuri a Hindi dialect, but it is a standalone language for the Indian diaspora in Guyana, Suriname, Fiji, Trinidad and Tobago and, of course, Mauritius.

We obviously convinced the Education Ministry lady, because permission was given. Deep got an 'A' in Hindi and found it extremely useful when he was working in Delhi.

## Races in Singapore

But other surprises awaited us. The Chinese taxi driver's response when I said I was Bengali was, "Some Bengalis look *ang moh*!" The Singaporean slang for European was new to me, but his next question revealed he wasn't thinking of Bengalis at all. Why didn't I wear a turban, he asked. It was the first intimation of a mystery that inspired protests from both Indian and Bangladeshi diplomats when *The Straits Times* illustrated a report on Bengalis with the drawing of a Sikh. "I didn't know Bengalis weren't Sikhs," apologised the Indian Singaporean journalist who handled the report.

There was more confusion when a Nominated Member of Singapore's Parliament wondered in 1993, why the National University of Singapore (NUS) asked intending undergraduates of Indian origin "to state whether they are Sikh, Sri Lankan or other Indian" in their matriculation forms. The then-Minister of State for Education replied that otherwise, many Sikhs and Sri Lankans put themselves in the rich stew called "Others" which included Eurasians and Singaporeans who were not Malay, Chinese or Indian. However, he also assured Parliament that NUS was reviewing the categorisation to see how it could be improved.

This flexibility disappeared when it came to race.

When my Roman Catholic Filipino colleague, the late Noli Galang, wrote 'Malay' for race he was asked, "How can you be Malay if you're not Muslim?"

Noli's logic was irrefutable. The Philippines were named after Spain's King Philip II. "How can a Spanish king determine an Asian's race?"

But who was listening?

My 'Indo-Aryan-Mongoloid' (the genetic category for Bengalis) was also rejected. My race was Indian. "That's nationality," I protested. "It's a political label!" But in vain.

A visit to the Sri Mariamman Temple in the heart of Chinatown during the Theemithi festival heightened my ethnic bewilderment.

I hadn't seen the ritual before because even if not actually banned in India, it's severely discouraged for being dangerous. But here were barefoot Hindus treading a bed of red-hot coals after months of preparation with prayers and purification ceremonies. I was told the impure fail the ordeal by fire.

Suddenly a group of Chinese men appeared. They, too, were bare-bodied but their paler skins glowed red from the heat and exertion and they dripped sweat as they ran nimbly over the embers. In a karaoke bar some months later, an Indian Singaporean, a Tamil, was singing in Hokkien.

### **Cross-cultural Phenomena**

These cross-cultural phenomena came to mind when, researching my book, *Looking East to Look West: Lee Kuan Yew's Mission India*, I read of Jawaharlal Nehru saying in 1946, at Singapore's Ee Hoe Hean Club for Chinese millionaires, that the island would "become the place where Asian unity is forged".

Thirteen years later, in a *Straits Times* report on 7th September 1959, Mr Lee Kuan Yew predicted that "a vigorous, vital and cultural civilisation" would emerge from the "boiling pot" of Indian, Chinese and European cultures.

It hasn't happened yet, but may be happening. Meanwhile, there are other signs of the cultural mutation the two prime ministers predicted.

We dined last night in London, where I am writing this, on chicken rice, roast duck and *char siew* which Deep brought from Singapore where he returned last year to work for an *ang moh* company after sampling life in London, New York and New Delhi. It made a change from the *nonya* cuisine that a new restaurant in Calcutta, my home town to which I went back in 2008, provides.

The world is shrinking. Knowledge is expanding. Singaporeans may still confuse Sikhs and Bengalis but a Singaporean friend of Pakistani origin says Pakistanis are no longer lumped under 'Indian'. His identity card describes him as racially Aryan. Perhaps Indians are also now recognised as Aryan since thousands of new expats from all over India have also brought home to Singaporeans that Tamil isn't the only Indian language.

## SUNANDA K DATTA-RAY

Sunanda K Datta-Ray lived in Singapore from 1993 to 2008, during which he was Editorial Consultant with Singapore Press Holdings, taught at Nanyang Technological University and was Senior Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. Educated at Manchester University, Datta-Ray is a Visiting Fellow at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. His last book was the award-winning *Looking East to Look West: Lee Kuan Yew's Mission India*.

# Singapore through the Lens of An Overseas Indonesian

ALVIN AMADEO WITIRTO

Being a 26-year-old Indonesian-Chinese residing in Singapore certainly makes me an unlikely expatriate in a global city which is one of Asia's most important financial centres. This writing is a collage of personal reflections of the last 11 years I have spent in Singapore, nine of which were spent studying and the last two as part of the foreign talent community in the Singapore financial sector.

## **The 'Little Red Dot' in a Nutshell**

For many Indonesians, Singapore is indeed a great place in which to be. Singapore speaks to the needs and concerns of many Indonesians. For the affluent families, Singapore is the safe haven with reliable financial institutions where their private bankers manage their wealth. Singapore is also the place to seek medical treatment in Asia. For Indonesian shopaholics, Singapore is the strip of malls along Orchard Road, the main shopping thoroughfare. Just have a walk around Orchard Road during the Great Singapore Sale in May and June or during the Hari Raya holidays, and you will wonder whether half of Jakarta has moved to Singapore. For Indonesian parents, Singapore is NUS, NTU and SMU (acronyms for names of Singapore universities). It is the place to school their children. Every year, the venues in Jakarta, where the undergraduate



admission tests to the top three universities in Singapore are held, are always packed with aspiring candidates.

While for me, then an aspiring student, who was hungry to experience a new place, Singapore was a collection of vague ideas as a highly competitive schooling environment with stressful examinations, and as a place which happened to be the most advanced city in Southeast Asia with a modern cosmopolitan lifestyle. Neither expectation was disappointed, as both were proven to be true.

### **A Bicultural Singapore: The Cosmopolitan and the Traditional**

As with many things in life, experiencing and understanding Singapore turned out to be like peeling an onion, as each layer of understanding begets another one. Over the last ten years, Singapore was a country in transition, from being merely an orderly well-run nation-city to one whose economic significance and cosmopolitan nature firmly places it among the global city ranks.

If, in the past, saying that you are from Singapore will draw questions like, “Which part of China is that?”, today an instantaneous recognition would be expected, albeit at times associated with peculiar regulations like ban on selling chewing gum. But there is no doubt that Singapore has crossed the chasm to become a cosmopolitan city.

What is more interesting is the way Singapore’s leading intellectuals articulate its identity: as a place where the traditional East meets the modern, cosmopolitan West. While in many ways this is true, I believe this East-West cultural junction has been only reached by a group of sophisticated Singaporeans who have mastered the art of retaining the fundamental values of traditional Confucian ideals, while shedding all the trappings of ethnic traditions, and thus embracing a more global outlook of life. This delicate balancing act has been achieved by a small group of people, while a significant number of Singaporeans remain largely localised in their respective traditional ethnic cultures. Their

appreciation of Singapore's cosmopolitanism stops at knowing that it's there, but they do not participate in it.

In a way, I was fortunate to witness this transformation, and to be side by side with this small group of globalised Singaporeans who will continue to shape the nation-city's future. Their growing numbers among the post-1980s generations will affirm this transformation. Their mix of East-West is indeed what appeals to many other Asian expatriates like me. It feels like a fine balance that allows one to be part of the global space and yet remain true to one's Asian roots at the same time.

While this group of elites enhances Singapore's attractiveness to foreign talents like me, I reckon that on the other side of the coin, a group of people are left out. I'm not speaking of the majority of Singaporeans who could still appreciate the new cosmopolitanism while remaining as bystanders, but referring to the group of people on the lower ranks who will remain permanently excluded in the psychology of a newly globalised Singapore: the aged and the least-educated.

It is an ironic sight to see them having to work as menial labour such as cleaning staff, while the rest of Singapore is celebrating its cosmopolitan affluence. Admittedly, this may be seen as a minor imperfection in the bigger picture of Singapore's success, but if Singapore could address this, it would truly achieve the great society which many in the West have failed to create. Singapore is certainly working hard on this as a community, but there is still some way to go before Singapore can reach this ideal.

### **Singapore to Me**

Is Singapore my home today?

I spent some time pondering on the question of where home is for me now. While I have a coherent idea in my mind about what constitutes home – that is, a place where you belong – having spent my formative years in Jakarta and my adolescence (plus adult years) in Singapore has made me feel at home in Singapore as much as in Indonesia. So where is home then? Singapore? Jakarta?

The baffling nature of this question came to me when my work led to a 6-month stint in Jakarta. This was probably the longest continuous time I spent in Jakarta since I moved to Singapore in 2000. During that period, I returned to Singapore once a month to visit my friends. In a way, my travel pattern was reversed, because on a normal basis, I travel to Jakarta for family reasons once a month when I'm based in Singapore.

So the most precise answer to the question of where home is would be both, but for different reasons. Singapore is home because this is where most of my closest friends are, while Jakarta is home because that's where my family is. More than 95 percent of my friends are in Singapore, and the same proportion of my family is in Jakarta. In a way, I have one foot in each city.

So what's the bottom line of all these reflections? Simply put, Singapore is a home away from home.

## **ALVIN AMADEO WITIRTO**

Alvin Amadeo Witirto moved to Singapore in 2000 on a SIF scholarship and studied at St Joseph Institution. He went on to Anglo-Chinese Junior College and later enrolled in Singapore Management University's Economics and Sociology programme on a SMU Scholarship. He is currently active in the Indonesian Professional Association and is working as an analyst for an international financial institution.

# Singapore as Catalyst

MOCH N KURNIAWAN

I hail from a village called Tlogorejo in Central Java, Indonesia, where I spent my childhood and teenage years. I remember my simple life then – swimming in the river, playing football, and riding a bicycle to school.

In 1993, I was enrolled at the Bandung Institute of Technology in Bandung, West Java, which was deemed the best university in Indonesia. My time at the university introduced me to city life, to new friends from all over Indonesia, to intense competition, and to activities that led to critical thinking. However, I focused on what my parents had always reminded me: to place study as my top priority.

Heeding my parents' advice, I worked hard in my studies and four years later, in 1997, I was granted a one-semester fellowship, by the Singapore International Foundation (SIF), to study in Singapore. I was very happy to receive my first fellowship award as it fulfilled my dream to study overseas.

## **Widening My Horizons**

I was 21 years old at that time. I landed in Singapore for the first time, along with ten students from other universities in Indonesia. When I arrived, I realised many things there are different from what I know back home, although Singapore is just about two hours' flight from Jakarta.

I was amazed to see that Changi Airport was much bigger, better organised, and cleaner than Soekarno-Hatta Airport in Jakarta, as well as more orderly. Changi Airport turned out to reflect what Singapore itself was.

Then came a time when I met with Singaporean and Filipino fellows who spoke English really well. Most of the time, I was merely listening to their conversations due to a lack of confidence on my part to speak up. This language issue was a big challenge for me during the fellowship period. There was no other way to survive except to keep on learning, speaking and using English daily. My host family, with whom I stayed and talked to during weekends, also helped me adapt to the new environment.

In the National University of Singapore (NUS) where I studied, more new discoveries surprised me. The internet connection at the NUS library was much faster than that in my university back home, which was among the few institutions in Indonesia with online access then. This gave me an opportunity to read a lot more than I could in Indonesia. I imagined if Indonesian people could easily access the internet as efficiently as in Singapore, they would gain access to information more easily, and generate business opportunities and economic activities too.

Also, when my campus colleagues found out that I was granted a fellowship to study in Singapore, they tend to praise me, “Ah, smart guy.” I just smiled and thanked them. However, deep in my heart, I was thinking that I had a lot to catch up with. But I did manage to do well for several assignments in my modules.

### **Adapting as a Minority**

As a Javanese and a Muslim, I was a minority on campus. This meant, among other things, that I could not express my views in my native language as I could not easily find fellow Javanese around. So I had to be braver to speak out for my own interest as no one would do so. I also had to follow cultural norms which were new to me.

For example, no one younger than me called me *mas* (elder

brother) which is the normal respect given in Javanese society. I had to politely ask food-stall owners whether the food is *halal* as I am not allowed to eat pork as a Muslim. I also missed *adzan*, a prayer call for Muslims.

This situation changed the way I behaved. Back home, my ethnic group and religion were in the majority. Being in a country in which I was a minority in both spheres, I learned that being more tolerant and respectful to other ethnic groups and religions are key to growing and maturing as a society.

Besides these insights, the best thing about this fellowship was the friendship and bonding among us. I remember, for example, some of us gathered in our course mates' rooms and Singaporean peers' homes just to get to know one another better or to debate on various issues. Some of us also went to play sports together. I think we are now more like brothers and sisters – at least those of us from Indonesia – after our shared experiences in our one semester together in Singapore.

### **Back in Indonesia and Giving Back**

When I returned to Indonesia, my life changed quite a lot. I became more confident in speaking English, more persistent in pursuing my dream to obtain a scholarship to further my studies overseas and be successful in life. I was also eager to give back to society by helping the less fortunate to continue their studies and improve their life.

Most of my dreams came true. I got a job as a journalist in an English daily newspaper, the *Jakarta Post*, in 2001. I also received a scholarship from the Asian Center for Journalism for a master's degree in journalism at the Ateneo de Manila University, the Philippines, in 2005 where I learned more about online journalism, public journalism, investigative reporting, and code of ethics, and in 2008, I was invited to be as a visiting scholar in UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism where I focused on learning multimedia journalism. All these achievements, I can say, were driven by my first fellowship from SIF.

When I talked with several SIF Indonesian fellows, they shared the same feelings. They said that they had been successful in their studies and careers as their SIF fellowship experiences in Singapore had given them the belief that they could compete with others and the confidence to achieve more.

For example, most of them were awarded scholarships to study for their master degrees overseas. Some prominent examples are Fadlizon who was nominated as an Indonesian agriculture minister in the 2011 cabinet reshuffle, and Ahmad Fuadi, now one of the best-selling novelists in Indonesia.

Many of these Indonesian fellows wanted to give something back to society, so they established a scholarship programme in 2005 which sponsors underprivileged students' studies from elementary schools to the university. This programme has helped 60 students so far: three will enter university in 2012 after six years of being supported by the scholarship. It is great to see how the students started to believe that they will have a better future through education despite coming from poor families.

As the funds needed to finance the students increased rapidly, the Indonesian fellows established the Indonesia Bright Foundation to legalise the scholarship programme movement, and also asked friends and other institutions for donations. This initiative shows their commitment to the cause.

I appreciate having the chance to share all these experiences and initiatives with participants during an SIF Connects! Singapore event, in early December 2011, in Singapore.

And one of the replies I got from a Singaporean participant summed things up perfectly: "It's great to hear that not only Singapore experience has opened the door for you, but you then opened the door for the underprivileged students in Indonesia to reach their dreams through education."

## **MOCH N KURNIAWAN**

Moch N Kurniawan was awarded a SIF-ASEAN Student Fellowship in 1997, and came to Singapore for a one-semester study stint at the National University of Singapore. In 2005, along with other SIF-ASEAN Fellows from Indonesia, he started *Yayasan Indonesia Bright* (Indonesia Bright Foundation), a scholarship fund for underprivileged students from Pati, Indonesia.



# A Fruitful and Rewarding Learning Journey

LE HUU HUY

On 28 July 1997, I stepped off Vietnam Airlines flight No VN 741 to Singapore from Ho Chi Minh City, ready to undertake my new work assignment as Chief Representative of the state-owned Bank for Foreign Trade of Vietnam (Vietcombank).

We had opened the Vietcombank Singapore Representative Office, our first in ASEAN, despite the regional crisis. Headquartered in Hanoi, Vietcombank Singapore Office aims to help promote co-operation with its foreign correspondents in Singapore, resolve problems involving settlement of payments and make market information available to customers in Singapore and the region.

After my work stint at Vietcombank, I remained in Singapore to pursue my master's degree programme in Southeast Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore (NUS) where I had been a part-time student for two semesters. Concomitantly, self-learning efforts earned me several professional qualifications on financial planning, insurance and investment consultancy and a position as Financial Services Adviser with Prudential Assurance Singapore in 2002.

In early 2003, I joined a Singapore-owned manufacturer of edible oils and fats as Sales Manager and travelled extensively to Malaysia, Vietnam, Russia and the Ukraine for business development and market expansion. It was a professionally and academically satisfying six years.

### **Singapore, a Great Place to Work**

After that, I set up a consulting firm and then a language centre providing business and translation services and Vietnamese language courses. Our consultancy and translation businesses have been growing substantially along with a vibrant Singapore economy. We have built a diversified customer base consisting of MNCs and Singapore companies interested in doing business in Vietnam.

Thanks to Singapore's flexible working environment, I have become a language trainer-cum-interpreter at several private and public institutions, which include the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, Centre for Language Studies at NUS, SEAMEO Regional Language Centre, and Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

For the last four years, I have also been a part-time teacher of Vietnamese literature at an international school - ACS (International) Singapore.

### **Sparkling of Interest in Culture and Society**

There are many unforgettable memories during my time in the Lion City, chief among them my very first business lunch with a senior banker from United Overseas Bank shortly after my arrival in Singapore. In addition to queries for updates on banking business in Vietnam, the banker asked me some questions on Vietnamese culture, language, arts and cuisine. I felt helpless and ashamed as I was unable to provide him with a satisfactory answer, despite being a Vietnamese myself, as my knowledge was inadequate and my English was not strong enough to explain matters well.

I decided to come clean about my ignorance and I became committed to acquiring more knowledge about Vietnam to be shared with my Singaporean customers, business partners and friends. Thankfully, this nationalistic drive and mission have indirectly helped me discover more about Singapore's many wonders and values that I had never been aware of.

## **A Bridge to the East and West**

Singapore is widely regarded as a bridge between the East and West, as the intersection and meeting point of diverse cultures. Singapore's story is, in part, the story of how it has absorbed and adapted different cultures – and their associated traditions and languages – into its market-driven economy and multicultural society. One vivid example would be Singlish, a mixture of English and Chinese or Malay.

While the Singapore government labelled Singlish a handicap for some Singaporeans, some local artists and writers have branded it a badge of Singapore culture, which many Singaporeans feel really proud of. *Lah* (as in “OK, *lah*”) is now among the 10,000 new and revised words to appear in the Oxford English Dictionary Online which defines it as “a particle used with various kinds of pitch to convey the mood and attitude of the speaker”.

## **Reflections on Singapore as Home**

I am now a Singapore permanent resident living in a cosy HDB executive flat in Queenstown. I treasure Singapore as my second home, truly a home with my daughter singing *Majulah Singapura* and reciting the Singapore pledge every weekday morning in a local primary school. However, from the bottom of my heart, I would admit that such a sense of belonging is a melange of expatriate pride and melancholic nostalgia.

Singapore does not have a long history compared to Vietnam, my home country. However, Singapore does have much to offer with its unique history and geography, a multi-racial population with diverse cultural values, a well-regulated society influenced by various religions, and in its status as a cosmopolitan and booming centre of capitalism in Southeast Asia.

In my opinion, the cultural identity of Singaporeans, though, is still a work in progress. You may have heard of the 5 Cs – car, condominium, credit card, cash and country club – as Singaporeans' main aspirations, and which hint at how important economic status is in their outlook on life. But my exposure to the Singaporean

Hokkien-speaking environment would offer another version, the 5 Ks, which provide an even deeper insight into their psychological make-up: *Kiasu* (fear of losing), *Kiasi* (scared of death), *Kia bor* (afraid of wife), *Kia boh* (afraid of having nothing) and *Kia chenghu* (afraid of the government).

Generally speaking, Singaporeans are nationalistic and always score high in surveys on national pride. The National Day Parade (NDP) is held every year to promote the Singapore spirit. Each NDP has its own theme song but a favourite among Singaporeans is *Jia* ('Home' in Mandarin) which comes with English and Malay versions too. This reflects the importance of family in Singapore society. As a minister, Lim Swee Say, once said, "Singapore is a capitalist America, a socialist China and a nationalistic Switzerland".

There is much to be learnt from Singapore in being an attractive hub for business, culture and human development. This has been a fruitful and rewarding learning journey in the Lion City.

## LE HUU HUY

Le Huu Huy is a Vietnamese national who has been living in Singapore for the last 15 years. He is Director of Vietnam Global Network, which offers consultancy services in trade and investment, education and training in Singapore, Vietnam and ASEAN. He also runs Vietnam Language Centre which provides translation and interpreting services and Vietnamese language courses.

# A Student in Singapore

CHRISTOPHER BRENTON

## ‘Singapura’

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” The famous line from *Romeo and Juliet*, so poignantly written by Shakespeare, has become somewhat of a cliché as far as descriptions go. While reflecting on Singapore and my experiences here thus far, it is the first thing that came to mind. Why, you ask?

While immersing myself in the fascinating and vibrant lifestyle Singapore offers, I have found that the literal translation for ‘Singapore’ offers an interesting insight into what it means to be truly Singaporean. *Singapura*, the country’s Malay name which means Lion City, conjures images in my mind of strength, vigour, and pride. While all of these characteristics are true to this nation, affectionately known as ‘The Little Red Dot’, the part that catches my attention is the word ‘city’. From what I have observed during my time here, the word, though historically referential, is hardly a fair descriptor for a nation of Singapore’s calibre. But before I expand on that, I would like to take a moment to explain what brought me to live in Singapore.

Unlike some of the authors who provided their insights after living in Singapore for many years, my experience has been framed by a much shorter stay in the country. I found myself in Singapore

as part of a foreign exchange program with Singapore Management University for four months from 3 August to 3 December 2011. The exchange is complementary to my current course of study in business administration at North Carolina State University in the United States. While pursuing my major and moving ever closer to graduation, I decided to take the opportunity to pursue a study stint abroad, hoping that the opportunity to see the world would provide me with a wider perspective and greater understanding of a culture unlike any I have ever experienced before.

I am ashamed to admit that I did not have much knowledge of Singapore prior to my overseas study application. To be honest, I am not afraid to admit (or to poke fun at myself) that my general knowledge of the country at that time was a result of brief references from friends and the opening scenes from *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End*, which features Chow Yun Fat's now infamous line: "Welcome to Singapore". While I am sure that movie producer Jerry Bruckheimer would be overjoyed at the thought that his film has established such a strong association with Singapore, it would be a real shame for anyone to allow this to become their impression of the country.

Unfortunately, this is a distinctly colourless reality for so many around the world, and until I arrived in Singapore, I must admit that I, too, fell into this category. Fortunately, I have never been one to leave a question unanswered, and after earning the opportunity to fly half-way around the world, I made it my mission to right those wrongs. Ending up in Singapore with my tank of knowledge at the 'empty' mark, I was enthusiastic about the chance to immerse myself in Singaporean culture and expand my global perspective.

### **Singapore's Charm**

When I first arrived in Singapore, I was immediately overwhelmed by its charm. Prior to my arrival, I had heard Singapore described as 'Asia for beginners', but having had the opportunity to travel through China, South Korea, and Thailand shortly before commencing my stay, I can admit that I took issue with the phrase.

It paints a picture of a nation with cultural dilution and muted vibrancy. That could not be any further from the truth. Singapore is a nation brimming with its own character and personality.

Drawing its identity from a wealth of cultures including those of China, India and Malaysia, Singapore offers a unique cultural experience for visitors that is refreshingly complex and inspirationally diverse. Even among the more commercialised centres (with special reference to the Central Business District), it is easy to encounter an incredible amount of artistry and historical context. This is especially true among the many colonial-era buildings (with a special nod to the National Museum of Singapore) which dot the island and reflect a harmonious balance of heritage and the progressive thinking evident in the environmentally-friendly modern buildings.

Another aspect I found quite appealing is the country's poise and sophistication. Like the physical embodiment of a montage, you can always depend on Singapore to put its best on display. This is especially true when it comes to national events, notably the National Day Parade or the numerous religious holidays observed throughout the year. Each event is meticulously orchestrated, generating an intense level of pride in Singaporeans and a matching sense of awe among foreign tourists and expatriates alike.

In addition to the physical beauty of the 'Garden City' nation, one feature that I have found to have made a considerable impact on my experience in Singapore has been the hospitality and spirit of the people here. As someone with little overseas travel experience, I deeply appreciate the generosity of those who have gone out of their way to make my stay as meaningful as possible. Also, I have found that the passion and internal drive, what some would describe as *kiasu*-ism, that is supposedly possessed by every Singaporean, is highly infectious and inspirational. It is hard to imagine that in its mere 46 years of independence, Singapore has been able to launch itself from third-world status to a logistics powerhouse cum financial hub in Southeast Asia.

Although my stay in Singapore has been brief in the grand scheme of things, my experience to date has left me with a fantastic impression and a giddy excitement to see what the future has in store for Singapore. After hearing about all of the amazing things that are in store for this nation, such as Gardens by the Bay and the Singapore Sports Hub, I am looking forward to seeing Singapore continue to establish itself among the global elite.

Singapore is a nation that has already far outperformed its original 'city' designation, but with its lion heart and spirit of a champion, you can be sure that Singapore will continue to push its limits and move ever forward. *Majulah Singapura!*

## CHRISTOPHER BRENTON

Christopher Brenton lived in Singapore from August to December 2011, while studying at Singapore Management University (SMU)'s Lee Kong Chian School of Business. His stay was part of an exchange programme between SMU and North Carolina State University, in Raleigh, North Carolina, US.



# From China to Singapore

ZHOU JI

As a child in a China which was starting to open up to the world, I had seen many shows about Singapore and Nanyang from made-in-Singapore serialised television (TV) dramas and films. These shows, aired over TV which was just becoming a mass appliance in China, gave me the impression that Singapore was a place full of risks and dangers. However, it also showed that Singapore had some similar characteristics with China. This always piqued my curiosity. As I grew up, I gradually learnt that Singapore is a well-known financial and economic centre, where many professionals and talents gather, and where innovative ideas take root. But I did not have an opportunity to become more familiar with Singapore, until a young Singaporean man, Roy, became my colleague in 2008.

Roy came from Deloitte Singapore, and was attached to my company, the Shanghai Electric Group Finance Ltd. In the three months with us, his professional competence and experience impressed us. During our work stint, we discussed and shared much with each other, and also delved into our hobbies and cultures. We became good friends; Roy has a good command of Chinese, so communication was smooth and in-depth, which helped me to understand the somewhat different culture he came from. I was pleased to get to know such a good friend from Singapore.

## **The Singapore International Foundation**

The next year, in 2009, another Singaporean, Joey, arrived to work in my company for two and a half months. Joey was from DBS Singapore. She managed to convey the Singaporean ways of thinking and working during her time with us. In the end, I had

made two good Singaporean friends, and I started thinking that in future I should fly to Singapore to experience for myself what their country was like.

Gradually, I learnt about the Young Business Ambassador (YBA) programme, which is hosted by the Singapore International Foundation (SIF) and Shanghai Youxie, an overseas connection organisation in China. The YBA Programme provides a platform for both countries' young professionals to get an opportunity to experience a different working and living environment via the exchange programme.

To my great fortune, I was selected by my company to participate in the YBA programme in 2010. I was excited that I finally had an opportunity to work and live in Singapore for ten weeks, not only for learning, but also to forge a better understanding with Singapore and its people. At the same time, I could make and maintain friendships with old and new friends.

From September to November 2010, I had a wonderful experience and an enjoyable time in Singapore. In the first week, SIF gave us - three other participants and I - an orientation about Singapore and led us to visit government bodies, related organisations and places of interest. The visits and communication with Singaporeans during these visits expanded our horizons and inspired our thinking. Every person we met had good presentation skills, as well as excellent time management. Singaporeans seemed totally focused in ensuring meetings would start on time and end on time.

I was also amazed at how, even during leisure trips, some Singaporeans would carry a notebook to record their thoughts and observations about work matters. In that week, I not only attained a better understanding of Singapore, but also picked up ideas and tips on how to manage my time better as well as communicate more effectively. Making use of these have since benefited me in my career.

From the second week onwards, I was attached to DBS Bank; specifically, I was with TMT team IBG1 in the bank. This department's

task was to gather information and updates in the telecom, media, and technology industry, and to provide financial services for corporations. During this period, I learnt much from my team in DBS, which is a leading financial service organisation in Asia. I gained much greater understanding of the diversity and depth in the corporate banking service, and the development trends in financial services. As compared to China, Singapore's business environment is rather open and free, and its corporations and organisations are more international and competitive.

### **A Mix of Nationalities**

My team in the bank is a truly international one. While in China, I do have team members from one or two other countries, I found that in Singapore, colleagues came from many different countries, including Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, India, Thailand, Korea, Hong Kong, and China. I was so happy to be able to learn from them and discuss ideas with them. With a mix of different ways of thinking stemming from different cultures, we would usually come up with better solutions. Teamwork really works!

This experience has been a most unforgettable one. I acquired broader sights, gained more knowledge, and was inspired by creative thinking ways. I am grateful to the SIF and YBA programme for such an opportunity to improve my life.

The most important aspect is, I gained friends – Roy, Joey and others from YBA and SIF, and my attachment colleagues. We still keep in touch with one another. The sharing and exchanging are still going on.

In Shanghai, there are already more than twenty members under this programme, all of whom have shared similar Singapore experiences. Sometimes we gather and talk about our Singapore experiences. We all felt that the Singapore stint had given us insights in the international scene, and helped further our careers.

So when I returned from Singapore, I volunteered to establish the Shanghai SIF alumni, with many lending a hand. I believe very much that my Singaporean experience should be shared as this

would help prepare my fellow citizens for the global economy. The alumni was set up and the first 'SIF Connects! The YBA Exchange' (which SIF organises in major cities to reconnect with programme alumni) was successfully held in May 2011.

## Zhou Ji

Zhou Ji works as a Product Manager for Shanghai Electric Group, one of the largest power station equipment manufacturers in China. In 2010, he was attached to IBG-TMT DBS Bank in Singapore for ten weeks under the Young Business Ambassador programme organised by SIF in partnership with SPAFFC (Shanghai People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries).





# **Business in the Lion City**

# What Makes Singapore Different?

JOERGEN OERSTROEM MOELLER

As a Dane who has lived in Singapore for more than 14 years, I naturally find similarities between Singapore's and Denmark's endeavours to carve out a niche for themselves in the harsh climate of economic globalisation.

Both countries try as best they can to use their geographical position to their advantage. The basic idea of the hub strategy comes naturally to the fore.

Countries like the United States and China use their domestic markets as a platform for economic strength. That is even feasible for middle-sized countries being well-established in certain segments of the global market. For example, in Europe, France in luxury products (fashion, haute couture, wine) and Germany in engineering. In Asia, Thailand in agricultural products and Vietnam in seafood. These countries brand themselves via a strong position in industrial segments, producing first for the domestic market before subsequently being turned into an export industry.

Neither Singapore nor Denmark can do likewise. They need to find something else to brand them – to be different. And they need branding because high-cost countries – and Singapore has, for some years, been in that category – find it agonising to compete on wages and prices. For such a strategy to be successful at all, it requires a tremendous effort, as the competition is with a whole string of countries with a much larger pool of labour, thus benefiting from lower wage cost. Singapore must do something else, something

better to lift itself out of this box, and branding is an obvious way. A brand offers something more than just the user value. The consumer enjoys something special by using a branded product and is ready to pay a higher price for that special 'something else'.

Singapore's brand pertains to efficiency, reliability, good corporate governance, good government, and rule of the law – factors which attract multinational companies.

For years, Singapore's harbour and shipping sector have been an important element in the country's economy and employ a large number of Singaporeans. These days, few people realise that it was by no means certain that Singapore would be the busiest harbour in Southeast Asia and among the largest container harbours in the world. It was achieved by realising that efficiency and the ability to deliver high-quality services every time a ship docks, which in turn conveys to shipping lines that Singapore could be relied upon. This brought about a virtuous circle: the larger the number of shipping lines which uses Singapore's harbour to their satisfaction, the more likely new shipping lines *inter alia* serving the Chinese market and/or established in China would also use it.

Having acquired the knowledge of running a harbour competently, Singapore's next step was to use that as a competitive parameter in offering this knowledge to harbours in other countries, supplemented by investing in harbour facilities in some of these markets.

### **The Global Competition**

Building an airline and an airport which, year after year, are ranked among the best in the world illustrates how a country using the hub concept can overcome the disadvantage of a small domestic market and establish itself as an important player in the global competitive game.

Now Changi Airport seems a natural place for an air travel hub in Asia, but a look at the map shows that this fruit could have been plucked by many countries. Thailand, Vietnam, and Malaysia are all as well positioned as Singapore, maybe even better, and



might have supplemented that with a larger domestic market. They have done so, yes, but Singapore grasped better than its competitors one of the essential things in global competition: you move in with both feet and wholehearted commitment, or you stay away. As the famed American general George S Patton said: Get there firstest with the mostest.

There is a good deal of risk associated with the hub concept in areas such as shipping and air transport. The investment required is enormous and cannot be changed with a snap of the finger. Therefore good planning and strategic foresight are indispensable to ensure the success of the hub concept.

In these areas, Singapore can also be described as a hub. There are not many cities around the world that welcomes the global intellectual elite for lecture tours, seminars, conferences and brain-picking as consistently as Singapore. These people come to Singapore to share their knowledge and ideas about future trends, and by doing so, they enhance Singapore's knowledge, which explains why Singapore enters the high-risk investment game with so much confidence.

The picture is the same when looking at the fields of Information and Communication Technology and biotechnology. Likewise for education and healthcare. A country choosing the hub concept and branding itself as a hub prospers by cultivating a stimulating intellectual climate and making itself an attractive place for talent.

### **Mega-cities and Mega-regions**

There is much talk about mega-cities and mega-regions as drivers of global growth in the years ahead. These economic powerhouses possess sufficient weight to forge ahead on their own, as is the case for, inter alia, Shanghai and several other Chinese cities. They show us that Thomas Friedman's message (in *The New York Times*) that the world is flat conveyed a basically correct analysis – in the global economy, everybody competes with everybody else. But there is another aspect to this, which is the notion that the world is also spiky, meaning that economic activities tend to be concentrated in

large cities, hence mega-cities and/or mega-regions.

The gist of this dawned upon me in 1994 when I visited Seattle. I was shown an analysis pinpointing the key advantages of being in Washington State for biotech and medtech industries. The absolute top scorer was quality of life with 35 per cent, followed by high quality of work force accounting for 21 per cent. Academic institutions came in as number three with 19 per cent. Income tax and cost of living scored a meagre 6 per cent. This is what started me thinking about quality cities. I later talked with the Head of Research of Novo Nordisk (a world leader in diabetes treatment), and he told me that the company encouraged researchers to take an interest in cultural life because it would enhance their powers of observation – a vital ingredient when judging whether a research project was worth pumping money into. I have often thought about this lesson: It is not so much the research as its applicability and the interdisciplinary, intersectoral approach to get there. That leads to quality cities!

What has not attracted so much attention, but unquestionably will in the future, is the notion of quality cities offering an economic and intellectual climate that attracts multinational companies and the intellectual elite to place some of their activities there. These global players do not put all their eggs in one basket; they spread them around, thus opening the door for quality cities to get a share of these lucrative activities taking place at a high, and in some cases the highest, level on the value-added ladder.

This is what the hub concept offers, and looking at Singapore over the past 14 years, what strikes me most is seeing how this concept has sunk deep roots in Singapore.

## **JOERGEN OERSTROEM MOELLER**

Prof Joergen Oerstroem Moeller is a visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, an Adjunct Professor at the Singapore Management University and Copenhagen Business School, as well as a Senior Fellow with the Diplomatic Academy. He was the former Danish Ambassador to Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, Australia and New Zealand before his retirement from public office in 2005.

# Getting Down to Business in Singapore

ORI SASSON

I was running a small software company in Israel when I first visited Singapore in 1994 as part of a delegation to the Asian Aerospace. During that first visit, I could not have imagined in my wildest dreams that I would end up living in Singapore. Over subsequent years, I spent between a couple of weeks to a couple of months a year in Singapore.

In 2002, I decided to move to Singapore with my wife to pursue a business opportunity. At that point, I had spent my whole life in Israel, except for three years during my early childhood in the US and Canada.

Singapore has a reputation for being business-friendly, and it consistently ranks high in the World Bank report of business-friendly nations. When I moved from Israel to Singapore, I was quite impressed with the relative ease of opening a company and the low costs of complying with regulatory requirements.

Indeed, opening a new company in Singapore is as easy as it can be. In fact, anything having to do with business regulatory obligations can be done online. For a simple company, the registration can be completed within the hour.

## **Getting a Grasp of Singapore's Work Culture**

Incorporating a company or opening a bank account is a formal and transactional activity. Running the company involves many aspects

which are people-centric, such as hiring and managing people, or interacting with vendors and customers. Handling such aspects might be more complex given the cultural differences between Singapore and other countries. This complexity is exacerbated by the fact that the Singapore population is extremely diverse. I will provide some anecdotes to illustrate some cultural differences between Singapore and other countries.

In Singapore, the most common practice is to grant employees 14 days of paid leave, in addition to public holidays, and another 14 days of sick leave, which requires a medical doctor to certify that the employee was sick. In one of my companies, we hired a young British woman who worked with a Singaporean Chinese woman and they both became good friends. The latter often called in sick, saying she “was down with flu”.

While having some informal communication with the British woman, she mentioned to me that she thought Singapore was very different than the UK, because in the UK, when you had the flu, it will take a few days to recover, whereas in Singapore, there seemed to be a different strain of flu from which you can apparently recover much faster. The reality is, some workers view their sick leave as an entitlement they need to consume.

So much so that one time I witnessed two employees, who held the same position, planning in advance their sick leave so that they would not be on sick leave on the same day. At that time, I was not sure whether I should be unhappy about the blatant exploitation of the sick leave, or be glad they had such a strong sense of responsibility and wanted to make sure someone would definitely cover the work in the other’s absence.

When I first arrived in Singapore, I met an Israeli man who was trying to make a living representing Israeli companies in Singapore and selling their products and services to customers here. His main focus was IT and telecom-related products. He would frequently tell me how he had given a great presentation in one organisation or that another seemed very receptive to his offer, but after two years of giving such presentations, he was

still unable to sell anything. I later realised that this relates to a fundamental difference in culture.

In Israel, where the culture is painfully direct, if you are presenting to a potential customer a product he is not interested in, the customer will cut you off in five minutes and show you the door, explaining that this is a waste of everyone's time. In Singapore, people are more polite, and in many situations, they will be willing to spend time to sit through a presentation which is not relevant to them, and even express interest or ask a couple of questions.

Another confusing signal is presentations which are well-attended with dozens showing up. My friend would assume that meant the potential customers really thought the product was of interest, but in reality it turned out that these 'customers' were technical people trying to learn more either to broaden their horizons, or even to try to learn how to build similar products.

To summarise, Singapore provides an excellent environment for businesses to operate. Depending on the line of business and the profile of customers, suppliers, and employees, one may need to develop some inter-cultural acumen to be able to successfully achieve desired business outcomes.

I found that spending the time to do so might well be worth the effort, given the ample business opportunities available and the high quality of life that Singapore offers. In less than ten years, I was able to grow my company from a one-man show to over fifty employees.

Over the same period, my wife, an occupational therapist, found a job in a local hospital, and later started her own private practice offering therapy for children. The practice has grown to a network of centres offering services such as occupational therapy, speech therapy, special education, psychological assessments, and physiotherapy, and which employs over thirty people.

## **ORI SASSON**

Dr Ori Sasson moved from Israel to Singapore in 2002. He now lives in Singapore with his wife and two sons. From 2007 to 2010, he was an Assistant Professor with the Singapore Management University. Dr Sasson is the founder of two Singapore-based ventures - Simulation Software & Technology (S2T) Pte Ltd, which provides data and text analytics solutions; and Dynamics Therapy Centre, which provides educational and therapy services for children.

# Singapore, the 'Can-Do' Country

HIROSHI SOGO

When the HR director gives you a ring, you wonder which way the wind will blow this time, as you anticipate a new assignment in a new location, possibly somewhere exotic. If it is a role in a foreign country for the first time, we Japanese tend to take it very seriously. What am I going to do with my wretched language skills? What is going to happen to my peculiar dietary regime that has only been possible in such an idiosyncratic habitat as Japan? These are some of the questions we tend to ask.

You turn to a man who has accumulated some experience in this aspect, only to be told: Don't worry, son, when in Rome, do as the Romans do. Helpful, encouraging or otherwise, it is ultimately and entirely up to you to decide.

My first overseas posting was to London. I thought, gosh, what will happen to me there? I would be a total alien – legally, culturally and in appearance – almost entirely deprived of the faculty of speech in the business world, let alone for socialising. Of the seven years I spent in Britain, the first two to three years were particularly tough for me and my wife, who shared the same predicament – the frustration of not being able to express oneself in their tongue. It was unfair, and we fretted like a couple of runaway teenagers.

When the same HR director called me again years later about my second overseas assignment, he sounded quite casual and

even optimistic. I knew what he was thinking: having survived England, surely this guy should be fine with Singapore! I recall how pathetically ignorant I was back then about this compact city-state located at a latitude of one degree north. *Que sera sera*, whatever will be will be, and so, resigned, I came here. That was over nine years ago.

### **Settling Down in Singapore**

It would be an understatement if I said that I was surprised to encounter hardly any problems in the beginning. It was a revelation that kept striking me for the first few months – that how well and thoroughly everything you need for daily life had been thought of, set up and provided for. Especially when compared to the miserable memories of my early days in London, I felt as if I should thank the HR fellow for his consideration in putting me into a comfy chair. Of course, I should have known better.

The difference between London and Singapore was obvious to me. You need more time and effort to know your way around in the former, whereas the well-organised, shiny and elegant simplicity on the surface of the latter disguises the intricacy of the social fabric that this place has. As you take a closer look and discover the reality of Singapore, you start wondering what to make of this country.

Many people have compared Singapore to a salad, or *rojak* in Malay, in which many different ingredients are put together, tossed with some dressing, but not necessarily a *mêlée*, and I tend to agree with this analogy. There are many ethnic groups, and their cultures are juxtaposed in streets, offices, malls, parks, museums, wherever you go. The way they co-habit is very natural and balanced, in an apparent equilibrium, if you like, that you might easily miss out on the fine details below the surface, where deeper emotion and character reside. It took a long time for me to realise the range and depth of the people and the society here.

As time gradually went by, I came to have the privilege of knowing various people, both in work and private settings, from



various backgrounds. The openness of the society affords you a chance to meet many people whom you would not usually expect to come close to under normal circumstances.

Since my job involves promoting publications, I get to see internationally renowned authors, film directors, musicians and artists. They are often joined by politicians and government officials, academics and diplomats from many countries, international business executives, students and many other kinds of people, at receptions, parties and conferences, and so on. The fact that Singapore started as a trade hub in the region remains the case today. It is a crossroads where people gather and meet.

Over the years, I have had the good fortune to meet and befriend a number of fascinating people, both Singaporeans and other nationals. Through conversations with them, I learned the stories of their individual lives, cultures, political views, artistic inclinations and their pursuits. The variety of these stories, in this particular setting, is truly telling. It felt as if Singapore serves as a stage where its cosmopolitanism attracts layers of human memories and experiences to be accumulated and amalgamated, to produce one huge collective character of the country. You could perhaps say that things can get as multicultural as Singapore does. Yet, it is the nature of this very multiculturalism, its hybridity of the entity as a whole, which characterises Singapore.

Our company has greatly benefited from this multilayered mechanism. Whenever we face a new challenge, we deal with it through multiple approaches based on the wealth of diverse experiences our staff and partners bring in.

### **The Dubai Project**

One memorable example was our project in Dubai. After a lengthy market feasibility study, we decided that the project was to be led by our Singapore management team instead of Tokyo headquarters. The main reason for the decision was that a somewhat new and very different kind of mindset would be needed in order to steer the project – a new bookstore in the Middle East, where our company

would be venturing into for the first time. The hybrid structure of a team with the Singapore element at its core would be better positioned to cope with various situations hitherto unknown to this organisation.

Our multinational task force consisted of Singaporeans, Japanese, Hongkongers, Taiwanese, Thais, Malaysians, Australians, French and Germans. The task force then set up a base in Dubai, where more staff from the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India, Egypt, Morocco, Ethiopia, Turkey, Iran, Lebanon, Syria, and so on, came in. My colleagues from Singapore were impressively agile and versatile in organising the staff from different cultures in a short span of time under difficult circumstances. These included the high temperatures during summer that often went up to around 50 degrees Celsius, or the Ramadan period when the working hours were restricted by law. There was a wide range of issues involving regulations and procedures that appeared utterly foreign to us. However, because our Singaporean staff were used to the multinational environment, they were able to lead, negotiate, cajole and sometimes confront our staff, suppliers, contractors, the local authorities and other associates, who were also involved in the project, in order to get things done.

Unfortunately, the final stage of the project coincided with the global financial crisis in 2008, which inevitably made the process even tougher. In hindsight, the new setup in Dubai may have lacked strong organisational glue and longstanding mutual understanding among the team members. It did look like a bowl of salad, a mixture of different leaves and vegetables quickly put together, to do the job – “Lettuce/Let us do it” would be our motto. However, that might have been a boon, unwittingly so, in fact. Because of the hybridity, we were flexible, able to change our postures and approaches depending on situations. When we banged into a solid wall, instead of trying to crack it by force, we tended to walk around, make a detour, to deal with it from a different angle. That was probably one of the most significant factors in allowing us to push through the project, and successfully opening the store that is now running effectively.

The can-do spirit is in the air here. That is why I think the much clichéd Titanic joke can be augmented by adding a Singaporean element: As the ship was about to sink, it became clear that there was a shortage of lifeboats. In fact, there were only enough to accommodate children, women and the most vulnerable. Men were asked to volunteer to remain on board. The British men were persuaded to do so for the sake of their honour. The Americans came forward to join them as they thought it was a heroic act. The French were philosophical since their idea of *amour* was at stake. The Japanese were willing to sacrifice themselves because they were told that everybody else was doing so.

Now, what about the Singaporeans?

They will say: Don't be silly. Let's go and find a solution.

## HIROSHI SOGO

Hiroshi Sogo has been living in Singapore with his wife since 2002. He is Group Managing Director of Books Kinokuniya's Pacific Asian operations (except Japan). He enjoys reading, eating, and walking through the Singapore Botanic Gardens, which is his favourite place in the city-state.

# Lebensqualitaet in Singapur

HENNING FOCKS

When people ask why I came to Singapore, I used to answer it was for purely romantic reasons. I fell in love with Singapore during a stopover in 1994. I loved the trees along the roads, strolling along Orchard Road, the outdoor cafes, the relaxed mood and the enormous helpfulness once I discovered the loss of my wallet in a Boat Quay restaurant. Not only was my bill waived, the restaurant owner even paid for the MRT fare to the hotel.

I landed in Changi Airport on 3 February 1998 with three suitcases and no job. Sure, I had about 15 interviews lined up as a result of over 300 phone calls over the previous few months. The problem arose when I arrived: the Asian financial crisis had reached Singapore. On the phone, some of my potential employers said, "Hope I can keep my own job. Good luck!"

After studying economics in Muenster, Germany and Lyon, France, I studied Mandarin at the University of Bochum for one year. My plan was to go to Beijing. However, in the late 1980s, upon watching the grievances and protests over the results of economic reforms in China, most of the students changed their minds. So did I.

## **Starting Anew in a New Land**

Singapore it was, and there I was in a hotel in Lorong 18, Geylang. I knew nothing about Geylang; it was this click-clack of high heels outside my door on weekend nights that made me suspicious.

Also, the seven layers of bedsheets – unusual. Never mind, the hotel was new, the rooms clean and the front desk friendly – all for \$49. The telephone in the room was the main reason I didn't choose an even cheaper place – I planned to stay one month.

After two weeks, I moved to a spacious flat with a witty Australian who was looking for a female flatmate, but accepted me. My friends called him Mr Grumpy as he kept cursing his Japanese bank superiors and his weekends consisted of watching cricket and consuming remarkable quantities of beer. For me, it was a brilliant match. Initially I often laughed politely without understanding his jokes, until I adapted to his accent, and quickly learned a register of Australian 'expressions'.

After three weeks, I found a position at a German trading house. The job was exciting, the boss was great, and I made more friends than ever before. Changing cities in Germany had never been so much fun and didn't allow to meet so many new people.

The first years in Singapore turned out to be a succession of interesting, usually pleasant, social events. Both a new job and a new life came along with an exciting blend of ethnic impressions, touristic highlights and social lessons.

After a few months on the job, our warehouse was inaugurated with a lion dance. We all went downstairs, and over 100 employees watched with amusement the human 'lion' dancing and jumping around, while a buffet spread with roasted pork and other delicacies was prepared. Obviously, they had forgotten to add 'free ethnic events' to my employment benefits.

In my first week in the new job, I had to call Singapore's Trade Development Board (today's IE Singapore) to ask for a company listing. In less than 24 hours, three heavy address books were on my desk. They had delivered them by courier. In the afternoon, they called me to ask if we had received them. I had never witnessed such service from a government body before.

With passion, I started promoting our new products. Naturally, many telephone calls were needed and during the first

year, it wasn't easy to understand people talking on the phone. Often, I hung up the phone asking myself, "What did he/she say?"

On my way to meetings all over Singapore, I loved to discover new parts of the island. So many trees! Even Jurong's industrial zones are mostly tree-covered alleys. I was thrilled. I do remember a few meetings that were unusually challenging. Working in marketing and sales, I was used to a friendly atmosphere during first-time meetings. But a few stern-faced clients persistently ignored my attempts at humour and left me stranded. Recently, a friend who introduced a new product to Finnish paper makers reported the same experience. It took him two years of meetings to get an approving look, three years for a smile.

### **Observations on Work and Industry**

The work ambience was good; my colleagues were friendly and very helpful. A week after I started my new position, one of my colleagues invited me to his wedding on Bintan. I hardly knew him so I was amazed at such kindness. His wedding was wonderful and some of the guests remain good friends until today.

Over the years, two industries caught my particular attention:

- A. Singapore's marine industry enjoys a geographical advantage like no other in the world, allowing it to serve 140,000 ships per year.
- B. Unlike Singapore, Indonesia faces a dramatic lack of electricity all over the archipelago while it offers endless opportunities to generate renewable energy.

It is hard to understand: my two-year-old handphone can parallel connect to eight satellites and the new Airbus can lift 800 passengers into the sky. On the other hand, the latest gas or chemical carriers, built in 2012, are in no way superior to the world's first ironclad vessel, the *La Gloire*, launched by the French Navy in November 1859 – in terms of corrosion. Both use(d) nothing than a mediocre marine paint preventing their steel from rusting away. Every three to four months, ship crews clean rust all over the ship deck. They

clean exactly the same spots as they did months earlier. Now and 150 years ago. They use 'middle age' tools like chipping hammers, grinders and so-called needlehammers with an accordingly low quality result. Ship crews hammer away, instead of removing the rust correctly with a sand blaster which would have lasted 5 to 10 years.

### **Setting Up a New Business**

That's why I ventured into this business. In 2004 I started Sound Steel Pte Ltd. The name refers to tender documents demanding 'steel of sound quality'.

Approximately 40 percent of the Indonesian population has no access to electricity. Electricity is one precondition for information, modern education and business development. At the same time, Indonesia, with its fertile volcanic soil, is one of the world's best place to find plantation waste and to cheaply produce fast growing biomass – both ideal feedstock for biomass power generation.

In addition, there is a large potential for other alternative energy generation, be it geothermal, hydro, solar, wind and wave energy, but these vast energy sources are hardly tapped on. Today, after years, the national power provider PLN is beginning to increase the feed-in-rates for renewable energy generation. This payment for electricity supply is crucial for every electricity venture.

Singapore, as a safe haven and location, is the ideal hub for both these activities. Whereas the marine business is self-explanatory, the energy projects require two main factors: safe and supportive regulations at the project site and willing investors, ideally in a safe banking place.

Singapore's rating as an investment hub has improved so drastically over the past fifteen years that it is expected to bypass Switzerland within the next ten years. European and US investors are flooding to Singapore, looking for investment opportunities.

More and more investors fancy 'green' projects if they are profitable and safe.

In 2006, our company started a venture for renewable energy sources called Green Energy Trading Pte Ltd, or GET. We connect projects and investors and support sustainable energy ventures.

From my perspective, Singapore has turned out to be an ideal place to start a business which has been my mantra for many years. Quite a number of business friends listened and came to stay.

### **Looking to the Future**

Singapore's past decade was a phase of expansion. Will we focus on life quality improvement in the coming decade?

Good plans have been realised. The canal renovations and the park connectors were great ideas. Wonderful timber walkways were built along reservoir lakes. Aware of the concern that remaining green spaces like Bukit Brown might be destroyed, our friends and I much enjoy visiting parks and reservoirs in our free time. In time to come, the people and government of Singapore would look back with regret if existing forests are not preserved.

Indeed, Singapore's green spaces spell the difference from other capitals. I am excited to find new bicycle tracks to spend weekends outside. There is no doubt - Singapore is a great place to live.

### **HENNING FOCKS**

Economist and entrepreneur Henning Focks grew up in the Black Forest and studied in France and Germany. He has lived in Singapore for 14 years and ventured into the marine industry and green project development following a background in marketing, advertising and industrial trade. An avid cyclist, he loves Singapore's lush greenery.







# **From Desert to Oasis**

# Reinvention in Singapore

JUDITH KAMM

## First Impressions

If Singapore was just ‘the world’s emporium’, known for the overwhelming number and diversity of its malls, where shopping has morphed beyond recreation to an art form and a religion, I would probably not have left our home in the northeastern United States to accompany my husband, Roger, for his entire six-month work assignment there. Shopping can give me a headache. I hate malls. The ubiquitous advertisements that clutter the print, on-line and broadcast media, on taxis, buses and MRT stations, are visual and auditory pollution I try and usually fail to ignore.

At first glance, life in Singapore seems to be primarily about making and spending money. It can be very expensive to live here compared to the US, especially in terms of cost of food, liquor, and home and car ownership. Not surprisingly, most of Singapore’s news media seem to focus on global business news, and the country appears to run itself like a business. Everyone, young and old, seems to be driven to study and/or work long and hard at the business of life. I get the sense that many Singaporeans, including those in government, share with the global business world the values of efficiency, pragmatism, competition, continuous improvement, and the greatest good for the greatest number.

## Preparation

During my first visit to Singapore in 2009, I visited several art museums, as I always do when I spend any time in a city new to

me. Having been a member and active patron of a major US city's world-class art museum for 45 years and having travelled widely both within and outside of the US during my academic career, I know what I like and what impresses me about such institutions. I liked what I saw in the content, presentation, and venues of the Singapore Art Museum (SAM), National Museum of Singapore, Asian Civilisations Museum, and the Peranakan Museum. And, I absolutely loved the National University of Singapore Museum's collection of sculptor Ng Eng Teng's work. One visit was clearly not going to be enough. I could not wait to return to these places. Thanks to our American friends who were already living here, happily immersed in the arts scene and generous in sharing their discoveries, I knew I had only sampled a small bit of it.

At that time, Roger and I knew that we would be returning for a six-month period, but we did not know exactly when. I had moved from teaching and research to administration, so a sabbatical leave was not possible. What I did know, however, was that I craved more time and emotional energy for drawing and painting. With Roger's support in every sense of the word, however, it was becoming clear that I could now take my life in a different direction. I arranged an early retirement plan with my employer. Spending six months in Singapore would set me free!

On my second visit to Singapore earlier in 2011 to find accommodation for our upcoming move, I gathered information on where I could take non-credit art classes. I spent one afternoon walking around the museum-rich colonial district near SAM, just to see what I could learn before going online.

It was also easy to immerse myself in Singapore's arts scene because our American friends had kindly provided me with an array of nice-looking, free print guides to the myriad exhibits at galleries and museums. I didn't like everything I saw, but high quality art includes the controversial, and I was happy and satisfied by the time we returned home.

## **Back to School**

By the time we returned to the US, I would have completed three very different types of art courses: a day-long print-making workshop at a museum; an eight-week Chinese ink painting course at an art college; and a set of four morning-long lessons in botanical drawing and watercolor painting at a commercial studio. That I was able to find and fit these experiences into my six-month stay reflects the wealth of readily accessible art education opportunities Singapore offers. The quality of education I experienced was every bit as good as what I would have had at home, with practicing and very accomplished artists as instructors.

What was better for me about taking these courses here, however, was that my instructors were Singaporeans, as were the majority of my classmates. I wanted to become better acquainted with local people. In addition, because of the strong influence of Chinese ink painting in Singapore's visual arts scene, it has been much easier to purchase the proper supplies and view the work of contemporary masters in person, some of which are on the murals at the Clarke Quay MRT station as well as on Singapore's fifty-dollar note. If ever there were a place to be introduced to this style of painting, Singapore seems to be as good as it gets.

Curious, restless, and ready to stretch myself at this phase of my reinvention, the print-making workshop was just what I was looking for. When I inquired via email about the skill level expected of participants, I was reassured that it was for complete novices like me, as it was an introduction to a very basic form of print-making albeit one that required a press machine. My experience was not all positive: I could not understand most of the instructor's English, my prints were awful, and this was not an art form I could practise for improvement at home. Nonetheless, just watching such a press in action, using such ink and paper, and seeing my classmates' creative results were enough to enhance my appreciation for this medium's artistry as well as my affection for this institution.

I had almost despaired of the Chinese ink course ever being started; it had to be pushed back so many times in an attempt

to find enough students. Although it had first been offered as an afternoon course, it ended up as an evening course with five of us: four younger female Singaporeans with full-time jobs and little formal art training. All we had in common was our gender and our interest in ink painting.

Our teacher, whose experience and skill could have made her dismissive of us, was matter-of-fact but patient in her exacting critiques of our paintings, which were attempted both inside and outside of class, and warmly encouraging. She took us seriously and was generous in every way, even allowing us who brought along cameras to photograph her amazing demonstration paintings.

Two treasured souvenirs are my plum blossom painting, which she signed for me in Chinese calligraphy and which I had professionally mounted as a scroll. Another is the parting gift she gave me – a bound collection of papers presented at an international symposium on Asian art, focusing on its development in Singapore over the past generation, and commemorating one of the art school's milestone anniversaries.

### **Watercolour Botanical Paintings**

Inspiring too, and a bit intimidating, are the highly realistic watercolour botanical paintings of my teacher and very advanced classmates in the course I am currently taking. It was ideal for me as my obsession with photographing and identifying Singapore's gorgeous flowers could be combined with learning more about watercolour painting techniques. I had been drawing and painting flowers since arriving, and had amassed quite an inventory of flower photographs from which to work.

Despite the exorbitant cost of nature guidebooks here, I had bought three in order to know the names of the flowers, trees, and birds I saw. However, this course has turned out to be frustrating due to my ineptness at perspective drawing, which the teacher (very nicely) demands should be correct. This has kept me from doing much in-class painting because two and a half hours fly away as I repeatedly draw, erase, and try again. And the small number,

disparate skill level, and inability of most students to speak English have turned what I thought would be a course into a truncated individual tutorial. The teacher and the non-English speakers converse in their own first language as she guides them.

### **In Appreciation of Singapore's Visual Arts Scene**

Reflecting on my small, idiosyncratic portion of Singapore's visual arts scene as I have just now, it occurs to me that there are several forces that seem to be at work as Singapore continues its reinvention beyond its commercial hub beginnings. There must be individuals in positions of political and/or economic power who love the arts for their own sake, as well as for their potential to foster inter-cultural and inter-racial understanding and harmony. The importance of aesthetically pleasing surroundings to these individuals is evident in how much great architecture and landscaping characterises Singapore's city centre.

This set of people must also be aware of and experience first-hand other nations' arts and how they are incorporated into societies. For example, what role does the government, both local and national, play in fostering or controlling, and in censoring, the arts? What role does business play? Are artists esteemed or viewed as slightly dangerous? Are they included in making decisions about support for the arts?

Without good judgment about what is the best in other nations' arts scenes, however, simple awareness would not be enough for successful reinvention. Those responsible for Singapore's arts development seem to have used what I consider to be a pragmatic approach: take the best and leave the rest. Therefore, discernment about the definition of 'best' would also be vital. From my perspective, Singapore's leadership seems to understand enough about its culturally diverse society to define as 'best' that which fits Singapore well. I have noticed this nation's self-consciousness about its identity, where it came from, how it is doing, and how it can be better. It is evident in the broadcast and print media, as well as in many of the art forms I've experienced (in novels, photography and painting exhibits, even in programme

notes for concerts).

The visual arts scene here seems to celebrate, adapt from, blend with, or move slightly beyond but remain in keeping with, the unique cultures that comprise Singaporean society. Perhaps I am sensitive to this because it feels similar to what I have learned about how America has developed since gaining independence a few centuries ago.

Finally, money is required to take the best and leave the rest, as Singapore reinvents an arts scene for itself. My husband and I are very grateful that this prosperous country finds ways to generously support it financially. Compared to my home country, which does not, the opportunity to enjoy high quality art in any form here is extremely affordable. That there are so many complimentary, useful, frequently updated, and attractive guides is fantastic.

Arts promotion to get more people, especially children, interested is very well done here. Museums, concerts, and dramatic performances are reasonably priced, even for non-citizens. It is wonderful that Singapore's elderly are able to enter museums for free. The festivals throughout the year also offer free performances. Music and visual arts schools offer many world-class performances and exhibits at no cost to the public. An excellent, commercial-free, all classical radio station is another blessing.

Original Singaporean art, regardless of its type, seems to be highly valued and nurtured without becoming parochial or closed to external influences. And, for a student like me, the cost of continuing education courses is much lower than it is at home. Art supplies are also relatively inexpensive and easy to find. This is one type of shopping that does not give me a headache, and I appreciate that Singapore truly is a shopper's paradise.

As we prepare ourselves psychologically to leave Singapore and return home, we know we will miss being in a country that not only values the arts, but has found creative, effective ways to allocate resources to nurture them, both with tax money and



corporate partnerships. Having learned from other nations to embark on its reinvention, Singapore now has much to teach them in return. We can only hope that their leaders will be as open to this learning as Singapore's have been.

## JUDITH KAMM

Dr Judith Kamm has been a member of Bentley University's Management Department for more than 30 years, teaching organisational behaviour, managing innovation, strategy, and business, government and society. She has published books and articles in managing innovation, entrepreneurial teams, and business ethics. She was in Singapore for six months in 2011 to accompany her husband who was posted here.

# Going Beyond Surfaces

MARIE LE SOURD

*"When I arrived in Singapore, I was still a child, I had not yet learnt a lot of things, and the little that I knew, I forgot it while entering the straits. I think it was excellent this way. If it would have been later or after having read what I read since, I would have discovered the Lion City with my spirit, whereas I got to know it with my own body, and saw it as Adam saw the paradise." <sup>1</sup>*

Just as Georges Cassel, who imagined a young western man discovering Singapore at the beginning of the twentieth century, I arrived in Singapore, albeit a little over a hundred years later, with limited knowledge of the city-state and of Southeast Asia.

## The Power of Nature

The greenery immediately struck me from the sky. The trees, the plants and all the various vegetative species seem to remind us that Singapore used to be nothing else but jungle. Even today, around fifty percent of Singapore is indeed still covered by green. It impressed me on my first day in Singapore on 25 May 1999, all the more since my workplace was at Nassim Hill then, close to the heart of the city, but still nestled in the midst of a huge garden where nature was overwhelming.

I could feel – and still feel it – the strength of nature, particularly after strong tropical rainfalls, when the heat comes not only from the soil but also radiates through the air, wrapping people

in invisible clouds. And yes, snakes and other reptiles can make their way to Orchard Road (even if it rarely happens), the Champs Elysées of Singapore, just to remind us that nature eventually controls this place, however modern the city may appear or has been transformed by human beings.

### **The ‘Sounds’ of Buildings**

If half of Singapore is green, it means, in turn, that most of the other half consists of buildings, roads and other concrete structures. I used to live for a few years in a Housing Development Building flat, which was for me a great way to get to know the diversity of Singaporeans. At that time though, I have to admit that I did not understand precisely what the word ‘diversity’ really implied. I realised later, while travelling and working in other parts of Southeast Asia, that this diversity had somehow contributed to the fact that I was not different from the others.

Just walking casually on the streets or going into buildings exposes you to many languages, and different voices, that you also become part of this global mix and symphony of sounds. *Singapore GaGa*, a film documentary by the Singaporean film-maker Tan Pin Pin, in that sense, rings so true about the diversity of sounds and languages and about the search for a Singaporean identity.<sup>2</sup>

### **An Artistic Sensibility of Being Different**

This difference is in another manner very sensibly approached by Haresh Sharma in his play, *Off Centre*, which later appeared in book form, and which remains my strongest memory of literature in Singapore. One of my closest friends in Singapore told me that when the first time this play was staged in 1993 under the direction of Alvin Tan, people in the audience cried. I was really moved too, reading the story of Vinod and Saloma, which is now part of the educational curriculum in Singapore.

The year I left Singapore, in 2006, since the book was re-published, I had the chance to watch a dramatic reading at The Arts House. This story about differences due to mental illness is localised in the Singaporean context because of its link to a society

where the best are always strongly encouraged. At the same time, the story is a global one too, since subjects of marginalisation, family and social pressures are, unfortunately, common issues everywhere.

### **Art and its Many Forms of Expressions**

My time in Singapore coincided with the flourishing of the arts scene: I arrived during the last three years of the Esplanade's construction, and left when the first Singapore Biennale was being held. In between and after, many new places have been and are still being opened. Arts and culture are more represented within and outside Singapore, with a stronger push to promote Singaporean artists abroad.

Apart from these more visible cultural buildings, which have the capacity to present to both Singaporean and regional audiences international cultural programmes, spaces like the Substation have tried to develop another kind of arts programming. The darkroom of the Substation, the first independent art centre set up by the late Kuo Pao Kun, where I discovered many films from Southeast Asia, theatre and dance events, and attended discussions, will always remain my place of reference. Other initiatives from artists and the civil society could be mentioned, and the Little India area was, in that sense, quite prolific with venues related to art and contemporary practices. The P-10 initiative, which has now become Post-Museum<sup>3</sup>, is another interesting endeavour carried out by artists willing to make people think of or react to their respective lives through contemporary art processes.

When I look back at my time in Singapore, I realise, more than ever, that I was fortunate not to have been filled with preconceptions before coming. Is this approach too candid? Perhaps, but I guess it had helped me to understand better the many aspects and realities the city-state encompasses.

Globalisation has brought more people to see the world, to look at it, but they have not really delved into what they witness. This may be due to the fact that many (including me) form

impressions of places through guidebooks, internet articles and exchange (real or virtual) with friends, before actually venturing there in person.

I wish, as the famous late reporter Tiziano Terzani<sup>4</sup> did, one could sometimes travel the world and make a decision to take a longer but direct entrance through land and sea paths to countries, while escaping the cold and universal aspects of international airports. When you enter Singapore for the first time through Changi Airport, you begin to understand the city – as a controlled, high-tech, modern, organised and clean world – but at the same time, this is only the beginning of the process to know better its true and complex character.

#### Notes:

1. Translated from the first lines of the book *Singapour* by Georges Cassel, La petite collection des *Editions du Sonneur* ([www.editionsdusonneur.com](http://www.editionsdusonneur.com))
2. *Singapore GaGa*, by Tan Pin Pin ([www.tanpinpin.com/sgg/index.php](http://www.tanpinpin.com/sgg/index.php))
3. Post-Museum is an independent cultural and social space in Singapore, serving as an open platform for examining contemporary life, promoting the arts and connecting people ([www.post-museum.org](http://www.post-museum.org)).
4. Tiziano Terzani was an Italian reporter, particularly for the magazine *Der Spiegel*. He was famous for his extensive knowledge of the politics in East Asia during the 20th century. His book, *A Fortune Teller Told Me*, relates his one year travelling throughout Asia, while avoiding taking planes and following the advice of a fortune teller in Hong Kong (who predicted to him he would risk his life flying).

## MARIE LE SOURD

Marie Le Sourd is French. From May 1999 to August 2006, she lived in Singapore where she worked at the Asia-Europe Foundation. After five years as the director of the French Cultural Centre in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, she is now the secretary general of the cultural mobility information network, *on the move* ([www.on-the-move.org](http://www.on-the-move.org)), in Brussels.

# The Singapore Dance Theatre

JANEK SCHERGEN

Almost every major international city of distinction can boast a significant number of arts-related institutions, from museums to performing arts, as a part of their cultural landscape. They are not absolutely essential to us, but they add a quality to our lives that cannot be measured. What distinguishes us as a place with a culture is how we value experiences that are not of tangible value. As Singapore moves forward, so does the need for the country to be more than what one might initially expect. For my part, this has meant the Singapore Dance Theatre and its development as a professional dance company within Singapore.

In 1988, the Singapore Dance Theatre (SDT) was founded by two determined Singaporeans, Anthony Then and Goh Soo Khim. They believed that Singapore deserved a professional dance company, like those established in many other countries.

Until 1987, I was the ballet master of a very prominent and well-respected Singaporean choreographer, Choo-San Goh. He was the Associate Director and Resident Choreographer of the Washington Ballet in Washington, DC. We worked there together. It therefore seemed fitting that one of his creations was the first work presented by the then newly-formed SDT. I came to Singapore to teach the SDT dancers the ballet for their first performance season in 1988. The work was called *Beginnings* and was made for just a quartet of dancers. Little did I realise, then, that I was taking the first steps to my future life in Singapore.

## Starting Out

Truthfully, at that time in the 1980s, Singapore was not the cultural hub of the region that it has since become. Over the years, there had been many international touring arts groups in music, dance and theatre, but creative Singaporeans had not yet found an avenue to fully develop their own arts organisations. The lure of seeing larger and well-established groups holding performances was slightly at cross-purposes with the patience needed to see small arts organisations grow in a slow and constant path. Many of the professional arts organisations established in Singapore today had not yet been founded then. The Singapore Symphony Orchestra had only been formed in 1979, and its development was still in the formative stages.

The Singapore Arts Festival was an attempt to satisfy an ever more sophisticated populace eager to see world-class performances on stage. It was held only on a biannual basis for many years. This was an exciting time, full of possibilities for the performing arts. There were still limited places to present performances. Victoria Theatre and Victoria Concert Hall had a long history of being the site of important historical moments. The SDT held its first performances in June 1988 at Victoria Theatre, its home venue for many years to come. The company's first important steps had begun.

When SDT was first set up, there were just seven professional dancers in the company. The company needed more dancers and a bigger operating budget, and to attract talented choreographers. This required a combination of skills from a number of people involved on many levels. The Singapore National Arts Council was instrumental in providing seed money to see the company established, with a Board of Directors and management staff in place. Audiences and patrons followed. What transpired was steady growth for the company.

Now, SDT is fast approaching its 25th anniversary. It can boast of 32 dancers and an international repertoire of full-length classical works such as *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The*

*Nutcracker* and many others. One major focus of the company is presenting established masterpieces of repertoire from well-known choreographers in the field of both classical ballet and contemporary works.

Finally, the most important element is the new works created especially for SDT, which distinguish it as a unique dance company. We are not defined as strictly a ballet company, and pride ourselves on being able to do classical and contemporary work with equal authority. The company mounts six performance seasons a year in Singapore at major arts venues, including our annual *Ballet Under the Stars* at Fort Canning Park. We also embark on annual international tours; we have performed throughout Asia, Europe and America. SDT also conducts educational outreach performances. Sometimes, it feels like a very large mandate to fulfill.

For my own part, Singapore has become my home since 1988. I have come here almost every year (sometimes twice a year) to guide SDT on its path to growth and professionalism. Eventually, in 2008, a turning point came for the company. I was asked to become the full-time Artistic Director after having served as SDT's Associate Artistic Director previously. It meant making my home here and I am honestly able to say that I feel grateful. The rewards, both in my professional and personal life, have been tremendous.

### **Growth of the Arts in Singapore**

I have watched, over the years, as Singapore changed in almost every way. To some degree, the changes are all around us every day, spurred by a burgeoning economy. In many other ways, the changes are so subtle that one hardly notices, and adapts as one does anywhere in the world. These developments are constant and are necessary for every level of society. Still, sometimes when I stop and look around me, I am amazed at how far things have come in so short a time.

I have always believed in the element of education through the arts, with the scope it brings to our lives. Literature, visual arts, dance, drama and music can open a window in a personality



that can grow and flourish in the most beautiful way. Some people find more established arts groups to be to their liking, while others respond to smaller groups that are less narrowly defined. As we are a multi-cultural society, we also have the benefit of traditional arts forms in establishing our cultural heritage.

Singapore now stands in a unique place in the region, with world-class arts institutions on almost every level, and several performance spaces that are truly enviable. The next generation may not see the tremendous changes all the different art forms and performances have brought to Singaporean audiences, but there is more ahead to be sure. If retrospect is as perfect as they say, what is waiting for us with the development of the arts in Singapore will enrich our lives and fill us with rewarding experiences worth remembering in future as they have in the past.

## JANEK SCHERGEN

Janek Schergen is Swedish/American. He danced with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet and Pennsylvania Ballet and has been the ballet master for The Washington Ballet, Royal Swedish Ballet, Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre and Norwegian National Ballet. In 1991, he graduated from the Benesh Institute in London as a choreologist. He is the Artistic Director of the Choo San Goh & H Robert Magee Foundation and Chairman of The Choo San Goh Awards for Choreography. He is also the Artistic Director of Singapore Dance Theatre and has staged numerous full-length classical ballets, such as *Sleeping Beauty*, *Giselle* and *Swan Lake* and *The Nutcracker*.

# Harmony in Diversity

VICHAYA MUKDAMANEE

## The Art Associate Programme

Right after I graduated from Pratt Institute in New York with a Masters Degree in 2010, I participated in the Art Associate programme by the Singapore International Foundation (SIF) in partnership with the National Art Gallery of Singapore. I was attached to the gallery (now under construction) for ten weeks as an art researcher. Throughout my time in Singapore, every day was a learning journey.

In my opinion, Singapore has always been perceived as the land of opportunity and economic hope, and now also for the arts. Although I am back in Bangkok as an instructor at Silpakorn University in Thailand, my memory of the museums, galleries and artworks I saw in Singapore remains fascinating and inspiring, and I often share it with my colleagues and students. Beside teaching, I am a visual artist and also write for an art magazine in Thailand.

As an artist working in Southeast Asia, I have had the chance to exhibit my work in Thailand and overseas, and have always questioned the lack of good contemporary art museums in the region. Many Southeast Asian artists and art lovers had to fly to Europe or United States in order to enjoy outstanding museums and art galleries. Some of them even had to work abroad in order to find opportunities to hold exhibitions and collaborate with international artists. Now, we do not need to look further because there are plenty of prospects located close to us, in Singapore.

The art industry in Singapore has clearly shown major developments in the past ten years – as shown by the increasing number of art galleries, museums and art exhibitions. As a young country in ASEAN, Singapore tries to use art as a representation of history and portrays interesting, diverse cultures and heritage. Singapore is not only the economic and trade hub of Southeast Asia, but also a cosmopolitan country, where history and modernity, East and West, come together comfortably to create an astonishing melting pot of cultures.

Because of its location and infrastructure, which makes it a centre of trade in the region, as well as the great support from the government, Singapore has begun to assert itself as the hub of the ASEAN art and culture community. The quality of the museums is of international standard and attracts many renowned international artists to hold their exhibitions in Singapore. As an example, Cai Guo-Qiang, a widely-celebrated Chinese contemporary artist, whose significant works are a series of gunpowder drawings, sculptures and installations made from big objects and replicas of animals, had his first solo exhibition in Southeast Asia at the National Museum of Singapore in June 2010. I managed to catch the exhibition when I was in Singapore under the Arts Associate Programme.

### **A Variety of Museums**

Every museum under the National Heritage Board has a different focus and objective. There is the Asian Civilisations Museum, which collects cultural artefact from the Asian continent, including East Asia, India and Middle Eastern countries. The National Museum of Singapore is a great resource for both Singaporeans and foreigners to learn about the history of Singapore, including the development of its social system, economy, lifestyle, art and culture. The Singapore Art Museum exhibits contemporary art from both Singaporean and international artists. Another important facility that will fully open in 2015 is The National Art Gallery of Singapore, located in the old Supreme Court and City Hall buildings. This massive museum will focus on artworks created by reputable and prominent modern and contemporary artists

from Singapore and other ASEAN countries. There are thousands of artworks and artifacts in Singapore's national collection, which makes it the biggest collection of Asian art in the world. With these three museums, we will be able to have the full picture of the history of art and culture in the region, from the cultural, modern, and contemporary aspects.

Singapore has a very unique and diverse culture. The diversity comes from the mixture of Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Eurasian races. From street to street, you can see the variety of lifestyles, architectures, languages, and food. These distinctive characters have influenced many artists to create remarkable artworks. Singaporean artists have already established themselves on the global art scene; examples are Tang Da Wu, Amanda Heng, Lee Wan, Jason Lim, Vincent Leow, Donna Ong, Michael Lee, and Suzann Victor. Their artworks integrated both Western conceptual themes and the Eastern spiritual meanings, which gave a very unique character to it.

There are also numerous private art galleries in Singapore, which are fascinating to visit. Each gallery focuses on different areas of contemporary art. Some exhibit contemporary work by avant-garde artists, and others display more traditional pieces. There are also those that exclusively exhibit artworks from specific countries, such as China, India, the Philippines and Laos.

Since 2008, Singapore has held large-scale international art fairs almost every year, such as Singapore Biennale and ArtStage Singapore. The organisers invite artists, collectors, curators, and critics from all over the world to Singapore for their shows and exhibits. Some collectors come to these fairs, buy the artworks and then expose them elsewhere through exhibitions and auctions. This results in more potential buyers and avid art collectors from every corner of the world. Because of this, Singapore has become another destination for young and emerging artists to find opportunities and to publicise their work internationally.

My experience in Singapore was a memorable and priceless one. Besides working as an art researcher, exploring so many

extraordinary places in the city, indulging in varieties of food, I also had a chance to hold a duo exhibition with a Cambodian artist, Veasna Tith, at The Arts House in July 2010. The exhibition was fully sponsored by the SIF. The title of the exhibition was *Diverse Harmony* – inspired by the union of Singaporeans who, although of different races, cultural backgrounds and religions, live in harmony.

I wish that in future, this harmony will grow within the ASEAN community as well. To me, Singapore is not another neighbouring country, but the home of great friends that we work, talk, and connect with. Together, we will definitely help lead our region to a brighter future.

## VICHAYA MUKDAMANEE

Vichaya Mukdamanee is a Thai visual artist and a lecturer at Painting Department, Faculty of Painting Sculpture and Graphic Arts, Silpakorn University, in Bangkok, Thailand.



# **Amongst the Singaporeans**

# Singapore and the Asian ‘Reserve’

GRACE LEE

People are not usually suspicious of me. Some people think I’m warm and friendly. Some people think I’m serious. Many people tell me I remind them of someone they know. But until five years ago when I moved to Singapore, most people did not regard me with suspicion.

Having grown up mostly in the United States and Canada, the most salient feature setting me apart from others was my Asian-ness. I know now that some of my feeling of ‘not belonging’ had to do with cultural differences – because I’m Asian-American.

In Singapore, my most salient feature, the one that sets me apart, is my American-ness. At first, it made me feel like I don’t belong, but recently, I have developed an appreciation for the irony.

## **Americans and Singaporeans**

Although there are many Americans in Singapore, the awkwardness is that I don’t look typically American. In fact, because I look like a local Singaporean Chinese, I feel the tacit expectation and pressure to speak Chinese (which I don’t), understand Singlish phrases (which I’m still learning), and behave in accordance with local cultural norms (which I struggle with).

I don’t consider myself especially loud and gregarious. In fact, in comparison to the typical American, I would say I’m rather reserved. But compared to the typical Singaporean, I think I might be considered too forward.

Within two months of moving to Singapore, a strange incident left me bewildered. I was at a lunch party, helping the host in the kitchen. Someone tapped me on the shoulder to introduce me to a guest who had just arrived. I turned around, flashed her a big smile, enthusiastically said hello, told her I had heard many wonderful things about her, and was about to give her a hug. She suddenly averted her gaze, took a step backward and turned her body away from me. After that introduction, she avoided contact with me. I think she continued to regard me with suspicion for a couple years after that.

I realised after similar, but less melodramatic, encounters that I needed to tone down – to restrain my expressions and to curb my enthusiasm.

One of my friends who is direct, extraverted, and vociferously open with her opinions idealises the Latin American style of interaction. She loves the disarming warmth and exuberance of Latin Americans, even the emotionality and volatility, “where you know exactly where you stand in someone else’s eyes – no guesswork involved”.

I’m still ambivalent about my friend’s comment. Singaporeans may be reserved by North American and Latin American standards, but I feel that American culture can sometimes take uninhibitedness to an extreme.

### **Asian Culture**

After five years of living in Singapore, I’ve come to appreciate some of the subtleties of Asian culture. Like the more quiet sister, the muted tones and demure expressions lend her a mysterious air that can sometimes keep you guessing. And now that I understand her a little better, I find her understated charms different, but no less seductive than her more flamboyant sister’s appeal.

“So, tell me something interesting about yourself.” It’s direct, to the point and filled with opportunity. But I’d never ask that of someone here. It would be seen as too intrusive, threatening, and fraught with expectation.



On the upside, my capacity for steering clear of personal questions and replacing these with small talk is improving. I know more about my Singaporean friends' than my American friends' preferences for travel destinations, TV characters, restaurants, lipstick brands, and bargaining tactics. It's in the sharing of these seemingly mundane matters that secrets are slowly revealed, and friendships are formed.

On the downside, it takes longer to really get to know someone here.

Granted, intimacy is built slowly, over time, through mutual trust and progressive self-disclosure, but the process varies in length from one culture to another.

What I really want to know when I meet new and interesting people everywhere is what makes them tick. What inspires laughter and happiness? What fills them with hope? What do they daydream about? And what are they afraid of?

Don't the answers to these questions reveal the essence of a person?

I've often wondered how to cut to the chase, to have deep meaningful conversations, to be in authenticity with someone else.

Perhaps I'm guilty of expecting instant gratification. If so, then as far as friendship goes, Singapore has helped me to develop patience. And patience in friendship is an undervalued quality. I'm reminded of Marcel Proust's words: "Let us be grateful to people who make us happy; they are the charming gardeners who make our souls blossom."

## GRACE LEE

Dr Grace Lee is a social psychologist. She founded Glee ThinkWorks, a well-being consultancy in Singapore, and teaches an honours course in Positive Psychology at the National University of Singapore. Born in Manitoba, Canada, and raised mostly in Hawaii, US, she moved to Singapore in December 2006 for love and adventure.

# Reverse Parking

PAUL RAE

One of the best-known plays by Kuo Pao Kun, the late doyen of Singapore theatre, is *No Parking on Odd Days*, a monologue he wrote in 1986 about a man who contests a parking fine. The man feels he has been unfairly penalised for mistakenly parking in a lorry bay when the 'lorries only' sign is far from the space. It is a play about the small battles you fight to assert independence and individuality when all around you are toeing the line. I am sometimes reminded of Kuo's plays when I park my own car. Not that I regularly achieve the principled stand of his everyday hero – but when I slew front-on into a parking space in a busy car park, I do take pleasure in the almost entirely trivial thrill of going against the grain.

You see, Singapore motorists are inveterate reverse-parkers. Many is the time I've returned to my car to find its rear end defiantly cocking a snook at the serried ranks of more demurely outward-facing vehicles, which sit there like so many accessories to a bank heist, lined up for a mass getaway. But why do Singapore cars come with reverse parking as standard? In a nation that places such a premium on efficiency, reversing into a space is an inordinate faff, much more so than reversing out of one. Of course, the geometry of front-wheel steering means that reversing allows for greater precision when manoeuvring into a tight spot; and the dilapidated state of my front bumper tells you all you need to know about the perils of overshooting a parking space when there's a

low-lying kerb to contend with. But more often than not, I'll be parked, out, and halfway down the lot by the time your average reverser has completed the complicated shuffle that had begun before I even arrived.

Why?

What is the reason for this atypically inefficient behaviour? How many man-hours have been lost to such a quirk? How much handed over in fines after eagle-eyed traffic wardens spied expired parking coupons on the dashboards of front-facing cars that might have gone unnoticed had the car been pointing in? A few years back, younger drivers would festoon their dashboards with all manner of Disneyfied kitsch or football paraphernalia. Proudly presenting these little automotive stage shows to passers-by could be one reason for reverse-parking. But that fad has passed. These days, rear window stickers advertising your religion or animal charity of choice are all the rage, which for obvious reasons are not well-served by being hidden from view at the back of the parking space.

One could speculate indefinitely about the origins of this peculiar practice. But my own interests are less anthropological than philosophical. Singapore is a notoriously forward-facing society. Advanced, developed, futuristic, it appears largely unencumbered by the pasts that weigh so heavily on many other postcolonial nations. All those cars lined up and ready to pull out into the onward flow of the future at the turn of an ignition key could be seen as a perfect illustration of this.

As the journalist Janadas Devan has argued, forgetting is the condition of modern Singapore: in order to give itself sufficient flexibility to invent the nation it inadvertently discovered itself to be in 1965, it had to make a decisive break with its past. Since it needed to do business with Japan, for example, the Japanese occupation of the Second World War would be downplayed. And since independence was somewhat accidental, Singapore's future success would come to be seen as an inevitable outcome of its manifest destiny.

### Singapore's Focus: The Future

However, as we are reminded by my daughters' favourite Greek myth – in which Orpheus descends to the underworld to retrieve Eurydice, but loses her when he looks back as she follows him out – however important it is to keep your eyes front, the temptation to throw a glance over your shoulder is irresistible. And while it may not be quite so glamorous – and thankfully nowhere near so tragic – we could say that the Singaporean predilection for reverse parking exemplifies a secret desire to look back in a nation that is resolutely focused on what lies ahead. After all, you can't reverse into a space without careful attention to rear-view and wing mirrors. And these little splinters of what's behind that sit within your view of what's ahead seem a perfect illustration of how the past often figures in the future-focused present: fragmented, partial, subject to a degree of manipulation to get a better view, but also carrying their own blind spots and distortions, and always dependent on where you yourself are sitting.

Despite my own front-parking proclivities, in my work with my theatre company, spell#7, I have tried to manoeuvre audiences into a similar position by presenting performances that are recognisably of the present, but are arrived at through careful attention to fragments of the past. *Tree Duet* (2007-9) was about how trees influence our experience of the city, and was based in part on archival research at Kew Gardens on the life of Nicholas Ridley, an early director of the Botanic Gardens who established the Malayan rubber industry at the beginning of the 20th century. In *National Language Class* (2008), we took a 1959 painting of the same name, which showed Chinese students learning Malay, as the starting point for a multi-lingual language lesson with the audience which explored the relationship between language, ethnicity and national identity. And in *Epic Poem of Malaya* (2010), we presented a picture of Singapore as seen from the sea, by telling the life story of a boy who leaves the island in the 1930s and marries into the community of the *Orang Laut* – sea nomads – only to return to Singapore when he is old, finding the city changed beyond recognition.

In all cases, the aim has not been to present an accurate depiction of Singapore's past, but rather to highlight some of the ways in which the past bears upon the present, even when the details lurk in a blind spot, or are distorted beyond recognition. It is one of the things art is good for, and we are not alone in this endeavour.

Perhaps, too, it is good training for more perilous times. The German philosopher Walter Benjamin once described history as an angel blown backwards into the future as the debris of the past piles up beneath its helpless gaze. Occasionally, when I find myself flying headlong into the future at 60 kph with my eyes glued to the rear-view mirror in a multi-lane bid for the next right filter, I do wonder what kind of present I am living in.

## PAUL RAE

Dr Paul Rae moved to Singapore from the UK in 1996. He is co-artistic director, with Kaylene Tan, of spell#7 performance ([www.spell7.net](http://www.spell7.net)), and an Assistant Professor on the Theatre Studies Programme at the National University of Singapore. He is the author of *Theatre & Human Rights* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

# Larger Than Life: Meetings with Remarkable People in Singapore

BEN SLATER

During my first years in Singapore, I was often asked, “What do you miss about your home?” The answer to that question was, and still is, people. Places and spaces hold memories and evoke emotions, but family and friends, whom I rarely see, are a genuine absence. Now that Singapore has become my home, it’s the same.

The people I’ve met mark my time here. And there are those unique characters who, regardless of vastly different experiences and cultures, are simply larger than life. They rise above the mundane and the mediocre by design or by accident, and thankfully, in Singapore, I’ve met my share. Whether I’ve known them for years, months or a few hours, these are the ones who won’t be forgotten. They are Singapore for me. And this piece of writing is a way to remember four of them.

## **The Artist**

It is impossible to dredge up the first moment I lay eyes on Zai Kuning, an emaciated, weather-beaten double of sardonic actor James Coburn. Zai, quietly but forcefully, moved into the second floor room of the shophouse where I worked for arts group spell#7, circa 2003. Often alone in our spaces, initially we tolerated each other, making sparse but not unfriendly conversation. Late one night, when I was home in Bedok, he called me. I didn’t even know he had my number. He’d locked himself out of the shophouse.

Without hesitating, I jumped into a cab. Half an hour later, I was opening the door for him in Little India, and happy to do it.

Maybe it was a test, because after that, we got closer. He invited me upstairs to watch rough cuts of films, look at drawings, hear music or witness a performance involving chicken carcasses, and sometimes just to talk. He made brilliant and bold art around this time – a severed tree in Sculpture Square, a raucous performance at the Esplanade, and there were many ideas, schemes and dreams. Zai's entire life is a kind of work of art, often ragged, messy and frustrating, but occasionally beautiful and unforgettable. I moved on from the shophouse and so did he. Our paths rarely cross these days, and he spends less and less time in Singapore, but he's still creating, and only on his terms.

### **The Gangster**

No, not really a gangster, although he has a story about being initiated into a Chinese gang in his youth, and it's better than calling him The Expat, because that isn't true either. Ronni Pinsler was born in Singapore, his parents Eastern European emigrés. They were successful enough to send him for an education in England, although as a child, his first utterances were in Hokkien and his *amah* inculcated a life-long passion for Chinese folk religion and rituals, bringing him to Taoist festivals when his parents were away.

I learnt all of this one indelible afternoon in Ronni's sprawling Leonie Hill apartment in 2005. I was researching my book about the film *Saint Jack*, which Ronni had been peripherally involved with. Time with Ronni is a richly textured experience; his mellifluous voice flows freely, utterly without caution, of his life, the people he's met, the things he's done; and there's been a lot of living. Around us was a formidable collection of artifacts, books and cabinets literally overflowing with photographs. Every surface seemed to contain clues and fascinating records of Singapore's past. As I left, a young woman from the National Archives arrived. Today, much of what Ronni saw has been stored and digitised. But the man himself, that's the real archive.

### **The Collector**

Before you knew him, Toh Hai Leong might seem to be a nuisance. He'd be at almost every screening or film event, numerous bags swinging from his shoulders and hands, talking loudly and often unintelligibly, seemingly unaware of social decorum. I once saw him describe a grisly murder fantasy to a foreign embassy bigwig, but by then, I'd grown fond of him. We'd bump into each other and chat, and once or twice actually arranged to meet. On these occasions he'd open up those ubiquitous bags and pass me 'gifts' (and I wasn't the only one) – photocopies of film articles, VHS tapes and yellowing paperbacks. All carefully and lovingly curated by Hai Leong from his personal collection. In a way, this was how he communicated.

That's not to say he didn't speak; he talked incessantly, long tirades that required little reply, riffing on things he loved and hated with equal passion. When I first knew him, he was doing some film curating, a little writing, but not much, and the situation declined as the years went by. He became the star of a film that showcased his dark humour and misanthropy, but the momentary attention it brought him wasn't enough. Money was scarce and his health failed him quite disastrously. Hai Leong grew quieter and more withdrawn, lost a lot of weight, and his collection disappeared too. Now he's hospitalised, unable to look after himself. He may have forgotten much of who he is, but there are plenty who remember.

### **The Director**

First things first: she died in 2009 and she was Malaysian, but I include Yasmin Ahmad because I kept meeting her in Singapore and because she was much loved here. Many great friendships and encounters have been made possible by Singapore's willingness to import talent, like a procession of interesting guests at an unending dinner party.

Yasmin was in demand because she had a gift for making films with simple, resonant messages, although they could often be controversial. In person, she was mesmerisingly 'on', living



every moment with extraordinary intensity. A few hours in her company, especially if it was just you and her, was thrilling and invigorating. She was driven by curiosity and mischief. When we weren't talking about stories and films, she'd be telling rude jokes, deliberately embarrassing me (I rarely felt so 'English' than in her company), or she'd simply chat up a waiter. She lived life creatively and inventively, and inspired all who met her to try to do the same, even if it could be exhausting. When you said goodbye to Yasmin, you walked away feeling a few notches above your regular place in the world. And I miss those goodbyes.

## BEN SLATER

Originally from the UK, Ben Slater moved to Singapore in 2002. He is the author of *Kinda Hot: The Making of Saint Jack* (Marshall Cavendish, 2006) and is a Lecturer at Nanyang Technological University.

# Uncle Freddie

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EDEL TOLENTINO

It's the fourth Thursday of November 2011, Thanksgiving Day in America. Around this time the previous year, I had answered the ring on our door. It was Uncle Freddie. He was in his everyday getup – a loose white singlet, dark-coloured boxers, shod in light green flip-flops – and holding a FairPrice box. “Happy Thanksgiving Day,” he said.

The box contained a cooked whole turkey. I was flattered by the unexpected gesture, and about to decline, but he quickly handed me the box. Uncle Freddie's fleetness of foot and wiry body belied his age, which I guessed to be in the 60s. He had a full head of black hair and his eyes were set against thick eyebrows. “Your family has been very good to me, thank you very much, sir,” he said.

## **Beginnings**

Fourth August 2006 was the day my family emigrated from the Philippines to Singapore. After a long search, Sarah and I, together with our two sons, had settled on an apartment in a well-maintained, low-rise condo estate built in the 1980s.

Despite the sense of unsettledness that comes with adjusting to a new environment, life in Singapore was quiet, helped by the fact that the neighbourhood was peaceful, and the condo building had few households. In the first few months we never saw a soul enter or come out of the second-storey unit. Its door was

perpetually closed, and never was there a telltale sign of life such as electric light bleeding from under the door.

We came home late one night. A foul smell emanating from upstairs assaulted our noses as we approached the stairway. An open black plastic bag half-filled with trash lay on the second-storey landing. Beside it was a paper plate with salvaged leftover food. Disgust was immediately followed by an alarming discovery that somebody lived in the condo!

Knowledge has the power to clear the filters we subconsciously use to limit our sensory inputs. From then on, we would catch glimpses of a male body part – a shoulder, torso or leg – quickly disappearing around a corner on the open grounds. To alert him of our coming, we would bang our feet on the ground as one would to startle a rat into running for cover into the nearest sewer.

### **Revelation**

One evening, we accidentally crossed paths on the driveway. He was grubby, in a mucky white singlet, dark-coloured boxers and shod in light-green flip-flops. It was Uncle Freddie. I maintained my composure and said, “Good evening, uncle.” He walked briskly past us, looking down to the ground, shoulders hunched, a whiff of garbage in his trail. Even though he never acknowledged our greetings the few other times we’d crossed paths, we tried our best to look the other way and cover our noses when he scampered away and left his ‘spoils’ on the stairway.

We and our neighbours – Ingge, the Swedish-American living below us; Daphne; and James, the Indonesian-Chinese at the front condo – united in unspoken fashion, and would drop packets of fresh-cooked food or untouched dinner leftovers on Uncle Freddie’s doorstep.

Our first two-year lease was about to expire in 2008, and during her chat with our landlady, Sarah voiced her concerns about the unusual behaviour of our neighbour. “Freddie fell into depression after his divorce,” our landlady revealed.

During Chinese New Year in 2009, Uncle Freddie rang our doorbell. He was surprisingly tidy in his usual getup. Seeing him standing outside our door in his totality, face-to-face for the first time was like witnessing a patient return to consciousness after two years in a coma. He was holding three *angpao* envelopes, and said, “I hope you don’t take offence, sir. I would like to give these to Dizel (our former house-help), if I may, and your two boys.”

From that day onwards, Uncle Freddie ceased his nightly rummaging of the neighbourhood trash bins. I saw him alighting from a Toyota one sunny day, dressed in slacks and a Hawaiian shirt with red print. I must admit it took getting used to seeing him in broad daylight, often conversing with James and Ingge. Virtually overnight, this unusual sight became commonplace; it was surreal. He would leave his door open, which afforded a view of his apartment’s interior – good heavens, it’s well-furnished! “I woke up from my depression after I learned that my condo was put up for auction,” Uncle Freddie told me. He had defaulted on his real estate taxes and condo dues for seven years.

### **Turn of Events**

We heard that Uncle Freddie had undergone surgery. The doctor had discovered an unusual growth in his gut following complaints of tummy aches, and immediately ordered surgery. Uncle was holed up in his apartment for about a month, occasionally attended to by a lady relative. In less than three months, he was up and about, frail but active as ever.

Before long, Uncle Freddie embarked on a whirlwind of activity. He threw out a lot of old belongings, had his living room remodelled, and in quick succession, bought a big aquarium with a foot-long arowana fish, a king-size bed fitted with a 21-inch TV that mechanically retracts into a cabinet with a remote control, four Dyson blade-less fans, the works. He grew a green thumb, and started cultivating what he claimed were collectible plants. Two Indian helpers would come in the morning to trim, arrange and water the plants.

I came home from a freelance job one night, and, from the stairway, Barry White was blasting from Uncle's apartment. On his big hardwood dining table was a spanking new 50-inch flat-screen TV, which served as a monitor for a new netbook streaming a YouTube video of *Can't Get Enough of Your Love, Baby*. A wave of warmth and joy welled up inside me; it felt like Christmas Day!

"Uncle Freddie was here and looking for you, *Kuya* (elder brother)," Dizel said. I went down to his flat, and he saw me at the door. "Come in, I've got something for you," he said. Uncle fished out a box from the fridge. "There's this lady featured in the papers who bakes the most divine cakes," he said, and showed me the scrumptious-looking dessert. "I ordered it for you."

Uncle and I often exchanged notes about 'die-die, must-try' dishes. He would occasionally visit Lucky Plaza to get his fill of the quintessential Pinoy dish, *adobo* – pork braised in garlic, soy, vinegar, peppercorn and bay leaf. "I love pork, especially the fatty part," he said with a naughty wink. "Care for a beer?" he asked. "Are you allowed to drink?" I answered. "I can drink anything I want," he said.

Uncle Freddie regaled me with stories of days gone by in old Singapore, such as his National Service stint and how he would spend lots of time fishing in the river. Eventually, his story touched on his divorce, the consequent freezing of his assets, the ensuing seven-year depression – all of which resulted in the strange behaviour we had witnessed. "When I got sick, I realised that I wanted to live," he said. "The doctor was very surprised at my swift recovery!" We each had two bottles of cold Guinness Stout. I had to excuse myself, mindful of his health and wary of taking up more of his time. "Tell me how you find the cake," he said in parting.

Starting from 2011, I was a partner in a modest business venture in Manila and would make return trips every six weeks. During one of the few times I got to see Uncle Freddie, he complained of aches and pain. "It's getting terrible. The doctor has started giving me new treatments," he said. I noticed his face had developed little

black spots. I brushed aside fears of the worst, having seen how he had surmounted his difficulties and turn around his life.

I received a mail shortly before May – an invitation to the wedding of Uncle’s daughter, Alicia. He followed up with a call a week before the event. “Edsel, I just want to confirm whether I will have the pleasure of your presence at my daughter’s wedding,” he said. “Sorry, Uncle, I won’t be able to attend, am on my way to the airport as we speak,” I replied. He was kind enough to let my tardy RSVP slip. “No problem, I shall see you, sir, when you come back,” he ended.

I returned to Singapore in late June, and was very busy entertaining close family friends who stayed with us. On 24 July, our house-help came to me and said, “*Kuya*, some men are bringing down a body covered in a blanket from the second storey.” Sarah and I rushed to the kitchen window overlooking the open parking space below. On the back of a lorry was the covered body of Uncle Freddie, dead from cancer of the gut.

A day later, Sarah, my six-year-old son Enrique and I paid our last respects at his simple wake in a funeral home in Serangoon. The only other persons in attendance were Alicia and her new husband, a man I assumed to be Alicia’s father-in-law, Uncle’s lady cousin and her American husband. “Freddie was not the easiest person to live with,” admitted the cousin. We understood. Uncle Freddie could be a cantankerous and willful old man, but he was invariably friendly and respectful towards us and our children. Alicia’s father-in-law made reference to us and said, “Sometimes neighbours can be kinder than relatives.”

We were apart in age by more than a dozen years, yet in some ways Uncle Freddie and I were kindred souls; for one, we both shared a non-conformist streak. He objected to my calling him Uncle, yet would always address me as ‘Sir’. “You are my idol, sir, you’re a made man. Your life is complete; you have a happy family, a wife, two kids... What more can a man ask for?” Uncle Freddie would often tell me.

All this time, I’ve never confided in Uncle Freddie about my

struggles to land a permanent job as well as continual failures to reinvent myself in Singapore. “Uncle, you’ve been an inspiration,” I would say. “You showed me how to overcome challenges and start all over again.”

Alicia and her husband moved into the condo shortly after the funeral. They’re expecting a child.

## EDSEL TOLENTINO

In 2006, Edsel Tolentino’s family migrated to Singapore from the Philippines after his wife, Sarah, was offered a position at the Singapore office of a leading marketing company. Edsel is an independent copywriter/creative director and contributor to advertising publications. His previous experience in the industry included being a creative director and president of the Philippines’ prestigious Creative Guild.