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Speaking out & speaking up: Xinjiao perspectives

Eng Fong PANG
Singapore Management University, efpang@smu.edu.sg

Arnoud DE MEYER
Singapore Management University, arnouddemeyer@smu.edu.sg

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SPEAKING OUT & SPEAKING UP

XINJIAO PERSPECTIVES

Edited by
Pang Eng Fong & Arnoud De Meyer

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Contents

Foreword

Two years ago Pang Eng Fong and I designed a new course for senior local and exchange students at SMU on the theme of "*Singapore in the World, the World in Singapore*". The original trigger for this course was the celebration of Singapore's fiftieth anniversary. Our intention was to bring together Singapore and Overseas exchange students to analyse and discuss the respective contributions from the World to Singapore and from Singapore to the World. We did so by inviting a number of generous guest speakers, and by organising short discussions among the students on the joint essays they were expected to write. From the start, we intended that some of these essays would be published in an edited volume, so that our students would have a repository of their debates and would collaborate on a joint output.

The first edition of the course and the book proved to be a great success. The discussions were very stimulating, and the essays gave a good panorama of what the current international student generation is passionate about. In fact, many readers commented that the series of essays gave a very good view of contemporary Singapore.

Both of us were so stimulated by the outcome that we decided to go for a second edition of the course and the book. Again we brought an outstanding group of speakers to the classroom, ranging from ambassadors to academics and thought leaders. As in the previous year, the students challenged the speakers with their questions and opinions, dared to raise difficult topics and learned from each other. Our students came from different cultural, national and religious backgrounds, but were open to listen to each other's arguments. And they did not shy away from difficult and complex topics such as national identity, terrorism or poverty. But as you will notice from some of the essays in this book, we also discussed more light-hearted themes about lifestyle and entertainment.

For us, this was an interesting opportunity to learn about the passions, pre-occupations and worries of our students. This is all the more important, because, as President of the University, I do not have many opportunities for frank and open debate with my students. I am convinced I have learned more from the students and from their discussions about what drives them, than what they have perhaps learned themselves through this course.

The essays in this book are diverse in topics, and in quality of analysis and approach. This reflects what this course is about: no theme or topic is beyond discussion, so long as we are willing to listen to each other's arguments and opinions. None of us has full knowledge, and the collective insights are more valuable than the individual wisdom. We can all learn from each other, both as individuals and as countries.

I have to thank my Pang Eng Fong for his immense contribution to the course. We are, to a large extent, complementary in this venture: Eng Fong is a Singaporean with extensive international experience and I am a European with a strong commitment to Singapore. But because of my heavy schedule, he took on most of the work in organising the course. It was a pleasure to work with him.

I hope you will enjoy reading these essays. It is a bit of *rojak*, the Malay term for 'mixture' and a very popular dish in Singapore. But in that way it also provides an interesting view on present-day Singapore, as viewed by its own 20-odd year olds and some exchange students who discovered our city in the past months. Discover it for yourself.

Arnoud De Meyer
President
Singapore Management University

Acknowledgements

Speakers

Prof Chan Heng Chee
Ambassador-at-Large, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore; Chairwoman of the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities, Singapore University for Technology and Design

Mr Bilahari Kausikan
Ambassador-at-Large, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore

Dr Tan Lian Choo
Former Charge d'Affaires, Singapore Embassy in Brazil

Mr Ong Keng Yong
Non-resident Ambassador of Singapore to Iran; Executive Deputy Chairman, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University

Mr Blair Hall
Deputy Chief of Mission, United States Embassy in Singapore

H.E. Mr Benjamin Dubertret
Ambassador of France to Singapore

H.E. Mr Tumur Lkhagvadorj
Ambassador of Mongolia to Singapore

Mr Pierre-Louis Lempereur
Deputy Chief of Mission, Delegation of the European Union to Singapore

Mr Naohiro Tsutsumi
Deputy Chief of Mission, Embassy of Japan in Singapore

Prof Linda Lim
Professor of Strategy, Stephen M. Ross School of Business, University of

Michigan

Prof Wang Gungwu

Chairman, East Asian Institute and University Professor, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore

Mr Ho Kwon Ping

Executive Chairman of Banyan Tree Holdings and Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Singapore Management University

Introduction

In 2015, we developed a new course, *Singapore in the World, the World in Singapore* to coincide with Singapore's jubilee year celebrations. The idea was to bring together local and exchange students at Singapore Management University to develop a deeper understanding of Singapore's extraordinary progress in the past half century. As part of the 2015 course, students wrote individual, pair and group essays, and interacted with academics as well as local and foreign diplomats. A selection of these essays appeared in a volume entitled *Within and Without* in early 2016.

We ran the course again in 2016. Over sixty students enrolled in the class, half of them exchange students from Asia, Europe and North America. They interacted with speakers from academia and the world of business and diplomacy, and wrote over one hundred essays on Singapore's development and evolving identity. Their diverse perspectives – Singaporeans interpreting their experiences through a wider lens and exchange students bringing their views from home to make sense of a new country – challenge and augment the national narrative absorbed by locals who have been through the Singapore school system.

This book is a selection of papers written for the second run of the course. Entitled *Speaking Up and Speaking Out: Xinjiao Perspectives – xinjiao* in local parlance refers to young people – it groups essays under three headings: *Locating the Fringe*; *Breaking the Mould* and *Hearing Different Voices*. Readers can sample the essays in any order. We draw attention here to a few essays that reveal unconventional or idiosyncratic views on familiar issues.

Locating the Fringe, the first part of the book, opens with *A Singaporean in Xinjiang*, in which Wong Ee Vin reflects on his experience of racial tensions and wonders whether there are lessons to be drawn from Singapore's enviable record of maintaining racial harmony. The same section includes Xue Jiarong's essay titled *Sex for Sale and Second Wives* which takes a critical view of legal prostitution in Singapore, yet also sees it as a pragmatic way to alleviate the plight of women caused by China's patriarchal syste*m. On a lighter note, Gaming Virtual Reality, Seriously* by Lin Junkang and Low Kai Loon raises the issue of whether excellence in eSports can offer a viable career. Kate Whyte writes in *Gaelic Kallang Roar* about Gaelic football, a subculture most Singaporeans are

unaware of but which has a growing number of enthusiasts in Singapore and other countries. In so doing, she gives us a glimpse of a pastime enjoyed by the expatriate community.

In the second part of the book, *Breaking the Mould*, several essays examine stereotypical perceptions of Singapore. In *Online Dating: Waiting for the Stars to Align*, Alex Cherucheril and Muhammed Ismail analyse this phenomenon in Singapore, looking at its dysfunctional aspects, especially from the perspective of Americans, and concluding that Singaporeans seeking partners need to rethink their views and expectations about online dating. *In Songs from the City in a Garden*, Ang Yu Ann and Benjamin Tan re-examine the view that Singapore is well-placed to become a significant player on the world's stage. In *Sputtering or Starting Up*, Darren Lim and Ella Lim challenge a widespread belief that Singapore is bereft of original ideas and lacks in the spirit of entrepreneurship, when in fact, Singapore has a thriving local start-up community. Edwin Tan in *Char Kway Teow Goes Global* pours cold water on a widely-held local view that Singapore food can make it to the world stage. The hard truth, he says, is that Singaporean food is not well-known globally and attention instead should focus on nurturing an authentic local food culture that values tradition and quality.

The third part of the book, *Hearing Different Voices* includes essays that question what their writers see as systemic inequalities or injustices in Singapore. Foo Xian Fong's essay, *On Play and Profit*, celebrates the joy of play and argues for a more relaxed approach to childhood as a better answer to higher productivity and more creativity. In *Manufacturing a National Myth*, Mackenzie Schmidt queries whether the artificial creation of the Merlion captures the true Singapore spirit in contrast to the Canadian beaver. Emilyn Phang and Hollie Dawson in *On Local Fashion Brands* take a critical view of Singapore's fashion industry, dubbing it a follower rather than a trendsetter. Their perspective is different from *In Praise of Paris Fashion*, a laudatory essay by Aude Bertrand and Charlotte Lamboley. Hearing a different voice, the last essay in this volume, *Dogs for the Aged?* by Lim Dao Qing and Mackenzie Schmidt make a case for the greater use of dogs as a solution to the daily challenges that a fast-growing ageing population faces in Singapore.

Essays in this volume range from racial tensions in Xinjiang to online dating, defamation, food, fashion and the therapeutic benefits of dogs for the elderly. They reflect the views of young people, views that in many cases are

refreshingly sceptical or critical. One does not have to agree with them to appreciate the optimism and thoughtfulness of the young in Singapore as well as those from other countries. Readers, we hope, will find infectious their energy, excitement and openness to the possibilities for change.

Part One

Locating the Fringe

A Singaporean in Xinjiang

Wong Ee Vin

WHAT/WHERE IS XINJIANG?

When someone speaks of Xinjiang, it brings to mind great expanses of dust and stone punctuated by the occasional shrub under a cloudless sky, stretching over vast distances as far as the eye can see; its desolation terrifying and awe-inspiring in equal measure. Yet, the bleak terrain yields to grasslands and fruit orchards, thriving through irrigation and sheer determination of the local Tajiks. That was my first impression of Tagharma Valley, Tashkurgan, within the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in Western China.

Xinjiang is home to many of China's ethnic minorities, including the Uyghur and Tajik peoples – Turkic groups with histories tightly intertwined and as ancient as the land itself. This sight would also have greeted the merchants of old as they plied along the Silk Road through Xinjiang into China, bringing different goods, religions, and cultures into the region. In many ways, therefore, Xinjiang has always been the focal point of conflict between viewpoints that we still struggle with today: between tradition and progress, and between nationality, race and religion. These two themes resonated with me as a Singaporean visiting Xinjiang for the first time.

ON THE LOSS OF THE OLD CITY

We landed in Kashgar, Xinjiang after a 15-hour flight from Singapore. I had expected bustling bazaars and beautiful architecture, but I was disappointed to find Kashgar a medium-sized city with the usual consumerist trappings: shopping centres, fast food, and the local overpriced coffee franchise. This, our supervisor informed us, was the government's doing: great tracts of Kashgar's historic old city, with centuries-old mud-bricked buildings, were demolished to make room for modern infrastructure. Uyghur families who had lived in the old city for generations were made to move into newer facilities; only a small section was cordoned off as spectacle for tourists. Many Uyghurs protested at the lack of consultation with the very residents involved in the relocation program; some saw it as a concerted effort to marginalise Uyghur culture. Needless to say, the program constituted a dangerous flashpoint between the Uyghurs and the authorities, and sparked off an international condemnation

at the perceived excesses of China's rapid economic development.

The reality in Xinjiang is, however, much less black-and-white, as the redevelopment program also significantly benefits the Uyghurs. While party officials point to safety hazards, China's desire to build greater economic relations with other Central Asian states is likely the driving factor. Given Xinjiang's geographical location as a corridor into Central Asia, its residents stand to gain from such trade. Indeed, the modernisation of Xinjiang has already begun to bear fruit: many Uyghurs I spoke to agreed that their standards of living have risen in the past ten years.

As a Singaporean, I could not help but notice parallels in the way global trade has impacted the social fabric. During Singapore's infancy in the 1960s, a central tenet of its industrialisation strategy was large-scale public housing – a task the incumbent government executed with cold pragmatism despite widespread resistance. Many rural communities, affectionately called *kampongs* but officially designated as slums, were torn down to make way for high-rise living. While indisputably ensuring Singapore's survival in those trying times, Singapore's rapid land renewal schemes in the present day raise debates on balancing heritage conservation with progress. A recent controversy concerns the destruction of the Bukit Brown cemetery, a 200-hectare cemetery with graves dating back to the 19th century. Without such sites rooting Singaporeans to their heritage, activists argued, historical amnesia takes its toll. But as with most policy choices there are never right answers, only the trade-offs we choose to live with; and Singaporeans clearly prefer to live in the present rather than dwell on the past. Nevertheless, as numerous publicised debates, campaigns, and talk-shows can attest to, Singaporeans today face an identity crisis which, on deeper introspection, seems to stem from an indifference to the historical, and a yearning for the return of a communal sense of belonging – the proverbial *kampong* spirit.

Similarly, Xinjiang faces difficult questions on how to balance the economic progress with heritage conservation. With an even older tradition than Singapore, Uyghurs have created an identity that is tied to the very city itself. Kashgar has survived so many regime changes – from Turkic states to the Mongols – that to be told by the Chinese authorities that the destruction of the old quarter is necessary for Xinjiang's prosperity must sound disingenuous. If they had survived so many centuries, would they not continue to endure into the future? It is easy to see how these decisions can be construed as

repression of the Uyghur identity.

Secondly, the Uyghurs have only marginal say in the development of Xinjiang; while technically autonomous, Beijing still maintains effective policy control. The destruction of the old city even in the face of Uyghur resistance must have been a visible symbol of their political impotence.

Therefore, unlike Singapore, discourse centres not around how balancing should be done – by redefining what it means to be a Uyghur in the face of modernity – but instead on what the response to the dictates of the Chinese government should be. As such, the situation in Xinjiang is a quagmire of overlapping issues such that any conflict is difficult to solve. Economic development has brought many benefits to the Uyghur people, yet it is no wonder why economic development is seen as an attempt to make Uyghurs "live like Chinese people".

ON TOLERANCE AND ASSIMILATION

We took a bus from Kashgar to a sleepy hamlet in Tagharma Valley, where our community project was involved in building a Tajik cultural centre. We were kindly hosted by the village elder, a large Tajik man with a weather-beaten face; his stern visage belied a burning curiosity to learn more about these loud-mouthed youths who were not quite Chinese. He was interested: did our parents build us a house when we were married off? Wherever we went we noticed the Tajik reaction towards other cultures was marked by a drive to understand them, likely a cultural paradigm that was necessary to navigate through the diversity of conflicting political interests in ancient Tartary. Whether through trade or war, the fortunes of ancient kingdoms in Xinjiang were dependent on playing off the rise or fall of more powerful states.

In contrast, the Chinese experience of interacting with different cultures has largely been brusque for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the philosophical conception of China has always been of Chinese exceptionalism – states beyond its borders were regarded as barbaric. In the historical sense, the hundred years of Chinese humiliation stretching from 1839 to 1949 left an indelible mark of xenophobia and distrust in the collective Chinese psyche. Finally, China has remained a relatively homogenous civilisation-state; it is overwhelmingly Han Chinese with a Confucian value system. Xinjiang therefore uncomfortably fits

into China as a province. It is significantly populated with Turkic minorities who do not resemble Han Chinese, adhere to cultures that have integrated Perso-Arabic influences, are predominantly Muslim, and historically have regarded themselves as politically autonomous kingdoms or tributaries. Apart from being under Chinese political control and the economic benefits that brings, there are few reasons for ethnic minorities to identify with a Chinese nation-hood that is still significantly defined by the majority's ethnicity and culture.

It comes as no surprise to see the push by some groups in Xinjiang for a separate East Turkestan Republic from Mainland China, accompanied by sporadic outbreaks of violence. In response, Chinese authorities clamped down and repressed social, political and associative activities of the Uyghur people; as a consequence, Islam has become politicised in that region. The Chinese see it as a subversive ideology – tellingly during one of my university courses, a Chinese exchange student referred to the Uyghurs as 'Muslims' and Han Chinese as 'ordinary people' – as if Islam was incompatible with contemporary society. Whatever their justifications, authorities instituted intrusive rules, such as banning fasting on the holy month of Ramadan. Further, Han families have migrated *en masse* into Xinjiang; these migratory movements, along with economic inequality between Han Chinese and Uyghurs and an under-representation of Uyghurs in high-skill sectors and political offices, have fuelled perceptions of Han colonisation of Uyghur lands and perpetuated the cycle of violence.

Like Xinjiang, Singapore faced similar challenges in building a functional society from a diverse group of cultures and religions. Singapore's society is predominantly Chinese, the descendants of immigrant workers. Malays, however, were the indigenous people of Singapore. Similarly, there is a diversity of religious perspectives in Singapore. Hence, from its earliest days, racial and religious differences have always been the greatest challenge to societal stability; such as in 1950, when riots broke out over a court ruling for a child, brought up as a Muslim under Malay foster parents, to be returned to her Dutch Catholic parents. In subsequent decades such differences were managed with a combination of laws such as the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, which allows detention of offending persons without trial, and a Singaporean identity that was constructed partly from national duties that applied to all citizens regardless of ethnicity, such as compulsory English language education and mandatory military conscription for all Singaporean males.

The Singaporean model is not perfect. Ethnic minorities such as the Malay

population continue to lag behind economically and are under-represented in high-skilled jobs and tertiary institutions. However, Singapore's approach towards handling multiculturalism is much more nuanced than its Chinese counterparts, because of its emphasis on tolerance over assimilation: Singapore is built on the assumption that beyond the minimum required of a citizen in a democratic society, there can be a diversity of worldviews, and such diversity must be tolerated to the extent of limiting free speech. The majority does not force the minority to assimilate, far from it. All citizens are made to unite under a common national identity rather than racial or religious ones. To the extent that Chinese authorities continue to restrict religious practices, and where Chinese identity continues to be defined by ethnic traits of the majority rather than nationhood, Xinjiang will remain a security concern for Beijing.

Yet, can the Singaporean model ever be replicated in Xinjiang? Highly unlikely. Even if Chinese authorities removed all forms of political and social control, Xinjiang's success depends crucially on a mature civil society: on a Han Chinese population that is discerning enough to tolerate racial or religious differences, and on a Uyghur population that is willing to play the metaphorical game rather than kicking the table over. The Chinese situation requires novel solutions – solutions that will require time to be formulated.

WHAT NEXT?

We spent another two weeks in Tagharma Valley completing the Tajik cultural centre. I had expected the village elder to preside over the opening ceremony, but to my surprise, it was attended by a government official. As the official and our project supervisor posed for photographs amidst the staccato of clapping by Tajik onlookers, I felt a sense of disquiet. For the past few months we spoke about empowering the Tajiks, yet I felt as if we had just done them a disservice by relegating the proud Tajik culture to the walls of a Chinese museum. The voyeuristic nature of the whole enterprise – like gawking at animals at the zoo – was not lost on me.

Later that night, we ate a farewell dinner at the village elder's house. As we were eating, the village children entered the room with excited chatter, and turned on the radio. The thump of Tajik turbo-pop emanated from the speakers as they invited us to stand up; it was a traditional dance-off! We each faced a child, and as we wobbled about, pirouetting at the end of a line with

a flourish, the children guided us effortlessly, laughing at our feeble attempts at dance. But it was a dance nonetheless, and as two people worlds apart met at the centre – the stumbling Singaporean and the graceful Tajik – I could only marvel at the brief moments of synchronicity we achieved. If only we had all learnt to dance.

Sex for Sale and Second Wives

Xue Jiarong

A	s I was walking in Little India one day, I glimpsed, by chance, something shocking. Through the dim pink lights from the red lanterns hanging in front of the doorway, I saw Asian women wearing only bras and panties, standing on a staircase. They wore heavy makeup and had long nails. I realised that I had unwittingly entered a so-called 'red-light street'. Feeling afraid, I started to speed up when I saw another brothel similar to the first, except that this one had Indian women. I wondered if I had accidentally stumbled into the notorious Geylang area; later, I realised that prostitution is limited not only to Geylang but is also found in other parts of the city.

Everything in Singapore seems so clean and pristine, yet this anomaly – regulated prostitution – caught me by surprise. I admire Singapore as a city because of its orderliness and rapid development, but I began to question if its prostitution industry was a deliberate, wise decision, or if it is just a hidden taboo under its glamourous surface. When conducted improperly, prostitution brings with it social ills like human trafficking, drug dealing, and many other serious crimes. However, after some thought, I came to feel that regulated prostitution is better than a forbidden and therefore unregulated trade. Whether if it is legal or not, prostitution will continue in one way or another: it is, after all, the world's oldest profession. This, I think, makes a strong case as to why China should similarly regulate prostitution.

The official stance on prostitution in Singapore is that it is not illegal. Prostitution is not legalised: pimping is a crime, and there is no official registry or licensing process for brothels. On the other hand, prostitution is not illegal per se. At the risk of splitting hairs, I think it is most accurate to say that prostitution is tolerated and regulated. The Anti-Vice Enforcement Unit conducts regular raids on known brothels, hotels, and other locations to prevent the exploitation of sex workers. Nevertheless, sex workers are themselves free to prostitute, albeit with heavy disapproval from the government and some regulation from the police.

Without a doubt, prostitution is a perennial evil. The colonial government tried to abolish all registered brothels in Singapore in 1894. The result was a dramatic increase in venereal diseases when prostitution was driven underground. The situation became so bad that bureaucrats admitted it was an "appalling state of affairs… which demonstrated convincingly that regulation was the right policy".

Regulation, when exercised properly, does not condone prostitution but seeks to limit its effects. The most important reason for regulation is that regulated prostitution is safer because sex workers are required to have regular health examinations, and undergo other types of checks regularly. Compared with the existing unregulated prostitution industry, legalised prostitution presents lower health risks, specifically the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases. A regulated prostitution industry, where sex workers need to undergo frequent health checks, thus ensures public health is better safeguarded.

Secondly, there is some empirical evidence that regulated prostitution results in lower crime rates. The theory is simple enough: people's anxiety and aggression can be more easily relieved; as a result, not only the level of sexual assault but other crimes will also decrease as a whole. Further, potential customers do not feel the need to take extreme – and at times illegal – measures just to evade detection. Nevertheless, given that such evidence is context-specific, it may not apply in Singapore.

Does regulation protect sex workers themselves? Qualified yes. Sex workers are protected from various forms of exploitation by pimps or customers, and the pressure of being caught by the police is somewhat lessened. The Prevention of Human Trafficking Act, legislated in 2014, has made it significantly easier to prosecute criminals who force the vulnerable into prostitution. However, the legality of prostitution has not changed the social stigma against sex workers. It may still be difficult for sex workers to divulge their occupation publicly or even privately, owing to the social stigma they have to bear.

In contrast, prostitution is illegal in China. I want to explore an interesting question: will decriminalising prostitution in China have an impact on 'second wives'?

Legalising prostitution in China will no doubt bring many advantages to Chinese society, such as better public health and decreased exploitation of sex workers. But to avoid repetition of the points made above, I want to draw your attention to the impact it will have on the 'second wife' phenomenon, and the imbalanced gender dynamic in Chinese marriage.

'Second wives' is a colloquial term for mistresses. Typically contracted, they receive monthly fees from a client to ensure exclusivity. The major differences between ordinary prostitution and second wives are the emotional ties and exclusivity provided by second wives. In some cases, however, the second wife may not want any monetary reward because she dreams of becoming a legal

wife after her client's are divorced. Although the strength of the relationship between regulated prostitution and the change in demand for second wives is not clear, it is reasonable to expect an inverse relationship between the two, because they can be considered substitutable services.

Speaking of the inverse relationship between prostitution and second wives, marriage patterns may also be affected by the legality of prostitution. It is likely that as prostitution becomes legal, marriages will carry on smoothly and over a longer period. However, as most sex workers are females, it is more likely that males in the marriage visit sex workers – yet another benefit that impacts each gender unequally.

In 2011, there was an amendment to the Marriage Laws of China. A new Article 18 states that the properties owned before marriage shall belong to the respective individual, instead of treating them as common property between the couple. This caused a lot of anger and consternation among women. Since houses are traditionally bought by males or their family before the marriage, even if the wife had contributed material and non-material efforts to the family in subsequent years, she would still get nothing in a divorce because the name on the property certificate is her husband's. Considering many Chinese women become stay-home moms when they get married and have children, this law renders them jobless and homeless if they were to be divorced. That is to say, men can just shrug their shoulders and walk away with the most significant financial resource of the family – the matrimonial home. This also means a man can remarry and continue to live in the same house while his former wife is left without a roof over her head.

Some among the Chinese public endorse this new change of the Marriage Law, rationalising that it discourages women from becoming second wives because they cannot gain financially. The stereotypical view is that such men are often old and ugly, and second wives are only interested in their money. Therefore, the new law prevents the destruction of existing families. But that is a patriarchal rationalisation – another pretext for males to walk away without incurring expenses, even from their second wives. The new divorce rules mean wives, be it first, second, or any order in the sequence, are left in a weaker position than the husband who can walk away from his current wife when he becomes interested in other women.

It goes without saying that I have no love for the state of China's Marriage Laws today, which lowers the already-small chances of a long-lasting nuclear

family. Legalisation of prostitution has many benefits for public health and the safety of sex workers, but in this regard, I think legalising prostitution may be an effective – albeit unsavoury – measure in stabilising the dysfunctional marriage dynamics in China. Of course, it can only be a stopgap measure in a deeply patriarchal system that unfairly benefits men and accepts second wives as a widespread social norm. Eventually, China's social structures surrounding the family – men, women, laws, and second wives – must adapt and grow into something more stable.

Strangely enough, although prostitution is prohibited in most parts of the world, it remains legal in Singapore, a well-regulated city-state. When examined more carefully, many reasons support the regulation of prostitution. These benefits of legalising and censoring this industry include increased lowered health hazards and decreased crime rates. Conversely, a forbidden but unregulated prostitution industry will be detrimental to human rights and the overall well-being of the society. However, the social stigma of prostitution remains despite its legality.

Despite this, I think that applying Singapore's approach towards regulating prostitution rather than criminalisation in China may have positive effects on marriages. The current social norm of second wives, coupled with recently-amended Marriage Laws, creates dysfunctional dynamics between the roles of husband and wife. Ultimately, this perverse result points not at the merits of prostitution, but the severe degree of gender inequality in patriarchal societies such as China, where a husband's needs are prioritised over his wife's.

From prostitution to second wives, and second wives to marriages, the common theme lies in the male dominance over his female counterpart. One can only hope for a better future for all of humankind.

Singapore Families: Mixed Salad or New *Rojak*?

Darren Lim

GETTING POLARISED?

What is a family, and who is in it? That depends on who you ask. Everyone knows that perceptions of family structures sit somewhere along a spectrum from a traditional or conservative one, to the decidedly liberal. If we locate this debate within the wider geopolitical landscape, then Western countries – those in Europe and North America – tend to fall within the liberal camp. Conversely, East Asian countries exhibit more conservative tendencies.

Where is Singapore located on this spectrum? Singapore is widely regarded as an Asian country with Western characteristics; however, Singaporeans defy simple categorisation. On a personal level, I have had conversations with Western friends on contentious topics of alternative lifestyles, family structures or even recreational narcotics. When I chime in on these issues, albeit with some uniquely liberal takes and positions, responses typically range from surprise to disbelief. This assertion does not merely rest on the plank of anecdotal evidence. The broader trend uncovered by a 2015 "Our Singapore Conversation" survey canvasses a reality where "younger and more educated Singaporeans were more accepting of same-sex marriages", and were "more vocal on the issues of freedom of expression and censorship." These responses simply exemplify how much some members of my generation have defied what it traditionally means to be Singaporean.

Of course, I am wary of characterising this growing movement of liberalism as one that reflects predominant mindsets of Singaporeans. Conservative and communitarian conceptions of broader societal interests still pervade the majority within our nation. What is of note is the lack of homogeneity in our nation-state – an intractable tension exists between the firebrand advocates on both sides of the equation. Singapore therefore sits uncomfortably somewhere in-between the liberal and the conservative.

I think the debate surrounding family structures is an interesting one to explore. This essay examines not just the questions surrounding the definition of the family but also the answers. In this regard, I believe the answers cannot be either Western or Eastern, but have to be uniquely *Singaporean*. Such debates have to be resolved on our own terms.

GOING NON-NUCLEAR?

What is a nuclear family? The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as "a house-hold consisting of a father, a mother and their children all in one household dwelling." This social unit typifies what we generally come to expect from Singaporean families. I, too, was born in an archetypal nuclear family. I have a father and a mother. To top it off, I have a brother whose company I enjoyed very much in my formative years (and hopefully beyond that).

The first point of reference in this discourse of what constitutes a family in Singapore is a historical one. Mr Lee Kuan Yew, in a 1994 *Foreign Affairs* interview, explained the overwhelming persistence of the traditional view of the family unit:

> "We have a whole nation immersed in these [Asian] beliefs… It is the basic concept of our civilisation. Governments will come, governments will go, but this [the family unit] endures."

Having been born into this socially-approved family unit and being surrounded by similarly constructed families, I did not have a stimulus to think about other, then unconventional, households that exist.

My first experience with the idea of an alternative family structure came from an accidental brush with American popular culture. As an adolescent, I loved the American sitcom, *Friends*. *Friends* was a pleasant feel-good story about six friends and their dysfunctional lives in Manhattan. However, to me and perhaps other loyal viewers, it embodied more. It was more than a hit TV show; the sitcom had been woven with heavyweight undertones. It told an iconoclastic story of how it might be acceptable to have a family that is not 'normal'. Family was viewed through pluralistic and liberal lenses – there was no perpetuated depiction of happy families consisting of two married parents and their children; in their places, there were unwed single mothers and cohabitees living contented, or even happier, lives.

I can still see myself – that wide-eyed, inquisitive ten-year-old boy glued to the TV screen – attempting, but ultimately failing, to fully appreciate the alien idea that a family did not have a singular definition. Is this foreign concept any more comprehensible twelve years later? I would unequivocally answer 'yes' but the same cannot be said for all Singaporeans. The longstanding approach to

family is conservative and inherently Asian. These attitudes manifest themselves via the interactions that I have with the older generations. "Find a girlfriend, get married and have some kids." That is usually the golden advice I receive from relatives when I see them during festive seasons. I can only muster a feeble laugh and respond with nods of the head to acknowledge these remarks.

From a policy perspective, the problems surrounding recognition of alternative family units boils down to a conflict between permitting individual liberty to form different family units, and maintaining the collective social good of the archetypical nuclear family. It is an arduous undertaking.

The curious case of two English sisters, Catherine and Ginda Utley, sheds light on this difficult task even in the westernised United Kingdom (UK). The sisters live together and raised Catherine's daughter in a jointly-owned home. The women are as secure and stable a family unit as you could hope to find; however under British tax law, they do not enjoy the same rights enjoyed in a civil partnership and are unable to transfer ownership to their house without paying taxes amounting to almost a hundred thousand pounds. They complained that this particular tax law should be reviewed. The deliberation of whether this law should be overturned is still underway.

The Utleys' case illustrates that even Western nations are grappling with the question of how far the scope of 'family' should be broadened to give effect to individual liberties. However, while the law still does not recognise this form of family, we should note that the UK is far ahead of Singapore in its recognition of alternative families – same-sex unions are legalised by the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, and single parents are given a myriad of support channels through governmental or charitable outfits.

What has been done for alternative families in Singapore? In 2015, Minister for Social and Family Development, Mr Tan Chuan Jin, cautioned that the proportion of nuclear families was on a decline from 56 percent to 49 percent in the last fifteen years. Mr Tan also stated that the Government must be more responsive to these changing family structures and, at the same time, continue incentivising the formation of nuclear families. These comments reflect well on the shifting social policy objective of accounting for the welfare of alternative families.

There have been early hints of this softening stance as well. This point is underscored in one of our vital areas of social policy – public housing. The sacrosanct Housing Development Board (HDB) rules where only a 'family

nucleus' (formed with a spousal or parent-child relationship) can apply for and purchase 'build-to-order' (BTO) HDB flats have endured. The difference in public housing policies from then and now, however, lies in the creation of complementary schemes to this hard-and-fast rule. Unmarried singles can apply under the Joint Single scheme to purchase their first homes. Similarly, there has been more help for divorcees or single parents too. In 2013, the HDB launched a scheme that allocates five percent of new two- and three-room flats in non-mature estates to divorced or widowed parents with children aged below 16.

While there are obvious limitations to these complementary schemes – namely that the parties relying on these schemes are not given the same freedom to pick their preferred sizes of a newly built apartment – these ideas are definitely baby-steps in the right direction of balancing opposing views towards the family unit in Singapore. Undoubtedly as the earlier cited Singaporean Conversation survey suggests, younger Singaporeans can have wildly different perspectives from the traditional nuclear family model.

It is imperative that we respect these deep-rooted ideals that have percolated in our society. However, I think this regard for tradition cannot be a stubborn and inflexible one. We should never abandon our obligation to be an inclusive society. But we should try to incrementally ease our opposition to a growing population of alternative families, if it is sensible and fair to do so. While the tenor of our social policies reflects governmental responsiveness to change, we must not rest on our laurels. There should be a continual revision of policies in order to adapt to an ever-changing social landscape.

MAKING A NEW ROJAK?

In summary, the path we have travelled so far has been paved with decidedly Eastern communitarian values – nation and society over self – delineating how we expected our people to conduct themselves. The pointed musings of our founding father, Lee Kuan Yew, in a 1987 student forum mirrored these cultural inclinations then:

> "Confucian principles should guide public life. I worry about the unsettling
>   effects of Western individualism or liberalism on an Eastern society…"

Fast-forward almost three decades later: we are at the proverbial crossroads between a path down the West, or back along the familiar path from whence we came. Do we yield to the Western hegemony? Or do we guard what is close and familiar to us?

The resolution, in my opinion, is necessarily one of compromise. Singapore should not thoughtlessly shred its social fabric. However, at the same time, we cannot stubbornly insist on a collectivist attitude if this unreasonably fetters fundamental individual liberties. Nevertheless, to label our options in such a binary manner does no justice to a possible "third path" where we can find an indigenous and unique flavour of Singaporean society. A purely Eastern or Western perspective may lay siege to the design of our society and our cultural values; it dissuades us from finding our own indigenous blend.

Instead, I advocate a pragmatic approach by retaining ideology that makes sense, and discarding those detrimental to a stable and yet inclusive Singaporean society. The task of finding an autochthonous culture can be likened to the process of making a *rojak* dish: the composition of *taupok*, dough fritters, and cucumbers is essential to bringing out the flavour that we associate with *rojak*. In a similar vein, a delicate balance between Eastern and Western values can only be struck with conscious deliberation in picking the 'ingredients' to make up our values system. This shift to equilibrium should be incremental and, most importantly, as palatable as our beloved snack.

I conclude with an excerpt from a parliamentary debate in 1984:

> "[Societies] have to be custom-made, tailored to suit the peculiarities of the person wearing the suit. Perhaps, like shoes, the older they are, the better they fit. Stretch them, soften them, resole them, repair them. They are always better than a brand new pair of shoes."

The responsibilities of navigation rest on us – what works, and what does not should be a collective decision made by our people. Let us continue down the road less travelled; we will eventually evolve a distinctive Singaporean blend of the East and the West.

Singaporean-Burmese, Burmese-Singaporean or Both?

In Jin Zaw

During the 2015 General Elections ("GE") in Singapore, many friends asked if I had voted, and I replied 'yes'. However, towards the end of the same year, the same friends asked if I would be voting for Daw Aung San Su Kyi's party in Myanmar's elections. Perhaps they had forgotten that I had voted in the GE. I gently reminded them that I am a Singaporean.

It is difficult to describe a Singaporean-Burmese experience when we number only in the hundreds. I can only speak for myself, as the sole Singaporean-Burmese in my cohort throughout my primary, secondary, junior college and university years.

By a stroke of luck, I was born and bred in Singapore. My father came to Singapore on a student pass in 1987 to work for a Burmese businessman. He was newly-wed, leaving my mother pregnant with my older brother in Myanmar. He washed cars for extra income, and later with his savings, started a small business. His entrepreneurial success paid for my mother's and older brother's journey to Singapore in 1989. Initially, my parents planned to stay a couple of years to earn some money. But business was good and they chose to let my brother grow up in Singapore. I was born a few years later in 1993. And so a couple of years became 29 long years. Just like any other family living the 'Singaporean Dream', my parents worked hard to pay housing loans and tuition fees, and are still working hard to keep up with the rising costs of living in Singapore.

I'm alone, but I am not lonely. I'm as much Singaporean as I am Burmese; having gone through the Singaporean education system since childhood, English is my first language and Mandarin my second. I've personally experienced how barriers between people can be broken by speaking a common language. My proficiency in both English and Mandarin has given me insight into the cultures of English-speaking countries like America, Britain, and Australia, as well as Mandarin-speaking countries such as China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. In some ways I'm less lonely than the Burmese people in Myanmar: language has given me access to worldviews that an average Burmese can scarcely understand. While education in Singapore is definitely very stressful, I am glad to have had this opportunity to learn.

From being born here to going through the public school system, I've by and large been assimilated into Singaporean society, as evidenced by my friends' confusion during the election season. However, Burmese is still my ethnicity, my heritage, and therefore, my inheritance. It may be because of

my Singaporean upbringing but I cannot help but compare Singapore with Myanmar, especially when I am back in Myanmar.

Comfort begets complacency: I have taken many things for granted here in Singapore. When my family went back to Myanmar to visit my grandparents last December, we had to take turns charging our mobile phones. The electrical current was too weak; we could not charge all the phones at the same time. What took us two hours in Singapore took us six hours in Yangon. Perhaps it was a mistake the electrical engineers had made while building my grand-mother's house, or perhaps this is what every normal citizen's house is like.

Myanmar is a country a thousand times bigger than Singapore, with a fractious society composed of more than eight ethnic groups, compared to Singapore's 'CIMO' racial categorisation. Burma is a land steeped in more than a thousand years of history and predominantly Buddhist, in contrast to Singapore's secular communitarian values that have guided its course in the past 50 years. In that time span Myanmar has seen the rise of a military junta that has dominated Burmese politics until its dissolution in 2011.

However, Myanmar is not as run-down as many people believe it to be. There is a lot of foreign direct investment coming in from China, Korea, Vietnam and even Singapore. In central Yangon, foreign companies are constructing grand, modern-looking buildings and hotels; one might even think they saw a glimpse of Singapore's Orchard Road or Hong Kong's Causeway Bay in the making along the streets of central Yangon. The Burmese people are slowly re-joining the outside world after decades of isolation. With Burmese markets opening to the world, Myanmar is also seeing the so-called 'New Money' society emerging: people are embracing western-style consumerism like shopping for branded bags, fancy sports cars and designer furniture with their newfound wealth. One can even find a few Burmese youths featured on "Rich Kids of Instagram", an account dedicated to the young and rich people flaunting their wealth. Be it through honest means or more unsavoury work, it is evident that there is an increasing number of Burmese who can afford and appreciate the better things in life.

Many misconceptions about Myanmar stem from an average Singaporean's ignorance of its affairs and culture. My personal pet peeve is the lack of Burmese restaurants in Singapore; there are over a thousand Japanese eateries in Singapore, but barely ten Burmese eateries here. Yet, all my Singaporean friends who have visited my house and tried my mother's cooking have grown to love

and appreciate Burmese food. Hopefully, there will be more Singaporeans who will learn about Burmese culture and enjoy it.

In the same way, I do wish that more people will visit Myanmar as tourists and see modern Myanmar for themselves. Many do not know that Myanmar is home to many UNESCO sites (which Buddhist temples take credit for instead). Southeast Asia's tallest peak, the Hkakabo Razi mountain – one of the last few unconquered peaks in the world – is also located in Myanmar. The royal Mandalay palace, which some of my Singaporean friends have compared to the Forbidden Palace in China, is also awe-inspiring with its magnificent but restrained aesthetic. Myanmar's long period of isolationism is the cause of its stereotype as a Southeast Asian backwater, and the remedy – a simple mutual exchange of culture, history, and politics – is part of the solution to its integration into the larger global community.

Experiencing a glimpse in the development of Myanmar has definitely given me a more appreciative attitude towards matters in Singapore. In Myanmar, infrastructural development has not been equitable, and is mostly concentrated in the cities, further perpetuating income inequality. It saddens me to read that 70 percent of the Burmese people do not have access to electricity (Sara, 2014). What struck me the most was a comment made by historian Than Myint U: "We have 60 million people, 59 of whom are poor in a way that they probably don't have to be." This problem is in part due to corruption in the government.

In comparison, I hear disgruntled Singaporeans who think the ministers here are paid too much; people even go to the extent of questioning whether the ministers have the heart to serve the nation and the people. I may not speak for or represent any Burmese people, but I would gladly agree to that kind of pay rather than having a corrupt minister. Many Burmese people who come to Singapore have said that they wished their government was as efficient as Singapore's.

Yet, inheriting a Burmese heritage also comes with its own baggage. Internally, Myanmar is facing serious ethnic conflicts and repeated human rights abuses. The government explicitly discriminates against Muslims (a fact which was brought to the world's attention during the Rohingya migrant crisis) and pro-Buddhist laws were recently implemented (for example, laws that favour Buddhist females who marry a Muslim male, and the lack of laws that protect Muslims in the event of a divorce). Though there is a great deal of hope placed in Oxford-educated Daw Aung San to bring about both domestic stability

and peace, I am much more pessimistic. Such inter-faith conflict is steeped in a bloody history involving immigration and British colonialism, exacerbated by religious and racial differences, and spans hundreds of years. It will take time and capable successors to fashion a societal compromise in Myanmar.

I enjoy living in multi-cultural Singapore; being able to live harmoniously with people of other faiths is something that Singaporeans take for granted. But I would caution Singaporeans from concluding that the Singaporean model can work in Myanmar. Firstly, Singapore's style of governing a small city-state may not work in the large country that is Myanmar. Secondly, Singaporeans' comparative lack of historical ties to the land, and therefore a carte blanche to forming a modern secular society, is a significant difference. Such problems are difficult to solve and require indigenous solutions.

Am I responsible for the situation back in Myanmar? In many ways I'm not. As a Singapore citizen, and being born and bred a Singaporean, I can choose to easily discard my heritage. But I'm as much Burmese as I am Singaporean; and as a Burmese often alone in a crowd of Singaporeans; my silence and my ignorance make me complicit in the injustice perpetuated in the name of the Burmese people.

Although my family is going through a different kind of struggle as compared to a typical family in Myanmar, I still feel obliged to do something about the situation back there and often ask myself what I can do to help. Perhaps in the near future, if and when I am more powerful, I can put this thought into action.

I am a second-generation Singaporean Burmese. I speak English, Mandarin, and Burmese. I keep a watchful eye out for dramas that are the latest craze in Singapore, and news on how New Money (hopefully) contributes to the Burmese economy. I am an enigma to both Singaporeans and Burmese people alike, and yet can relate to both. I'm alone but not lonely. I've learnt that barriers between people can be broken by speaking a common language, and in my own small way, in a short English essay written on this tiny Red Dot, I hope I have contributed a little to that.

Foreign Workers: Seen but not Heard

Mohammad Muzhaffar

Rohith Misir

BACKGROUND

W hen he heard of Lee Kuan Yew's passing in March 2015, Mr Ramakrishnan Manivannan, together with his family and friends, broke down in tears. He then arranged a memorial service and hung up a framed photograph of Mr Lee next to those of his late parents in his living room – a Hindu tradition to honour deceased family members. His neighbours put up banners, photographs and posters honouring Mr Lee in front of their houses. While the demise of one of Singapore's founding fathers evoked strong emotions across the entire nation, interestingly enough, Mr Manivannan and his neighbours were in mourning nearly 7,000 kilometres away from Singapore, in the South-Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

Indeed, while hundreds of thousands in Singapore mourned the death of one of our founding fathers, multiple villages across India and Bangladesh were in mourning too. When queried, villagers explained their strong emotional ties with Singapore: many families in Tamil Nadu and Bangladesh who once considered a roof over their heads and three meals a day a luxury, now live comfortable lives in multi-storey terraces with luxuries such as television sets, computers and air-conditioning because of money sent back by family members working in Singapore. Many spoke of how businesses in their villages, from movie theatres to restaurants, were set up with money made in Singapore.

While we often hear how expatriates and tourists feel about Singapore, it was enlightening to hear the impact that Singapore has had on foreign workers, especially considering that these group of individuals, often neglected and overlooked by society, serve such a pivotal role in Singapore's development through various means – from constructing our infrastructure to keeping our garden city clean. With this in mind, we wrote this paper to uncover a viewpoint of Singapore in the eyes of the unheard: the foreign workers who silently serve our nation's needs. As such, this paper serves as a narrative that presents Singapore from the perspective of four foreign workers we interviewed, in terms of how they feel about Singapore, how their families at home feel, and how former workers who have returned home feel. We end with an exploration of what we as a society should know about these foreign workers and what they wish we knew about them.

We first sought to discover how foreign workers felt about Singapore in general. In light of the abundant stories of employers abusing and exploiting

foreign workers by withholding their salaries, neglecting work safety condi-
tions in favour of cost savings and providing sub-standard accommodation,
we expected negativity – or hesitance at the very least – when we set out to
talk to foreign workers around residential estates in Hougang. Instead, the
responses we received gave us a glimmer of hope.

ON THE BRIGHTER SIDE: A TUNEFUL TALE

"I love Singapore very much. Singapore is very clean… [and] very safe. Singapore
give [sic] me chance to earn good money to build my house in my village
and take care of my family. Singapore peoples [sic] all very nice and good. If
I can, I will bring my family to Singapore," said Shariful Islam, a 28-year-old
Bangladeshi construction worker who has been working in Singapore for
five years. Similarly, Balakrishnan Subramaniam, a 26-year-old Town Council
worker from Tamil Nadu, felt a sense of belonging to Singapore and explained
how most people he has met ever since he started working in Singapore two
years ago have been friendly to him. The 32-year-old Razeen Mustaq from
Bangladesh quickly interjected and explained that when he first came to
Singapore eight years ago, he felt out of place and subject to stares of disgust,
which made him feel like a lesser human, and consequently, he yearned to go
home. Thankfully, over time, things got better for Razeen – he has noticed that
Singaporeans are increasingly friendlier, often smiling or greeting him as he
carries out his Town Council duties. He beamed with joy as he explained how
the owner of a kopitiam would give him free coffee whenever he spots Razeen
on duty. Overall, we noted how all three of the foreign workers spoke about
Singaporean society's increasing friendliness – even acceptance – towards
them, and how they now feel a sense of belonging in Singapore.

   This is not a story that is unique to the workers we interviewed; even those
who had personally experienced abuse and exploitation at the hands of
unscrupulous employers were quick to show their appreciation of Singapore.
Most were particularly drawn to the relatively high level of public safety, and
expressed their trust in government officials – one quote from a Transient
Workers Count Too (TWC2) article reads: "If government give [sic] me PR here,
of course I want to stay here forever. Singapore good [sic] !"

   We then sought to understand what the families of foreign workers thought

of Singapore. Interestingly, all four foreign workers we spoke to said that back home, their friends and families had very positive impressions of Singapore, with Shariful further explaining that his family perceives Singapore to be 'paradise'. Indeed, thousands of villagers in Tamil Nadu and Bangladesh who have family members who have worked in Singapore feel an immense sense of appreciation and respect for Singapore, seeing Singapore as the enabler that pulled them out of poverty. Raghunathan Krishnamoorthy, a 27-year old from Tamil Nadu, said his wife and children often ask him to take pictures of various attractions, streets and restaurants in Singapore using his smartphone because of their fascination and curiosity about life in Singapore. The four foreign workers also laughed when explaining how their families back home would boast to fellow villagers about them working in Singapore – a status symbol of sorts. It was a bittersweet feeling for them: while their families missed them dearly and often teared up whenever they talked on the phone, they were also immensely proud of them for being able to work in Singapore.

Finally, we sought to understand how former workers who have returned home felt about Singapore. We found that former workers typically spoke well of Singapore upon returning home, often telling stories of their experiences in Singapore and the intricacies of Singapore life. Former workers who have managed to establish successful businesses in their hometowns and are financially well-off even return to Singapore as tourists with their families (Today, 2015). In fact, Raghunathan's uncle, who worked as a construction worker in Singapore in the 1990s, actually convinced and encouraged him to work in Singapore as well, and often retells his stories of Singapore to Raghunathan when they talk on the phone.

THE SOUND OF SILENCE

However, despite their generally positive experiences, all four of the workers when probed told us stories of former workers who left Singapore in anger or grief, with a negative impression of Singapore. This is for a wide variety of reasons, ranging from discrimination and abuse to non-payment of their salaries by their employers. In light of this, we will now explore some of the issues faced by foreign workers that have caused grievances and, frankly put, permanently ruined their lives.

The construction industry is, understandably, fraught with risk; workers frequently suffer injuries; workplace injury rates have steadily risen over the past four years. If a foreign worker gets injured on the job, the employer is required to pay compensation for medical expenses and for any resulting disabilities under the law. Unfortunately this often does not pan out in practice, with unscrupulous employers cancelling passes and repatriating workers without paying them due compensation.

The story of Mustakim is a prime example of such conduct. Mustakim, a 26-year-old Bangladeshi construction worker, had injured his leg on the job. He was taken to Khoo Teck Puat Hospital, where he was granted 25 days of sick leave, with a follow-up appointment three weeks later. The next morning after he returned to his dorm, he was greeted by tattooed men, whom he referred to as 'gangsters'. These men were clearly employed by his employer, who intended to not pay Mustakim for his injuries, and to not grant him the medical leave. Frightened and intimidated by the 'gangsters', Mustakim had no choice but to comply with their demands. They took him to a bank where he was made to clear out his savings account, and then sent to the airport, where they gave him an air ticket and told him to take the 10.55pm flight back to Bangladesh. Fortunately, the tattooed men could not follow Mustakim through the airport gates, and he, in desperation, approached the immigration officer to plead his case. The officer granted him a three day special pass so that he could clear his case with the Ministry of Manpower (MOM). With no income and no resolution in sight, Mustakim was forced to bunk in with a friend until his case could be heard by the MOM.

Mustakim's story is not a unique one, and injured workers often find alternative housing as they are afraid of being repatriated if they continue staying in dorms provided by their employers. This housing is often illegal, cramped, and filthy: one case saw eight men being packed into a room only 16 square metres large, and another saw 50 workers squeezed into two two-bedroom apartments.

TWC2, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) advocating for the rights of foreign workers in Singapore, has also revealed a number of other stories, with workers being repatriated due to injury, or due to them refusing to accept pay that was lower than agreed. In 2013, the MOM revealed that it had dealt with at least 23 cases where workers were repatriated with outstanding 'employment claims'. These, of course, refer only to the claims that were directly dealt with

by the MOM. It is very likely that a good number of such cases fall through the cracks, as foreign workers often are unaware of their rights in such instances, and unscrupulous employers can profit from keeping them in the dark.

Aside from injuries and illegal repatriation, workers often face other issues. One main issue is with regard to salaries – sometimes, workers are underpaid or not paid at all. A 2014 *Sunday Times* column revealed that many foreign workers were being paid $2 per hour; in comparison, the lowest-paid Singaporean worker would earn at least $5 an hour on average for far less dangerous jobs. As a result, foreign workers almost invariably work overtime. One worker reported working 13 hours every day for a month without any days off; he was paid a meagre $781 for the month.

To make things worse, a survey by TWC2 revealed that a third of workers are not being paid their dues, and a further third, without access to itemised payslips as required by law, have no way to check whether their payments are correct. Unauthorised and illegal deductions – such as those for the renewal of their work passes – are often made, sometimes without the knowledge of workers.

Workers also face discrimination from Singaporeans. While they may be friendly at the individual level, Singaporeans collectively tend to regard foreign workers as being less civilised. For example, in 2009 the Singapore government planned to convert a school building in the upmarket Serangoon Gardens neighbourhood into a workers' dormitory. This faced massive resistance from the local community, which believed that "low-skilled foreigners will soil their parks, clog up their streets as well as violate their children and womenfolk". Over 1,600 residents signed a petition against the plans. While the dormitory was eventually approved, a road was built to another estate to prevent the workers from travelling through Serangoon Gardens. Another example was the request from residents in Little India for the Town Council to build barriers in the void decks of their HDB flats to prevent workers from loitering in the area. These examples are not isolated, and serve as an indication of the attitude of Singaporeans toward their foreign peers.

All the factors listed above have resulted in greater social unrest; over the past five years Singapore has seen its first strike in over 30 years and its first riot in over 40 years.

The first incidence saw 171 bus operators, all Chinese nationals, going on strike on 26 November 2012. The next day, another 88 bus operators went on strike. These drivers cited low salaries, poor living conditions, and work hours

that were longer than promised as reasons for their discontent. The government response was the deportation of 29 drivers, and the prosecution of five.

One riot has become etched in our minds as the 2013 Little India incident, where over 400 people, mostly foreign workers, rioted, overturning police vehicles and even setting an ambulance on fire. The government response was the repatriation, without trial, of over 50 foreign workers, the prosecution of over 20, an alcohol ban and increased police presence in the area.

DIALLING UP THE VOLUME

It appears that the government, in particular the MOM, is not blind to the concerns raised by NGOs over the welfare of foreign workers in Singapore. Indeed even the Committee of Inquiry raised to investigate the Little India riots acknowledged that there was "room for improvement" in the treatment of workers. But it is clear that the legislative response has been far from up to par; some even say it has created a power imbalance – against the worker – that is taken advantage of by employers. While the legislative framework is present to address most issues of concern, enforcement is severely lacking and the mishmash of laws leads to the creation of regulatory paradoxes that further compound issues. To top it off, given the apparent discrimination and the fact that foreign worker communities tend to be hived off from the general population, there is little incentive for the Singaporean public to take a stand on foreign worker issues.

That said however, it is apparent that the vast majority of foreign workers have a happy experience in Singapore. The Committee of Inquiry for the Little India riot noted that nine out of ten workers polled said that they were not dissatisfied with working here. Given the continued oversupply of foreign workers and the positive reviews that we have found from former workers and their families, we believe that there is a generally positive sentiment about working here. However, there are serious issues to be tackled and we must stay vigilant against the abuse of our guests from abroad.

In essence, a more ethical and inclusive society boils down to understanding and empathy. We as a community have to recognise and appreciate the contributions of the foreign workers, and realise that they do not ask for special privileges. Rather, at the very least, they deserve to be treated with respect and

dignity. In the words of Razeen: "People are scared of us and don't talk to us because they don't know us. If they know us, if they understand us, they will know that we are all the same. We also have families, and we also have dreams."

Wheel You Ride?

Khew Pei Xuan

L ike most kids, my experience with learning how to cycle largely involved training wheels, scrapped knees, and the fond memory of my parents holding the back of my bike as I learnt how to balance and pedal on the two-wheeled contraption. When I had learnt how to cycle, my favourite post-school activity was racing my friends on our bikes and feeling the wind zip through our hair. Learning how to cycle was a rite of passage of sorts as a kid.

As we grow older and other life priorities take precedence, our biking days are relegated to the occasional cycling outing at East Coast Park or the short trip to our neighbouring friends' place. After all, we have other forms of entertainment and more transport choices now than ever – with new Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) stations and the attractive option of driving the family car once you have your driving license.

CYCLING CULTURE ABROAD

Whilst on my student exchange to Lund, Sweden, I was struck by the stark difference in the cycling culture between Singapore and Sweden. Biking is a popular mode of transport within the town. Over 45 percent of commuters travel by bicycle. I was part of this 45 percent during my time in Lund.

The draw of cycling is obvious. Public transport is expensive (at least by Singapore standards) and bus routes have limited coverage. Lund might be a small town but its cycling infrastructure is well-established, with plenty of bike parking spaces across the town and extensive off-road and on-road cycle paths. Cycling paths are linked to bicycle crossings as well, with their own dedicated traffic lights.

What I really admired was the road courtesy and ease of cycling. Cyclists, pedestrians, and the occasional motorist gave way to one another; conflicts were minimal. The dedicated cycling paths and signage might have helped with that as well. As a cyclist with average proficiency and rusty skills, I had little problem adjusting to the biking culture and felt safe while cycling. When cycling is safe and convenient, it is not hard to see why it has become the most popular mode of transport in the town.

Admittedly, Sweden is playing catch-up with other more established 'bicycle friendly' cities. Just across the Øresund and an hour's train ride away lies Copenhagen, the Danish capital, which is touted as the first Bike City in the world.

The story behind its world-famous biking culture is an inspiring one. While bicycles were popular in the early 1900s, their popularity dwindled during the 1960s, when standards of living improved and car ownership became more popular. However, this brought with it the problems of pollution, congestion, and traffic accidents. In the 1970s, the oil crisis and the environmental movement saw the resurgence of the biking culture, which has become part of the Danish identity over the years. Decades of city planning and mindset changes followed, leading to the well-developed cycling infrastructure and impressive biking culture we see today.

Businessmen in suits and fashionably-dressed women in their office heels hop on their bikes to get to work. Parents, equipped with their cargo bikes and child seats, ferry their children to school. Children ply the route from their homes to day-care centres and schools on their smaller bikes. The morning rush hour as you can imagine, is markedly different from what we are used to in Singapore. Cycling has become a distinctive feature of its cityscape and the success of its biking culture even led to the term 'copenhagenisation'.

Copenhagenisation refers to an urban planning strategy that focuses on designs and ways to make a city less dependent on cars and more accessible for pedestrians and cyclists. Amidst growing concerns over climate change and problems with congestion, more cities are promoting the use of public transportation and policy makers are considering cycling as a viable mode of transport. One example of the greater impetus to promote cycling is Velo-city, a cycle planning conference which gathers policy makers and advocates and facilitates the exchange of cycling planning expertise.

NATIONAL CYCLING PLAN

Singapore is a small city with limited land resources and a growing population; thus, urban planning is especially important. Do we allocate this plot of land for residential purposes? Should we build more roads? Our transport system factors in this key land constraint and our planning decisions are often a balancing act between competing demands and sustainability.

In recent years, apart from focusing on public transportation and managing private vehicle usage, the Ministry of Transport has also included strategies to create walkable spaces and promote cycling, not only as a form of recreation,

but also as a viable mode of transport. Its vision? "A cyclist-friendly, well-connected network providing safe and healthy cycling for all."

The National Cycling Plan (NCP), a commendable intra-agency effort involving agencies such as the Land Transport Authority, the National Parks, the Housing Development Board, the Public Utilities Board, and SportSG, outlines the steps to allow Singapore to achieve this vision. Its plans are ambitious, aiming to triple our cycling network, made up of cycling paths and park connectors, from the current 230 km to 700 km.

Intra-town cycling is one of the key areas that the plan seeks to promote. Its aim is to connect cyclists from their homes to major transport hubs and key amenities such as markets, schools, and town hubs. As of 2015, 50 km of off-road cycling paths have been completed in seven selected estates (Bedok, Changi-Simei, Pasir Ris, Sembawang, Taman Jurong, Tampines and Yishun) as well as parts of Marina Bay. Other infrastructure such as additional bike racks and bicycle crossings have also been pushed out at various stages of the plan.

Apart from intra-town connectivity, a comprehensive island wide network of cycling routes is also planned. By tapping on existing and future park connector networks, planned cycling routes will connect 26 public housing estates, providing a safe and convenient passage for cyclists. Other projects in the pipeline include a dedicated cycling path along the new North-South Expressway and trials for a public bike-sharing service.

THE (CYCLING) ROAD AHEAD

Providing biking infrastructure is a great step forward to becoming a bike–friendly, car-lite city. As compared to other cities, however, our biking culture remains in its infancy. Modal share of bikes is 1 to 2 percent as compared to Tokyo (14 percent) and Copenhagen (36 percent). For every 100,000 people, we have 4 km of cycling tracks, which will be increased to 12 km by 2030. While commendable, it is still much shorter in comparison to cities such as Amsterdam (71 km) and Copenhagen (80 km).

While we make progress, lessons can be learnt from abroad. The Danish model, built up over a period of 40 years, worked because cycling is a part of their identity. The transport system largely favours cyclists. Vehicle speed limits are slower, drivers wait patiently for cyclists to cross the road, and

pedestrians and cyclists alike adhere to their designated paths. The Green Wave in Copenhagen is one defining example of how ingrained the biking culture is: it is an initiative implemented on certain roads, where traffic lights are coordinated such that if one maintains a bike speed of 20 km/h, one would be able to consecutively hit green lights all the way into the city during the rush hour. Motorists are on the losing end but they accept this arrangement.

This is unlikely to be replicated in Singapore, given the prevalence of motor vehicles here and the current perception of biking. But in time to come, we might be able to achieve this healthy and sustainable lifestyle. The key takeaway is that there needs to be a change in mind set and a new etiquette towards and for cyclists.

In my view, education is the best path forward. We have existing frameworks that we can leverage to better educate the public on the benefits of cycling and cycling etiquette. For younger children, we have physical education classes and road safety talks. During my upper primary school days, my classmates and I greatly enjoyed the school trip to the Road Safety Park, where we role-played as pedestrians, cyclists and motorists and learnt more about road safety. For the public, campaigns can be effective in reminding road users of road safety. The public can also be kept up to date on new developments and encouraged to use public transport or to cycle.

Regulations may also be necessary. Recent cases of speeding bicycles knocking into pedestrians have surfaced the question of whether speed limits on shared paths are needed and what the limits should be. The surge in Personal Mobility Devices such as electric scooters and bikes brings about new tensions among the different users sharing the limited path space. An advisory panel set up by the Land Transport Authority aims to consolidate a set of rules and norms by mid-2016 to help the different users share the path peacefully. The challenge will then be to disseminate the information and educate the public.

CYCLING ON

With all the new developments and cycling initiatives ahead, we can look forward to the day where cycling is not only the healthier and cheaper choice, but also the faster and easier choice of transport.

Stepping out of your home, you can get on your bike, zip pass the rush hour traffic on the roads and avoid the hassle of riding on packed MRTs. The many trees lining the cycling path provide much needed shade, and fresh air from the park greets you as you take a shortcut via the park connector network. You reach your office in time for a quick shower at your company's showering facilities, before starting the day feeling healthy and energised from your workout.

Maybe it is time for me to dust off my bike and hop on for a ride.

Gaelic Kallang Roar

Kate Whyte

T he Irish believe that they are one of the smallest countries in the world –
that is, until they realise that Singapore is actually as tiny as their smallest
county, Louth. However despite the land mass difference, both countries
have relatively similar population sizes albeit in one country half the popula-
tion live on farms but on the other side of the world the majority live in HDB
flats! Approximately 2000 Irish live among Singapore's 5.5 million people. They
have uprooted their lives from across the world in search of employment, a
better quality of life, and often to escape the rain of the Emerald Isle. Many of
the Irish in Singapore are in their late 20s to early 30s and often are university-
educated. This essay will discuss how the Singapore Gaelic Lions, a Gaelic
football club set up in Singapore at the turn of the century, plays a central part
to Irish expatriates ('expats') living in Singapore. It will look at how the club
provides them with a sense of community, a place to network, to bridge and
bond; essentially a home away from home.

SINGAPORE GAELIC LIONS

Gaelic football is an amateur sport relatively unheard of outside the island of
Ireland. For a first-timer watching the sport, it looks like 30 men or women
beating each other up over a ball and trying to get it over a post that looks like
a rugby post synthesised with a soccer net. However, it is much more than that;
it is a combination of the thrill of football, the skill and artistry of basketball,
the strength and strategy of rugby, and the fitness and speed of athletics, all
merged together to create a fast-paced action-packed sport which has been
enjoyed in Ireland for many decades.

   The concept of the sport is relatively easy to grasp. There are fifteen players
on each team playing a 30-minute half. The objective is to score more points
than the opposition team by kicking or punching the ball into the goal for
three points or over the cross bar for one point. The sport was conceived in
Ireland as far back as 1829 where a variation of the sport was a major part of
the Tailteann games, a Celtic sporting festival during the feast of Lunagsha.
This long lineage means Gaelic football has always been a part of Irish history
and therefore a great source of pride to its people, which explains why today
in Ireland there are 2014 Gaelic football clubs scattered around the country.
Even more impressively, there are now over 400 clubs overseas.

As people emigrated from Ireland, they took Gaelic football with them; today, approximately one-fifth of all Gaelic football clubs are located outside of Ireland. One of these is the Singapore Gaelic Lions which has been the heart of the Irish community in Singapore since its inception in 1997 and is also one of the 'largest Gaelic Athletic Association ("GAA") clubs in Asia'. As mentioned, many Irish are attracted to the way of life in Singapore and also to the vast quantity of senior, high-wage jobs available here, particularly in the financial services and banking sectors.

The Singapore Gaelic Lions is often the first association that Irish expats look to join when they arrive in Singapore. This is especially the case for young people moving overseas as it provides them with invaluable connections with the Irish community around them as they try to find their feet. Very often, these expats know no one in the country, and initially join the association to meet people. The Singapore Gaelic Lions also provides an opportunity for Irish expats to express their social identities by creating common reference points. Without a doubt, Gaelic football "helps to sustain a strong sense of community and heritage among overseas communities".

The majority of the players are of Irish decent but growing numbers of foreign expats and locals have also joined. This demonstrates the real meaning of Gaelic football: inclusiveness. As mentioned, many join for the sense of community that comes with being part of a team. This may also explain why Gaelic football is less competitive abroad compared to Ireland where intense rivalries occur between towns. This is rarely seen even between Gaelic clubs that have popped up across the Southeast Asian region such as the Jakarta Dragonflies, The Viet Celts, Bangkok Thai GAA, Myanmar Celts GAA, just to name a few. In the case of Singapore Gaelic Lions, it is more about involvement and fun. Therefore, the Singapore Gaelic Lions is more of a social experience than a purely athletic club.

> "Gaelic clubs in Ireland are all about supporting the community. The Irish have been doing that with great success for hundreds of years, so we are just replicating a trusted and well- founded recipe!"

> Paul Carpenter, ladies football head coach, 2015

BUILDING AND CONNECTING SOCIAL CAPITAL

The Singapore Gaelic Lions also play an important role in providing networking opportunities in an informal setting, as the number of Irish expats on this side of the world is relatively low. The club is its very own social network, with members spending a significant portion of time off the ball and away from the pitch. Many are just social members, paying an annual fee so they can attend events, dinners, and travel as a supporter to local matches around Southeast Asia. Often this socialisation is done in true Irish fashion at McGettigans' Irish Pub in Clarke Quay, who also happens to be the main sponsor of the club (it also comes as no surprise that Guinness is also a co-sponsor)! This phenomenon observed in sporting clubs around the world is known as 'bonding social capital': in simpler terms, further strengthening relationships previously established (Putnam, 2000). Many of the players in Singapore Gaelic Lions have work colleagues or even neighbours as team members and therefore, although some new expats have no desire to play Gaelic football, he or she becomes a social member to feel included in the community. The sorts of friendships that occur purely from sports clubs such as the Singapore Gaelic Lions are usually weak, but they are extremely useful in providing networks to further bond off the pitch.

Similarly, Singapore Gaelic Lions allows people to also build social capital, meaning people can meet others who are different and/or come from different backgrounds. With over 200 members, the club boasts players of all ages, classes and genders. This allows people to learn of others' values, traditions and beliefs. Teams such as Singapore Gaelic Lions have a high turnover of players, as many Irish expats in Singapore are often here for a short term to gain work experience – and also often to earn a higher wage – before they return to Ireland to settle down. This means that members regularly meet new individuals from both the North and South of Ireland, paving the way for positive relations.

The fast turnover spurred the club's committee to look for local and permanent residents who will remain as long-term members; as a consequence, the Singapore Gaelic Lions is one of the least homogenous expatriate subcultures in Singapore. While the activity is still predominantly Irish – since the primary goal (pardon the pun) is to play Gaelic football – the community is rapidly becoming more diverse. These people feel a sense of community

because of the small team trainings, as well as regular face-to-face interactions through trainings and matches; not to mention their willingness to partake in "collectively defined practises, norms and rules". The sport then is an 'expression', or a reassurance, of their identity: as Gaelic footballers. Therefore while a typical Irish community used to be white, English-speaking, and Catholic, in Singapore the Gaelic community is much more globalised. All nationalities, races, cultures are welcomed into the Singapore Gaelic Lions family.

SEA GAMES AND THE ASIAN GAELIC GAMES

Gaelic football first became a part of the SEA games in 2008 in Hanoi, Vietnam, and continues to provide new avenues for the Singapore Gaelic Lions. The SEA games in 2015, in particular, allowed Singapore Gaelic Lions members to build social capital with people outside of Ireland and Singapore, as they competed against teams from the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Australia with Singapore as host. Singapore had the home advantage as they hosted the 28th SEA games, in its 50th year of independence. The home advantage proved to be decisive as the Singapore Gaelic Lions came away victorious in the women's competition, cementing Singapore's place as one of the strongest international Gaelic football teams in the world.

The SEA games is not the only international competition the Singapore Gaelic Lions are involved in: they also take part in the annual Asian Gaelic Games (AGG's). This event was paired with the Asia Pacific Irish Business Forum in Shanghai last year which brought together Irish businessmen and women throughout Asia for two days of networking prior to the games. The AGG's has become "the largest gathering of the Irish community in Asia" and has been brought about due to a combined love of Gaelic football.

ROARING TOGETHER

The Singapore Gaelic Lions originally stemmed from a need for Irish expats to find their place in Singaporean society. It provided a familiar, enjoyable place for these individuals to go, to express their Irish identity, and reconnect with their roots. The opportunity to meet with other Irish people in similar situations

would be almost impossible without Singapore Gaelic Lions, and it is for these reasons that the club and Gaelic football are at the heart of Irish expat living in Singapore. Later as Gaelic football expanded internationally, it has correspondingly grown from an Irish sport into a sport from Ireland, no longer being defined just by the nationality of its members alone. It has evolved to serve a different purpose – building a sense of belonging and community for their members from very diverse backgrounds, and giving them a chance to be part of something larger. In conclusion, while Ireland and Singapore may be islands, their people are anything but: their love for sport has inexorably drawn people worlds apart together for a simple game of Gaelic football.

Gaming Virtual Reality, Seriously

Lin Junkang

Low Kai Loon

E lectronic sports, or 'eSports', is a form of competitive sport primarily enabled and dependent on electronic systems. It is most commonly known as video gaming. The eSports industry is steadily becoming more prominent due to a growing fan base and larger prize pools at tournaments. The Singaporean eSports scene is fortunate to have such professional athletes, or 'gamers', that have represented Singapore internationally, winning over many local and international fans with their competitive exploits. But how do local gamers fit within Singaporean society – one that is infamous for its closed-mindedness and pragmatism? To explore this, we look at the experience of two local gamers, Benedict and Kun Xian.

THE A* STUDENT

"The day I transformed into an adult was the day I started playing Dota," Benedict Lim recalls. To this day, he does not regret the personal sacrifices he has made to realise his dream of being a professional gamer. He remembers how "his family does not actually speak much of his gaming career, and neither did they tell their friends and other relatives that he was actually that good at games." "All along, they have only been bragging about my studies, like it's the only thing they can be proud about," he revealed.

Benedict's father worked for a logistics company and frequently put in long and hard shifts in the past. One of his father's regrets was playing too much in his younger days and not putting more effort into studying. As a result, he did not want his son to follow in his footsteps and bear the brunt of youthful mistakes as he did. In his father's opinion, Benedict had spent far too much time on computer games but got nothing in return. At times, he seemed disappointed when he felt that Benedict did not want to go to school and wanted only to play computer games late into the night. "He was an A* student you know? But gaming pulled his grades down. It is very sad for me," Benedict's aunt lamented. "What do you want in life? That's more important," she questioned him.

Dota 2 is a free-to-play multi-player online battle arena video game, where two teams of five each clash with the main objective of destroying the opponents' heavily-guarded primary installation. Each player controls an avatar, otherwise known as a 'Hero'. *Dota 2*'s wide array of unique playable heroes and

other in-game features ensures a novel experience for every session, even for veteran players. This forms part of the equation behind its popularity across the world, attracting a wide player base of over 12 million players to date.

Benedict, otherwise popularly known as 'hyhy' in the *Dota* gaming community, acknowledges that gaming is a tough professional career filled with risks. However, he feels that when it comes to "pursuing your passions", the question of risk boils down to personal choice. He feels the sense of achievement one gets as a competitive gamer is like no other: "when you go up on the stage, you feel like you represent your country for something, you get the prize, it's the amount of satisfaction and achievement that nothing else can give you. Something I definitely do not regret ever doing. Gaming is simply the proudest thing in my life, and I feel that you should really work hard for your passions," he reflects.

MAKING SACRIFICES

In the summer of 2011, Benedict was invited to the first-ever edition of "*The International*", a *Dota 2* tournament hosted in Cologne, Germany, with a prize pool of USD $1.6 million including the top prize of USD $1 million for the winning team. What made the tournament a milestone in the history of competitive *Dota 2* was its enormous prize pool which was partially crowd-funded by the *Dota 2* community. Unfortunately, the game's most significant annual tournament in terms of prestige and prize pool clashed with Benedict's exams.

Benedict was faced with the tough choice of leaving Singapore with his other four teammates to fly to the United States to take part in the most prestigious *Dota 2* tournament and forsake his studies, or to give up on his passion and complete the exams. "The school did not recognise the *Dota 2* competition as a valid reason for skipping the exams," he recalls, "it's kind of like breaking the school rules."

The school was doing everything in its power to stop him from leaving, thus placing huge stress on his family, especially his mother. "When they are having exams they do not allow him to leave the school, so I told him to take care of himself," Benedict's mother remembers advising him. For Benedict, missing the exam for the competition meant that he would have to retake the entire year again.

Benedict was well aware of the trade-offs. "Education is important in Singapore, it is tough to juggle studies and gaming. My grades have dropped for two years already, and my parents treated gaming as the cause for it. They even said 'gaming will be the death of you one day'." Nevertheless, he felt that his team had what it took to take home the biggest prize and that the USD $1 million was going to make all his time spent on the game worth it. "By giving so much to come here to participate, I have absolute confidence in my team that we will win," Benedict declared. To Benedict, getting the chance to be the best in the world at something was a rare occurrence, and he recognised that this international tournament was a great opportunity to realise his aspirations.

Benedict's Team, *Scythe.SG* consisted of four other local players including Darryl Koh, who continues to compete professionally in the *Dota 2* scene. *Scythe.SG* earned many fans with a strong run in *The International*, beating Chinese powerhouse *EHOME* in the early stages of the tournament. Though eventually *Scythe.SG* fell to *EHOME* when they clashed again in the knockout stages, *Scythe.SG* managed to secure a top three placing at *The International*, placing far ahead of many other teams that were considered tournament favourites.

It was an incredible feat for a Singaporean team to perform so strongly when the professional gaming scene in Southeast Asia was still in its infancy. Though *Scythe.SG* missed out on the top prize, they still took home USD $150,000 for their heroic efforts, the largest single tournament winnings by any Singaporean eSports team to date.

Benedict was able to participate in the second edition of *The International* in 2012 with a new team, *Team Zenith* and finished fifth. He eventually left professional gaming in 2013 to pursue higher education using the prize money he had earned.

LEGENDARY 'STREET FIGHTER'

Ho Kun Xian was once just an ordinary guy with an extraordinary passion for fighting games. He first began playing video games at the age of seven at video game arcades, which he described as his "childcare centre" (Ting, 2015). His parents would provide him with some cash to while away his afternoons there.

Growing up was not easy for Xian. He did not continue his education after getting his O-Level certificate and made a living doing odd jobs for two

years before enlisting into the Armed Forces as part of his National Service in Singapore. Perhaps it was fate when he discovered *Street Fighter IV* in an arcade in 2009. Immediately, he felt a personal connection to the game due to its ingenious design. He revealed that he had a tremendous urge to be the best in the game after playing it. Xian's interest coupled with his innate competitive streak drove him to train on a Playstation 3 console just so he could prepare himself for *Street Fighter* competitions.

MAKING PROGRESS

Xian's first breakthrough came when he won a local qualifier for Dreamhack Winter, a tournament held in Sweden, in 2009. He subsequently finished second, an incredible achievement for someone who had just started training in the same year .

Xian's crowning achievement was winning the *Evolution Championship Series* held in Las Vegas in 2013, picking up over USD $5,600 for his endeavours. He managed to emerge champion over more than 1,600 other international participants, thus gaining recognition as the one of the top fighting game players in the world. Since then, he has consistently finished within the Top 3 in other international fighting game competitions, such as the *Capcom Cup* in 2015. Xian also emerged victorious at the *Dreamhack Winter 2015* edition, where he made his international competitive debut in 2009.

Xian's international feats did not go unnoticed by the local government and he was featured in the official SG50 book containing stories of Singaporeans (Lim, 2015). He admitted that he was extremely humbled and happy to be in the same book alongside other incredible Singaporeans including our founding father, Mr Lee Kuan Yew.

In 2014, Xian signed a sponsorship deal with Razer which now provides him with a monthly salary, dedicated gaming equipment and pays for expenses incurred when going abroad to compete. He acknowledges that being a full-time gamer locally is not easy, and feels that the Singaporean culture is not supportive of professional gaming. This view is underscored by the contrast between Xian's fame overseas and his relative obscurity in Singapore.

BUILDING A LEGACY

Xian credits *Street Fighter* for giving him a purpose in life, at a time when many of his friends were getting involved in 'gangsterism'. Competitive gaming also motivated him; it satisfied his competitive streak and gave him a sense of pride in being an expert in fighting games. Despite his current success, Xian admits that he cannot compete indefinitely at such a high level, but he treasures the moment and pledges to do the best he can with the opportunities he has.

Xian frequently streams live sessions of himself playing computer games over the internet, where he teaches others more about the games he plays. He hopes to be able to inspire others to live their dreams the way *Street Fighter* inspired him to live his.

eSPORTS: THE NEW 'COOL'?

Employable people normally flock to industries offering the most lucrative career paths. The eSports industry's highest-trending competitive game, *Dota 2*, is increasingly being seen as a viable livelihood for full-time eSports professionals. In the years since Benedict attended *The International*, it has grown from strength to strength. Entering its fifth edition in 2015, *The International* boasts a total prize pool of USD $18.4 million, and a USD $6.6 million prize pool for the top team. As the community contributes more to the prize pool, it enhances global recognition for the game and it is undoubtedly a magnetic pull for players from other eSports games. *Dota 2* is increasingly saturated in terms of players and competition, making it harder to clinch the top prize – a large proportion of the total prize pool. This reflects the 'high risk and high returns' nature of a gaming career. Only the cream of the crop is able to make a fortune out of this career and therefore, it is risky if one does not emerge amongst the top due to high opportunity costs.

At the fifth edition of *The International*, Singapore was represented by two Singaporeans both on different teams, Darryl Koh, and Wong Jeng Yih. Both teams eventually finished in the top eight, earning USD $1.5 million and USD $800,000 respectively. Thus far, their earnings from eSports tournaments are the highest ever earned by Singaporean eSports players.

In particular, the earnings of Darryl Koh may catch the attention of some. According to eSports earnings.com (2016), Darryl is estimated to have earned about USD $880,000 in prize money throughout his career as a professional gamer. His net worth may be even more if he has substantial sponsorships or licenses his image rights. Darryl earned an estimated USD $319,000 in 2014 – higher than the sum famous local swimmer Joseph Schooling received from the Singapore Olympic Committee (SGD $370,000) for his endeavours at the Commonwealth and Asian Games in the same year.

Leveraging on the rise of online live-streaming and playback platforms such as Youtube, Twitch, or WatchESPN, eSports is garnering a greater global fan pool especially amongst the younger generation, as these platforms are generally free-to-watch and the gameplay thrilling. One area where eSports stands out against traditional physical sports is its accessibility. In eSports, everything is dependent on individual skill set, synergy of teamwork and strategy; whereas for physical sports, there are some advantages conferred to some players over others due to their physical attributes. One prominent example would be basketball where height is a critical requirement – there is hardly room for players without a requisite height. Without requirements for innate physical attributes, the gameplay of eSports seems fairer and appeals to a wider potential pool of players – the unspoken rule of the game is that no one is discriminated against. This could be another reason why people are attracted to eSports games.

GAMING SERIOUSLY?

Casual gaming has no real objective besides gaining instant gratification or taking a short break from the real-world. For professional gaming, on the other hand, the objective is simply to win. Similar to a professional sports team, eSports teams have managers and coaches to arrange the team's schedule and see to their daily needs. Also, physical facilities may be provided to teams for training purposes during seasonal tournaments. We should take a moment to appreciate that these jobs were not in existence a decade ago. Further enhancing its lucrativeness, sponsorships from corporations for individual professional eSports players or professional eSports teams are on the rise. Corporations – especially electronics, gaming software, and hardware companies – leverage

on the fame and recognition of professional eSports players to advertise their products and build a stronger brand. This is akin to professional athletes like David Beckham endorsing products from multiple sports brands.

The booming eSports market, expected to be worth about $1.9 billion globally by FY2018, has garnered interest from multiple parties. This is most clearly seen with the emergence of event organisers for eSports tournaments, such as Battlefy and Major League Gaming, all vying for a share of the growing pie. With the number of stakeholders within the industry growing, there will be an increased need for rules and regulations to shape the way the industry operates, possibly increasing governance to the level of traditional professional sports. There might even be various national regulatory bodies set up in response to eSports' rising prominence.

THE STATE OF eSPORTS

Singapore is slowly but surely transitioning to a system with more alternative career and education paths, where talents – both academic and non-academic – are embraced and not discouraged. Obvious examples of this shift are institutions such as School of the Arts and Singapore Sports School, which are part of broader initiative by Singapore's Ministry of Education to provide students with multiple paths to realise their individual potential.

Despite much emphasis being placed on sports and the arts, there is little to no opportunities or support for grooming eSports players domestically. Additionally, there is a lack of institutional support for spurring growth in this industry. Just as in traditional professional sports, eSports players tend to peak between teens and mid-20s, after which their reflexes will begin to slow. However, because of the mandatory national service that takes place at the start of the 20s for most, players lose years from their peak performance age. This impediment can prove a stumbling block that dampens the desire of potential eSports greats from pursuing an eSports career, and making eSports much less viable than other career choices. While support for traditional sporting careers grows, with top Singapore swimmer Joseph Schooling permitted to have his national service enlistment deferred in order to compete for the Southeast Asian Games, eSports athletes receive no such grace. For example, local eSports player Galvin 'Meracle' Kang, was not permitted additional leave

from National Service during a crucial period in his eSports career, leading to his team and himself losing their chance to compete at the finals of *The Summit* in Los Angeles (prize pool of USD $311,000) .

This lack of support is further exacerbated by a general lack of mainstream media coverage of eSports. This is especially difficult to understand when there is clear interest in gaming: the Singaporean population spends the most on video games in the Southeast Asian region. This could be attributed to the general inability to accept the so-called 'deviant' nature of gaming. This lack of mainstream media coverage, the social stigma of gaming, and lack of institutional support greatly limit the room for growth of the eSports sector here.

The Singaporean eSports scene stands in stark contrast with that in South Korea, where top local eSports players regularly appear on TV variety shows and magazine covers. Closer to home, in Malaysia, the government sponsors an eSports team that emerged top in a local event held to support eSports players. This type of local support is important in eSports as eSports teams generally start off as home-grown teams with members from a single nationality. As such, countries can take pride in the victories of their own domestically groomed teams. In the near future, there could even be an Olympic equivalent of an eSports event where national teams compete across different games with the nations' support. If eSports continue in its current trajectory toward becoming a mainstream sport, governmental support will be crucial for the development of home-grown eSports athletes, who require both time and capital for the team to grow.

PROMISED LAND OR FOOL'S GOLD?

The eSports industry has provided an alternative career choice for the younger generation. In the past, it was a pipe dream to play games for a living. However, with relatively little support from authorities or civil society, it may still be too early to determine if an eSports career is viable in the long term. Additionally, eSports has to address match-fixing and doping issues, which are also prevalent in professional sports, before it can be accepted amongst the wider public. Until then, prospects of the eSports industry in Singapore may very well be a false promise.

Cyber Vigilantes: Mobs or Cops?

Timothy Lim

Hermanth Kumar

I n 2014, Briton Anton Casey became Singapore's public enemy number one after 'posting disparaging remarks about "poor people" on the MRT and having to "wash the stench of public transport" off himself'. This incited anger among the online community that led to him and his family becoming a target of abuse. Eventually, Casey lost his job and had to move with his family to Australia as they were allegedly receiving death threats from netizens. To add insult to injury, budget airline Scoot took swipes at Casey by creating on online advertisement with caricatures of him and his family with the caption "Escape Plan: To Perth…".

The Anton Casey incident showcases the rising phenomenon of cyber vigilantism within Singapore. Cyber vigilantism refers to the situation where groups of people use the internet to 'unearth the previously obscure, anonymous, or protected personal data of social wrongdoers'. In addition, targets of these cyber vigilantes are insulted and shamed through the public internet domain, such as online forums and blogs.

This trend of cyber vigilantism is by no means confined to Singapore; it is prevalent across many parts of the world. For instance, in China, a cyber manhunt was sparked by an online video on Southcn.com showing a high-level governmental official making abusive threats against a victim at a restaurant in Shenzhen. Despite efforts by local authorities to downplay the incident, the online community pooled their resources, and found out the identity and personal information of the government official. The video was viewed 200,000 times and the official identified had his personal details such as vehicle number, date of birth and education posted online by netizens. Eventually, the official was suspended and subsequently lost his job.

For many in the online community, cyber vigilantism is a means of righting social wrongs committed by transgressors. Netizens go on witch hunts to shame and humiliate those who have committed what the netizens consider acts of social wrongdoing. However, this lynch mob mentality expounds the very mischief that it seeks to solve; the netizens deal with the transgressors' putative lack of civic mindedness in the most uncivilised manner – brutally dehumanising the 'wrongdoer'. It therefore appears that cyber vigilantism has unleashed intransigent social forces upon Singapore in recent times.

This essay seeks to: (a) explicate the reasons underpinning the rise of cyber vigilantism in Singapore; (b) evaluate the benefits and problems it has brought forth; and (c) suggest how Singapore ought to manage cyber vigilantism in future.

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS AND SHARED VALUES

The prevalence of cyber vigilantism is attributable to the ascendancy of online media platforms with languid censorship regimes that implicitly endorse online shaming.

One such platform is Straits Times Online Mobile Print (Stomp). Stomp is a website owned by the Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), which was initiated to promote citizen journalism and light-hearted entertainment to the public. However, what started out as a platform for opinion sharing and constructive feedback has degenerated into a repository for gossip, voyeurism, and small-minded petty complaints.

Stomp does at times regulate the credibility of the articles posted, but it leaves much to be desired with the regulation often lambasted as being lackadaisical. This is especially the case for postings under the *Singapore Seen* section. As a result, the website's credibility has been questioned, and it has come under frequent fire for misreporting the news.

For instance, ex-Stomp content producer Samantha Francis uploaded a falsified picture of a MRT train door remaining opened *en route* her trip to Lakeside MRT station. The photo was later found to be misappropriated from a Twitter post, and Ms Francis falsely claimed to have personally witnessed the incident on her post on Stomp. This showcases not merely the problem of false reporting, but also the tendency of the online community to rashly accept things they see at face value without engaging in a critical and circumspective examination of its veracity. SMRT became an unfortunate victim of Ms Francis's unconscionable conduct; it was crudely assailed by netizens whom vulgarly tore SMRT apart for their alleged lack of safety.

In contrast to Stomp, overseas citizen journalism sites have taken a different approach. In the United States, for instance, CNN's iReport takes a more active step in policing the credibility of netizens' articles. It provides a list of can-and-can't dos under its community guidelines to facilitate reliable reporting by netizens.

The other dimension that underlies the prevalence of cyber vigilantism in Singapore is the nation's societal underpinnings.

Singapore is 'a Confucian society guided by Asian Values'. It promulgates the use of negative reinforcement against transgressions to the Singapore social order. This culture was recognised and promulgated by the *White Paper*

on Shared Values 1991, which emphasises the importance for Singaporeans to 'put society above self and show concern for others'. Ironically, what was meant to promote harmony amongst ourselves has been misinterpreted as and convoluted into an endorsement of online shaming by many netizens.

The prevalence of cyber vigilantism may be seen as a cathartic release of societal angst by netizens against those who have committed social wrong-doings. In a study conducted in 2010, a group of bloggers who engaged in online shaming were interviewed to understand the rationale for their actions. Broadly, the main reason given was concerns about a 'perceived lack of civic mindedness among Singaporeans'. As such, this group of individuals took it upon themselves to pinpoint the bad behaviour of Singaporeans and shame them online to attract the public's notice and attention.

Cyber vigilantism therefore traces its roots to our shared Asian values. But is it healthy for the Singaporean society?

CYBER VIGILANTISM: BOON OR BANE?

Cyber vigilantism is often condemned by academics, civil society and the authorities in Singapore. However, it has to be conceded that online vigilantism brings some benefits to society. It may, on occasion, be necessary to engage in such conduct to pressure the relevant authorities to investigate possible unsavoury acts of social transgressions.

The infamous case of Jover Chew drives home this point. Chew's unethical business methods first came to light when he attempted to cheat the Vietnamese tourist Pham Van Thoai of $1,500 over an iPhone. This incident was recorded on video and uploaded online. It sparked a furore amongst netizens who slammed Chew for his dishonourable acts. In addition, internet vigilante "SMRT Ltd (Feedback)" publicised Chew's personal information and photographs on its Facebook page, which led to further online shamming, which bordered on harrassment.

This chain of events eventually pressured the authorities to investigate Chew's misdemeanours and to take legal action against his business. The Consumer Association of Singapore (CASE) sought an injunction against Chew's business. Chew was prosecuted and sentenced to 33 months of imprisonment. Parliament even took an interest in this incident, and Members of Parliament

used it to advocate for stricter consumer laws to protect consumers and tackle errant retailers.

The Jover Chew incident also challenged the cold and uncompassionate stereotype of Singaporeans. The altruistic side of the Singapore spirit was revealed when several Singaporeans volunteered to reimburse Pham for the money that he was cheated of, and even offered to buy him a new iPhone.

Be that as it may, the consequences of cyber vigilantism weigh heavily against its meagre benefit. First, acts of cyber vigilantes are intrusive, shaming not just the transgressor but innocent family members and associates. The social harm brought about by cyber vigilantism is the unwarranted embarrassment of innocent people – guilt is assigned to them by mere association. This view is endorsed by Professor Eugene Tan, who opines that the acts of cyber vigilantes are "over-zealous and self-righteous. Regardless the legitimacy of the cause, the actions by netizens are disproportionate and intrusive". He further observes, astutely, that "Two wrongs don't make a right." Indeed, looking back at the Jover Chew case, not only were his personal details posted online, his innocent loved ones had their photographs and personal details posted online as well. Many online citizens eagerly lapped up the information, and took vindictive action against them .

Secondly, cyber vigilantism promulgates bias and creates an unforgiving society. The netizens' sources of information for alleged wrongdoings are often videos and photographs posted on the internet. However, these videos and photographs portray a one-sided perspective that unduly colours the opinions of netizens watching it, impeding objective analysis of the facts.

Consider the scenario of a video that depicts a man landing blows on another. At first glance, this would seem to be a morally blameworthy act. Netizens seeing the video would appoint themselves 'judge, jury and executioner', going on a witch hunt to identify him, name him and shame him. However, they may not have been cognizant that the individual could have been acting in self-defence. Surely the wrath of the netizens is unwarranted in such circumstances; his actions were justified, yet harm is inflicted upon him. This hypothetical scenario is by no means extreme, as the online community has, on several occasions, displayed its predisposition to extremeness. In particular, acts undertaken by influential netizens may be perceived by members of society as an implicit endorsement of such extreme conduct, thus planting the seeds of a prejudicial and uncompassionate society.

Most importantly, cyber vigilantism in Singapore has showcased that Singaporeans still lack the capacity to maturely exercise their freedom of expression. Many netizens evidently fail to consider the consequences of their actions, labouring under the misconception that their acts of online shaming will not lead to dire outcomes. This reflects naiveté on their part. One simply needs to look abroad to know that there are lessons to be learned. In China, cyber vigilantes are known as human flesh search engines, ferreting personal information which can [drive]…victims to the brink of suicide . The lessons learnt from China ought to be a warning that greater restrictions have to be put in place to protect victims of online shaming. In light of the overwhelming problems brought on by cyber vigilantism, it must be put to a halt.

STAYING VIGILANT

There is a thin line between shaming an offender and highlighting distasteful societal behaviour. This is an important distinction to make, as it is imperative for protecting both the interests of the victim and the societal transgressor. Just last year, the Protection from Harassment Act came into effect and it seeks to protect individuals against the ills of cyber vigilantism. This step towards regulation is to be applauded.

There are some who argue for a non-interventionist approach and that government intervention is not the preferred solution to address the problems of cyber vigilantism. Their argument is undergirded by the assumption that freedom of expression should be given primacy in civic society.

With respect, such a proposition is untenable. The past incidents of cyber vigilantism have clearly shown that when it comes to the freedom of expression, Singaporeans are unable to exercise it in a responsible manner. There may come a time when Singaporeans learn to self-regulate, but unfortunately such a time is yet to be.

It is also suggested that a soft approach would be useful in promoting civic mindedness and stopping cyber vigilantism. This could be done through the Media Literacy Council where more promotional efforts could be made to help curb the ongoing problem of cyber vigilantism within Singapore.

Cyber vigilantism is a global phenomenon that has become part and parcel of Singapore society. It has evolved from a benign form of civic peer monitoring to one that intrudes into the lives of individuals.

Admittedly, it does bring benefits to society and helps to police social wrongdoing but its costs far outweigh its benefits. It is high time for cyber vigilantism to be put to a halt and for Singaporeans to draw the line between the mere highlighting of bad behaviour and intimidating others through online shaming. We have vociferous campaigns against online bullying in Singapore; how is cyber vigilantism any different?

> "The idea of you lynching anybody! It's amusing. The idea of you thinking you had pluck enough to lynch a man! Because you're brave enough to tar and feather poor friendless cast-out women that come along here, did that make you think you had grit enough to lay your hands on a man?"
>
> Col Sherman from *Huckleberry Finn*,
> addressing the Southern Antebellum Lynch Mob

Part Two

Breaking the Mould

Online Dating: Waiting for the Stars to Align

Alex Cherucheril

Muhammed Ismail

Singapore's "ultra-low birth rates" have been recognised as a pressing concern, and steps have been taken from a policy-making level to address this. However, there seems to be a lack of discussion about the key social issue which underpins this concern: Singaporeans having difficulty finding a life partner.

An IPS survey in 2013 found that only 7 percent of Singaporeans are willing to have children outside of marriage . This finding, coupled with focus groups conducted by as part of her thesis on romance, dating, and marriage in Singapore suggesting "marriage is undisputedly seen as a social convention, a stage of life that precedes, and is necessary, for starting a family by most participants", leads to the conclusion that not finding a life partner precludes most Singaporeans from having or even thinking about having children.

Seeking life partners should be encouraged and facilitated for an independent reason: long-term relationships are the cornerstone of longer and higher quality lives, as shown in the *Harvard Study,* the longest-running adult development study. Surely, a society of individuals living such high-quality lives is a worthy goal for Singapore and Singaporeans.

In this essay, we want to shine the spotlight on why Singaporeans have a hard time finding a life partner. This essay suggests three linked reasons:

1. High expectations of partners;
2. Difficulty in expanding social circles for meeting potential partners; and
3. Unwillingness to embrace new methods of searching for partners.

We will first look at whether Singaporeans desire a life partner. Next, we examine the high expectations Singaporeans have of their desired life partners. We then look at the Singaporean approach to meeting potential partners. Specifically, we consider the use of dating services that operate on mobile devices (dating apps). Finally, we turn to Singaporean perspectives on new methods for searching for partners, focusing on existing dating apps.

Love, romance, and intimacy feature prominently in popular culture. This may have led to, or been caused by, a desire to have these attributes and experiences in our lives. Singaporeans view finding a life partner as a good way to achieve these objectives. This may be a reason the IPS survey found that 69 percent of Singaporeans under the age of 40 definitely want to get married.

Further, Singaporeans do not differentiate between a successful marriage and a successful relationship. The implication is that Singaporeans do indeed seek a successful relationship.

If the desire exists, why are Singaporeans not able to find a partner? *The Straits Times* published the following checklist to highlight a 'checklist syndrome' as being a major stumbling block to finding a life partner in Singapore:

What women want
Men who are:
• Taller than them. Optimal height is more than 1.75m
• As educated or more educated than them
• At a position in a company comparable to theirs
• Older. Optimal age is up to four years older
• Confident
• Earning more than them. Preferably in the following professions: lawyer, doctor, engineer, banker and pilot

What men want
Women who are:
• Pleasant looking (not too pretty)
• Slim
• Family oriented
• Not at a higher level than them in terms of profession/job status
• Younger. Optimal age is up to four years younger

The checklist shows the high expectations of Singaporean women. Expectations have gone to the point that a 2005 study quipped that the ideal Singaporean male partner is in "scarce supply". However, such expectations are a reality of the changing times.

Given changing gender roles, higher earning power, and increasing standards of education, the 'bargaining power' of women in the 'marketplace' for partners increases, which naturally leads to higher expectations of a potential partner. Yang (2013) also highlights that Singaporeans have greater expectations of romance in a relationship. These tangible and intangible attributes constitute an arguably high water mark – albeit a reachable one – expected of a life partner.

Despite expressed desires to find a life partner, and high expectations, over 50 percent of the respondents to the *IPS Survey* were single and not dating. This disjoint between desires and steps taken to achieve them is likely to arise from time spent at work, desired attributes of partners, and the approach taken to meeting new people.

Singaporeans face difficulty expanding the network of people they interact with. This is reflected by Emma Wong's (pseudonym) experience. As a student in Singapore, Emma found it hard to expand her social circle. The time spent in school meant her social interactions were largely with peers from similar backgrounds. When Emma wanted to be romantically involved with someone, she found it difficult to find 'the right one' within her social circle. Emma attempted conventional methods of socialising as she did not think dating apps were a suitable tool for finding potential partners. It was only when she went to the United States that Emma saw friends using dating apps to expand their social circle, and consequently warmed up to the idea.

Another Singaporean in USA who faced similar difficulties is Joshua Phua. After his partner of eight years ended their relationship, Phua faced difficulties finding someone he could connect with. Phua found a solution to his concerns – dating apps. Phua brought the benefits he saw in dating apps back to Singapore by co-founding Paktor. Paktor has since grown into a regional player, expanding to several other Asian countries.

Today, Singaporeans have an array of dating services at their disposal. These include dating apps like Tinder, as well as specialist services catering to unique Singaporean demands. An example is Mat&Minah, a Singaporean dating app that links Muslim youth, which caters to the demand for religious endogamy in the Muslim community.

In fact, the field has become so crowded that when Tinder's new monetisation model prompted many to leave the service, sites took to publishing lists of their favourite alternative dating apps for Singaporeans.

The challenge of bringing the dating services back to Singapore has largely to do with how Singaporeans approach dating. In fact, the very idea of dating seems to be ill-defined in Singapore.

As Paktor executive Darryl Liew highlights, Singaporean youth have to reconcile being "more open to casual dating" and "still [being] pretty conservative". One manifestation of this dissonance is the willingness of Singaporeans to chat with multiple people, but dating only one person at a time. This is in

contrast with the western approach of dating multiple people at the same time, then asking one of them to be 'exclusive'. As Dan Wells (pseudonym), an American student in Singapore who uses dating apps, puts it: "dating in USA is non-committal and not considered as serious as dating in Singapore is".

Dan shared that when he asked Singaporean girls he didn't know out, they seemed to be caught off-guard. Singaporean student Colin Lim (pseudonym), tried the direct approach and similarly failed. Both felt Singaporeans need to know the other person well before asking them out, even on a dating app. Indeed, some see directly asking a stranger out as a sure-fire way to never speaking to them again! This can prove to be a significant barrier to finding a life partner, since only those within a narrow social circle are available as potential partners.

This difficulty of expanding one's social circle is especially pronounced in Singapore. In a recent survey by STJobs and Paktor, 65 percent of Singaporeans said they spend too much time at work. Singles thus have less time to meet people outside work, and even if they meet someone, pursuing or furthering the relationship can be difficult with work taking up most of their time and energy. This was echoed by two dating Singaporeans, who pointed out to The Straits Times that work leaves them "too tired to go on dates". It comes as no surprise that 50 percent of respondents found work to be a barrier to dating.

In light of this, Singaporeans are turning to dating services, as Emma and Phua did, to maximise the utility of their time to meet fellow singles. Liew told us dating apps have proven particularly popular here because they:

1. Afford privacy from prying eyes by living on the user's personal mobile device;
2. Reduce temporal and spatial barriers by being accessible anywhere and anytime the user has their personal mobile device; and
3. Provide the comfort of a digital 'veil' which allows more reserved Singaporeans to communicate more easily with a stranger.

Overall, reticence seems to be the general approach to dating. Singaporeans do not want others to know they are dating. Even if they are searching for the ideal partner, they do not want to be seen as "a player" by going out with multiple potential partners concurrently. Instead, a high level of commitment is expected from an early stage. Even on dating apps, while there is a willingness to "chat with multiple people", committing to a date equates to exclusivity. This points to exclusivity being required at an early stage in the courtship process.

In Colin's experience, "after a few months, most people leave the [dating app] because they can't find what they are looking for". He felt this was because Singaporeans want a "personal touch" in the way initial connections are made. This can be both a personal preference and one that is influenced by social pressure. On a personal level, some of our peers stated that merely asking them whether they used dating apps was "offensive". On an external level, Emma highlighted her unwillingness to share where she met her partner as Singaporean families disapprove of the idea of dating someone they met online.

Coupled with the social pressure to settle down, and the concern Colin expressed to "not lose out", Singaporeans are faced with divergent strains. They have to find a suitable partner promptly, but are discouraged from casting a wider net.

Even when Singaporeans turn to dating apps, they do not seem to be using it as a tool to cast a wider net. Instead, Liew highlighted that the initial reason for most Singaporeans to go on dating apps was boredom. This use of dating apps as a novelty while holding onto the expectation of meeting a life partner offline is akin to waiting for the stars to align and bring life partners together.

The common thread that emerges from this examination of dating apps in Singapore is the logical break between desiring a life partner with high standards; and lower willingness to actively search for potential life partners. In our view, the latter is more a result of social circumstances.

The IPS Survey linked relationships to "ultra-low fertility levels", and recommended two policy-intervention solutions:

1.   Facilitating more rapid achievement of the markers of adulthood at an earlier age; and
2.   Engineering a shift away from materialistic attitudes.

The first method creates a system of incentives that loses sight of the bigger picture. Finding a life partner is not a task with simple rules and clear directions; extrinsically motivating people to achieve this goal is likely to have a detrimental rather than beneficial effect. This is owing to the nature of the 'task'; to end up married simply to realise the artificial benefits that married couples enjoy is unlikely to lead to the long-term success of the marriage relationship.

Again, the focus should be on creating opportunities for Singaporeans to form close long-term relationships. Findings of the *Harvard Study* indicates that forming close long-term relationships increases the likelihood of a more wholesome, and fulfilling life. A more humanistic focus on these goals

rather than an instrumentalist approach to improve fertility rates would serve Singapore better.

In that regard, the second method is to be lauded. However, reliance on a top-down policy intervention is unlikely to be successful. In our view, a bottom-up approach where society develops and adapts to changes in the technological landscape is more appropriate. As a society that has prided itself on principled pragmatism, this would be a logical progression.

Some may make short shrift of this call by emphasising the importance of a unique national identity. In our view, this development does not call for embracing negative social elements such as infidelity which continue to be looked down on by Singaporeans. Further, local dating apps have sought to steer clear of being seen as 'hook-up' channels. In short, market forces will follow society's views.

What we are calling for is a shift in thinking about the tools for expanding one's social circle that is commensurate with Singaporean singles' aspiration with regard to life partners.

If we embrace personal advancements that push our aspirations for our desired partners, then is it fair to shut ourselves out from tools that these advances provide us, especially to achieve the goal of high-quality life for Singaporeans?

Tying the Knot, for Better or Worse?

Emilyn Phang

Hollie Dawson

AN AWKWARD QUESTION

E very lunar new year, singles are bound to hear the same question:

"Girl, when you getting married ah?"
  or
"Boy, you not young anymore. Still never find girlfriend?"

Such questions are not unusual in Singapore as extended families get together for yearly Lunar New Year gatherings, catching up on each other's lives, and sharing views on events that have occurred in the 11 months that have passed. Without a doubt, questions on marriage and dating are top contenders in the list of questions hurled at younger family members by older relatives amidst the Lunar New Year festivities. The fact that these questions are commonplace displays the central role marriages appear to play in the lives of the older generation. This begs the question of how, broadly, our conception of marriage has changed; and focusing on Singapore and the UK, what does marriage mean to us today?

In international terms, marriage is the legally recognised union of a man and a woman (or, two people of the same sex in certain jurisdictions) as partners in a relationship. The act of marriage is performed through wedding ceremonies and attendant festivities or formalities, leading up to the pair's recognition as a married couple. However, in modern Singaporean society, there is a downward trend of such ceremonies as couples opt for a slow-burning approach, such as getting and staying engaged to each other over a long period rather than entering the formal and legally binding union of marriage.

In Singapore, influences from all parts of the world have transformed both the way individuals approach dating and the later stage of marriage, the most obvious being from the West. While the definition of marriage remains largely similar to the international one, we are observing a vast change in trends where the government takes part in encouraging marriages. This can largely be attributed to the trend of Singaporeans marrying later, which has a negative effect on the demographics of the Singaporean population. This is most clearly observed in the form of lower total fertility rates in Singapore in recent years.

There is a similar trend occurring in the UK but for different reasons. This revolution in the way marriage is seen began in the 1960s with the introduction

of contraception and abortion, which meant there was no longer a need to have a 'shotgun' marriage – as it was called – purely because of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Additionally, the role of women was becoming broader, starting with their acquisition of the right to vote, women took on roles traditionally thought of as being exclusively for males. As society shifted toward increased individualism, and with the expansion of the white collar industries which allowed for women to enter the workforce, women ultimately became independent from men; the institution of marriage no longer played a central role in women's lives.

Data from the Singapore Department of Statistics suggest that the median age of marriage for both brides and grooms is increasing. In 2004, the age of brides marrying for the first time was 26.7 years. A decade later, it had risen to 28.2. The comparable figures for grooms are 29.4 in 2004 and 30.2 in 2014. Unlike in the past when marriages played a bigger role, individuals today search longer for a prospective lifelong partner who meets their specific expectations. However, this is not the only reason for late marriages giving relatives opportunity to harp on the same issue year after year. As Singapore prospers, marriage as an institution has transformed in the eyes of society and other life destinations have taken the pride of place marriage once held.

Lateness in marriage is also occurring in the UK but for significantly different reasons, one being the old-fashioned milestone called 'The Seven Year Itch' – a phrase used to suggest that the happiness and success of a marriage starts to deteriorate after around the seven-year mark. However, young couples today are less likely to experience this 'itch' after getting hitched as they have the option of assessing life with their partner without the commitment of getting married, thanks to the social acceptance of cohabitation in the UK. This means couples can experience what it is like to live together before committing to each other for life. Surveys have shown that "the earlier in life a marriage is formed, the more likely it is to breakdown". Cohabitation gives couples a period of experiment before they decide to tie the knot. It is a reason for the fall in divorce rates since around 2003. There is a downside. Cohabiting couples who do not marry are at much higher risk of not staying together for the long haul, especially if no children are involved.

The rising cohabitation trend in the UK is due in part to a government that has failed to guide and persuade the younger generation on the importance of marriage and how it leads to future security and stability in life. It has to

do also with the fact that a huge proportion of the younger generation have parents who have divorced, an experience that may have diminished their belief in the institution of marriage. However, the problem with cohabiting for the rest of one's life is that neither partner has any rights to the other's possessions, home, family or money. Should the worst happen, though they may have been together for over half a century, or even if children were involved in the dispute, they would still not have any marital rights. Not only that, the removal of the stigma attached to divorce has dwindled to nothing in the UK, and this could be because of the diminishing power of religion in people's life decisions. Divorce is not seen as a sin anymore; society has grown and adapted to people's needs and wants, in that an amicable separation is much preferred over a hateful marriage and an eventual acrimonious divorce.

COSTING LOVE

Over the years, career, self-development, and education seem to have topped the charts as goals for most Singaporeans. Driven by the goal of advancing their careers, people relegate marriage to a position of lower priority. According to an interview with an anonymous female professional, "[t]he main reason for delaying marriage is 'competing life goals' such as a prolonged period in formal education and career." Singaporeans today tend to be more focused on career successes and are hence less willing to be committed in a relationship. Dr Straughan, Vice Dean of International Relations and Special Duties at the National University of Singapore, said the trend of delayed marriages will continue as more young Singaporeans are focusing on their careers first.

Similarly, in the UK, other than the trend towards cohabiting, there is also the trend of delaying marriage in favour of pursuing a career before settling down to start a family. With the current job market, there is a growing need to pursue further education and training to become better qualified for future employment. This pursuit is done at the expense of settling down, delaying marriage even further. Labour force changes have also had an impact on the levels of divorce because the financial independence of women allows them to live in separate households without needing the help of their partners.

Even if couples are keen to get married after achieving their career goals, they face the hurdle of the growing cost of starting a family, which has been

rising steadily. Today, even middle-class couples, whether married or cohabitating, feel that they must double their incomes before thinking about starting a family.

In the UK, the old trend of the rich marrying the rich is making a comeback and the marriage gap between the rich and poor is widening since nothing has changed in the "crime, school, wealth and deprivation figures". The marriage gap continues to widen despite the British government's efforts to close the inequality gap. Among those in the top tax bracket, "nine in ten new parents are married (while) for those on minimum wage or less, it's about half". This is a huge difference, considering marriage used to be a goal for everyone; a gap not apparent a few generations ago has doubled from 24 percent to 48 percent in the last decade.

In Singapore, the government has been doing a lot to help reduce the costs associated with starting a family and raising a child. One scheme it uses to incentivise couples to start a family is the Marriage and Parenthood Package (Appendix 1 gives details of the package). It may come as a surprise to our foreign friends to learn that the government has been playing such an active role in encouraging individuals to get married and start a family. The Social Development Network (SDN) promotes social interaction amongst singles, encouraging them to get hitched. Government policy gives priority to first time applicants for subsidised public housing. In addition, the Housing Development Board (HDB) gives grants to aid young couples.

The impact of all these marriage and family promotion measures is mixed. The Department of Statistics reports a decline in the number of marriages before 2013. Between 2013 and 2014, the number of marriages rose 8.2 percent while the divorce rate fell 2.9 percent. Nearly three of five singles in serious relationships put career ahead of marriage. Over a third said they were not mentally prepared for marriage.

Another aspect of marriage of special relevance to Singapore is inter-racial marriage. As one of the most religiously and racially diverse countries in the world, Singapore has seen a growing number of inter-racial marriages. In 1990, only about eight marriages out of one hundred involved inter-racial couples. By 2004 the proportion had risen to 13.1 percent and in 2014, it stood at 20.4 percent. The reasons for this rising proportion are complex. Greater interaction of the races may be one factor. Another could be the rapid influx of foreigners since 2000. The greater opportunities for inter-racial interaction may help increase the total number of marriages in Singapore.

In contrast to Singapore, the UK marriage picture is quite different. A generous welfare state there may have encouraged young women to get pregnant and drop out of school. Instead of getting a job, they have children in order to receive more money from the government. Their minimal employable skills mean they get more benefits from having children than holding a low-paying job.

PARTING WORDS

In sum, marriage plays a more central role in the lives of Singaporeans than the British. The institution of marriage seems to be something Singaporeans still believe in. But they are taking longer to commit to for pragmatic reasons. The Singapore government recognises their concerns and is playing an active role to encourage and incentivise marriage, while taking steps to ameliorate the problems associated with getting married and starting a family. This is in sharp contrast to the UK, where marriage as an institution is becoming less central to the lives of younger Britons. This change in attitude could have knock-on negative effects on British society. Whether the British government should play a more active role in encouraging more of its citizens to marry is an issue worth discussing.

Appendix 1 - Marriage and Parenthood Package Measures

Measure	What it means
Getting Married	
Finding a partner	The Social Development Network (SDN) facilitates social interaction among singles.
Housing Schemes	Priority is given to first-time applicants in purchasing HDB Build-to-Order flats. Young couples can also apply for CPF Housing Grants (such as the Family Grant and the Additional CPF Housing Grant) to help them finance the purchase of a flat from the government.
Having Children	
Medisave Maternity Package	Medisave can be used to help pay for delivery and pre-delivery expenses.
Co-funding for assisted reproduction technology (ART) treatment	Government will co-fund ART treatment received at the public hospitals.
Medisave for assisted conception procedures	Up to $6,000, $5,000 and $4,000 can be used from couples' Medisave for the 1st, 2nd and 3rd time that Medisave is used for assisted conception procedures.

Raising and Caring for Children	
Baby Bonus	Parents can get a cash gift of $4,000 each for their 1st and 2nd child, and $6,000 each for their 3rd and 4th child. Savings into their children's Child Development Account (CDA) will be matched dollar for dollar up to $6,000 each for their 1st and 2nd child, up to $12,000 each for their 3rd and 4th child, and up to $18,000 each from the 5th child onwards.
Parenthood Tax Rebate (PTR)	Parents can claim the PTR of $5,000 for their 1st child, $10,000 for their 2nd child, and $20,000 per child for all subsequent children.
Qualifying / Handicapped Child Relief (QCR/HCR)	Parents can claim $4,000 per child under the QCR or $5,500 per child under the HCR.
Working Mother's Child relief (WMCR)	Working mothers can claim the WMCR at 15 percent of earned income for their 1st child, 20 percent for their 2nd and 25 percent per child for all subsequent children.
Grandparent Caregiver Relief (GCR)	Working mothers whose children aged 12 and below are cared for by their grandparents can claim the GCR of $3,000.
Subsidies for centre-based infant care & child care	Parents can enjoy a monthly subsidy of up to $600 and up to $300 for infant care and child-care respectively.
Foreign Domestic Worker Levy Concession	Parents can enjoy a $95 levy concession if they have a young child aged below 12 staying with them.

Work-Life Support	
Maternity leave	Mothers have maternity leave of 16 weeks.
Child care leave	Both parents have 6 days of paid child care leave per year each if they have any child aged below 7 years.
Infant care leave	Both parents may take 6 days of unpaid infant care leave per year each if they have any child aged below 2 years.
Work-Life Works! (WOW!) Fund	Organisations can use the fund to subsidise costs of consultancy and training, leading to implementation of better work-life strategies.

The Poor in Singapore: Whose Fault is It?

Samantha Lee

Xue Jiarong

POVERTY IS REAL

Poverty in Singapore is real. It is not something we can ignore just because we do not personally experience it or encounter it on our streets. There appears to be a lack of understanding of this multi-faceted issue. There is a lack of communication, determination and effort from both sides – the parties wanting to help and the ones receiving help – to work out a sustainable solution to get the poor out of the poverty trap.

The fight against poverty is not simply about wanting to improve the lives of the people at the bottom; it is part of improving society as a whole. Such advancement can start from noticing, to respecting and reaching out to people who are different from us, people who are usually forgotten or invisible to us. Such a shift in thinking is necessary if we are to evolve into a more inclusive and caring Singapore.

What most people do not realise is that poverty is a symptom of a deeper underlying problem. There are often more complex issues plaguing such families, including gambling problems, drug and smoking addictions, shopping addictions, health issues, marital issues, alcoholism, abusive parents, poor education or parents who are in prison. All these have emotional and psychological impact that add to the financial stress of low-income households. They are often stuck in a pessimistic mindset that feeds and breeds on a chain of negative thoughts, actions and attitudes. This not only limits their potential and keeps them in the poverty trap but also drags their loved ones down with them, consciously or unconsciously steering away people who genuinely want to help, and reinforcing the perceived segregation between themselves and the rest of society. It also creates a sense of disdain towards the government and those who in comparison fare better than them. Further, because the low-income are so overwhelmed and stressed about their immediate financial worries and day-to-day survival, they have little time, mental will and cognitive capacity to make good decisions, think ahead or practice self-discipline, often leading them back to their addictions and preference for instant gratification. Thus, poverty is not just about having insufficient funds for daily necessities, it is also a concept that covers the lack of education, social and emotional support, and the requisite mindset to break free of the poverty trap.

WHAT THE GOVERNMENT IS DOING

What the government has done so far is to implement the "Many Helping Hands" approach to restrain Singapore from being a welfare state. This was formulated to help the disadvantaged to be self-reliant; if further assistance is needed, the individual's family will be the first to help, then the wider community, with the government rendering residual assistance. This is to ensure that no citizen is left with nothing to fall back on, leaving the government to focus on serving the people better. How effective the "Many Helping Hands" approach is, we have no way of knowing; we only know what has been done – through the CPF, the HDB, workfare, tax incentives, public assistance and non-profit organisations.

The weaknesses of this approach are the lack of proper organisational structure, and the consequent lack of communication and coordination between agencies functioning within this system. This fragmentation makes it difficult for the beneficiaries to navigate through the system and obtain the help they need. This is exacerbated by most of the schemes being opt-in, with onerous requirements for end-users to comply with. Lastly, we feel that the emotional and psychological support is insufficient; we need to change minds to change lives.

Currently, Singapore's "Many Helping Hands" philosophy is evolving; the government has acknowledged over the past few years that greater support is needed and that there is a greater role for them to play. In 2014, the government announced plans to pilot a programme that would assign vulnerable families an individual social worker to work with as they navigate through various agencies; this could potentially be a multi-year process. In addition, the government plans to pilot a Social Service Net that will share the data of aid-recipients across agencies, Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs) and non-profit sectors to minimise red tape for end-users and enhance collaboration between stakeholders. These measures aim to ease the burden on Singapore's most vulnerable families as they seek social assistance.

However, as mentioned earlier, social workers need to go beyond the symptom of poverty and address the underlying issues these families face that poverty is merely symptomatic of. In addition, we see the need for a peer support network to give the families involved a sense of inclusion and motivation to address their issues and escape the poverty trap.

Even if we accept that the systems currently in place or that are being put in place will address all who need assistance and seek it, there will remain those who do not or cannot seek assistance but still need it. These individuals who have slipped through the cracks are arguably those that require the most care, support, and assistance.

THE MANY FACES OF THE POOR

To assist these individuals and plug the gaps in our system, we first need to understand who make up this group. Broadly, we can split them into three umbrella-groups, as suggested by the *Handbook on Inequality, Poverty and Unmet Social Need in Singapore*, published by the Lien Centres for Social Innovation (2015):

    1.   The "working poor";
    2.   The "unemployed poor"; and
    3.   The "poor retiree".

The "working poor" are people who are working but are not paid enough to live on. If they speak up and seek assistance, financial aid should not be a problem.

The "poor retirees" are those who have retired, but were not paid enough to have savings. Some in this category may be abandoned by their families or have none to begin with, and can continue doing odd jobs, sell tissue packets, and/or collect cardboard boxes. Having spoken to a reliable source, we realised that some people who fall in this category and are of an advanced age may not be keen on taking up full-time employment, but may prefer the freedom and flexibility of the modes of employment which come with minimal obligations and have little or no hierarchies. This lifestyle preference should be respected, but there remains a need to assist persons in this category by checking up on them, providing assistance for them to enjoy their golden years, even if they do not seek such help.

The "unemployed poor" is the category with the most difficulties. Within this category, there are multiple sub-groups. Going by the multiple charity shows aired on television, the common thread among one such sub-group is an unexpected illnesses or circumstance which strikes a family member, requiring a loved one to become a full-time caregiver for them. This adds financial burden

to the breadwinner(s) of the family, as there is one less provider. We have little doubt that Singapore's healthcare system will provide people in this category the medical treatment they require despite their inability to afford healthcare. The area for improvement lies in having polyclinics or hospital staff connect the low-income group to social workers, for assistance with their financial needs.

The next sub-group within the "unemployed poor" are those who remain unemployed for various reasons, often living from hand-to-mouth. This sub-group consists mostly of women who do not work, and are dependants to their husbands. For such women, tragedy strikes when marital issues arise and the breadwinner of the house whom they've depended upon, their husband, walks out on them. They are left in the lurch with no income or savings, saddled with debt. Sometimes, they are also left to bring up the children on their own. Under our current framework, such families receive significant aid from the self-help groups (AMP, CDAC, EA, SINDA and Yayasan Mendaki), the question is – can more be done to prevent this from happening? While being a stay-home parent is a respectable and noble decision, can we not encourage such people to squeeze in some work to be less dependent on their spouses? Flexible jobs for stay-at-home moms and dads would be a great work alternative, but most companies in Singapore do not offer that option. As we progress as a society, we can advocate for more flexible working opportunities.

The most vulnerable ones are the children in such families. The odds are that the children will be trapped in the poverty cycle. Education is among the best ways to break out of this cycle in a meritocracy, and the government has taken a good first step by making primary school education compulsory. However, we feel that pre-school education is arguably more important, and something has to be done to ensure these children do not start too late off the blocks compared to their peers when they enter primary school and in the later part of their educational careers.

WHAT MORE CAN BE DONE?

As Singapore is wont to do, we look beyond our borders for examples of systems that solve similar problems. The United States of America (USA) is making a novel move towards a two-generation approach to poverty reduction. This strategy seeks to ensure both the needs of parents and their children are met

simultaneously, instead of targeting one group at a time. Families in poverty can best be served by addressing parental needs for education, workforce training, and parental skills, while also addressing the development essentials of the children in these families. There is also a positive feedback loop, since the lure of free childcare-cum-pre-school education means parents are more willing to set aside time and effort to do whatever the Family Service Center tells them to do.

We propose that Singapore should adopt a similar two-generational model for vulnerable young families that require childcare. Other than wanting the children to fare better in primary school, the intention behind this is not only to motivate the "working poor" and the "unemployed poor" to go for job training and money management classes but also to involve parents in their children's education and personal lives. Healthy relationships between parents and children would greatly relieve the financial stress and any negativity that the parents have, steering the child away from unhealthy relationships that can push them towards bad choices.

We also call for adoption of suggestions targeted at relieving the poor of the cognitive stress of day-to-day survival to enable them to make better choices moving forward, including:

- Cancelling debts, which is the most direct way of removing mental toll due to financial stress. Methodist Welfare Service (MWS) currently only offers a programme that matches debt repayment dollar-for-dollar up to $100 per month.
- Increasing operating hours for social service offices, or having social workers visit the needy, which would greatly increase accessibility to aid. The poor often work long hours and can apply for aid only after work. Yet most of the social service offices are open only during office hours and are closed on weekends.
- Changing the assistance schemes from opt-in to opt-out basis. This would mean that the poor would be automatically enrolled into saving schemes and/or government grants unless and until they opt out.
- Improving their living environment to reduce mental stress, something some outreach organisations are already doing through home improvement projects for low-income families.

Poverty exists in every society; it is not something we can eradicate by throwing

money at the problem. Providing more flexible job options, more holistic social and emotional support and more education on money management would be ideal. Fundamentally, however, we need to address the psychological aspects of the individual who is trapped within and affected by poverty, rather than blaming the poor for making bad choices and leaving them to their own devices. It is more constructive to understand how the mental stress of coping with day-to-day needs drives them to make bad choices, then work to reduce that daily stress and motivate them to strive to do better. Our duty, as a society, is to create pathways out of poverty that are accessible and attainable. Helping struggling families cope better with their lives today will help them and their children reach for a brighter future.

Is Singapore a Tax Haven – Reading Between the Lines

Lin Junkang

Low Kai Loon

W hat comes to your mind when the country Singapore is mentioned? Is it the small nation-state's rapid rise to economic prosperity, or do the words 'offshore tax haven' come to mind? In this period of global austerity, governments all over the world are intensifying their scrutiny of alleged tax evaders to fill their cash-strapped coffers. Capital flight to offshore jurisdictions such as Singapore has cost other nations dearly. One estimate is that the United States of America (USA) has lost over $3 trillion in tax revenue in a ten-year period.

Singapore with its strong confidentiality laws, low tax rates, and generous tax incentives, has attracted a fair bit of attention over its alleged role in aiding such tax evasion. In March 2016, UBS Group AG was embroiled in a dispute with the American Internal Revenue Service, which tried to compel the bank to release information on an American citizen's assets within Singaporean jurisdiction; the conundrum was that Singaporean banking secrecy laws allegedly prevented disclosure without permission from the client involved in the case. The ensuing debacle attracted significant media attention with Bloomberg running the headline, "Is Singapore the next Switzerland for US Tax Crackdown?"

We disagree with such media speculation, and argue that while Singapore may seem like a tax haven, its strong cross-border enforcement of tax laws, coupled with the radically different social structure funded by Singapore's tax regime, makes labelling it a 'tax haven' disingenuous. Without a better understanding of the Singaporean context, such statements hide national or political chauvinism behind neutral regulatory language. We elaborate on our argument below.

Singapore, a small nation-state in Southeast Asia, enjoys a vibrant economy and has come to be known as one of the foremost financial hubs in Asia, and even the world. Its efficient administration, strong rule of law, and transparent governance attract many multinational corporations and high net worth (HNW) individuals to live and do business here, most prominently Eduardo Saverin, the co-founder of Facebook who moved to Singapore in 2009.

In terms of its tax structure, there are broadly three broad aspects that make Singapore an attractive destination for such companies and individuals: generous tax relief, comparatively low tax rates, and strict banking confidentiality laws.

Firstly, companies that do business in Singapore enjoy significant tax relief, subject to some qualifiers. Under the Economic Expansion Incentives Act, companies looking to invest in Singapore and set up designated 'pioneer' industries may be awarded full tax relief, with profits attributable to this pioneering activity being tax-exempt. In addition, certain key industries enjoy further tax incentives, under schemes such as the Financial Sector Incentive Company, Global Trader Programme, and Maritime Sector Incentive.

Secondly, Singapore has comparatively low tax rates compared to its global peers, with a maximum progressive tax of 20 percent on personal income. It does not tax capital gains – gains from the sale of financial instruments, shares, and property in Singapore are not subject to tax unless the seller is deemed to be trading in these assets; and since 2008, neither does it tax inheritances transferred upon death.

Finally, Singapore maintains strong confidentiality laws for bank clients. Under Singapore's Banking Act, a bank in Singapore has the statutory obligation to maintain the secrecy of its customer. Licensed banks in Singapore are generally prohibited from disclosing customer information unless expressly provided for in the Banking Act. These confidentiality laws attract foreign high net-worth individuals to shift their assets to Singapore.

There are competing interests at play here. On the one hand, Singapore's tax laws are designed to attract business and capital here to spur its economy. On the other, foreign cross-border tax evasion laws are largely aimed at clawing back sums that the countries with such laws feel belong to them. Tax evasion is seen as morally or legally wrong because it is analogous to 'cheating' – the illegitimate evasion of tax indirectly increases the burden borne by other taxpayers. In this regard, jurisdictions that are complicit in such tax evasion are labelled as 'tax havens'. Such tax havens often face international sanctions.

In 1998, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), suggested four key criteria to identify a jurisdiction as a tax haven:

1. No significant economic activities;
2. Absence of cooperation from their competent tax authorities through exchange of information;
3. A 'lack of transparency'; and
4. Zero or minimal tax on 'relevant income'.

To understand whether Singapore is a tax haven, we examine whether these criteria apply.

Firstly, tax havens traditionally have no significant economic activity, their economies are spurred significantly by a tax structure that is specifically designed to attract companies and individuals seeking to reduce tax liability. In other words, companies and individuals channel monies into these tax-free jurisdictions merely to reduce their tax expenses. This description is in sharp contrast to the Singapore economy; significant contributors to its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) include high-end manufacturing and one of the busiest ports in the world. Economic activity is not generated from a lax tax structure; rather, the tax structure promotes productive economic activity. Where tax havens only desire capital inflow, Singapore's tax policy is designed to stimulate economic activity, develop expertise within the economy in certain sectors, and reap benefits from the multiplier effect of investments into the economy. The tax rate is thus balanced in a way that acts as a stimulant for efforts that result in constructive economic progress.

Secondly, contrary to its portrayal by media outlets, Singapore's banking confidentiality laws are subject to important exceptions. While the Banking Act gives banking customers certain rights to confidentiality of information, this confidentiality is not absolute. Section 65D of the Income Tax Act supersedes any duty of secrecy otherwise required by the Banking Act, allowing local tax authorities to obtain personal information of a bank client. Lastly, with effect from 1 July 2013, the definition of offences relating to money laundering has been widened to include acts of tax evasion, increasing the legitimacy of inquiries by investigators into certain personal bank account details and transactions. This was in response to the Financial Action Task Force, an inter-governmental body whose main aim is to combat money laundering.

Indeed, the Singaporean authorities have reaffirmed their commitment to aiding the enforcement of cross-border tax laws on many occasions. Singapore has an extensive network of double taxation treaties – among other things, to inhibit tax evasion – which it constantly updates with its treaty partners. In addition, authorities offer assistance in exchanging pertinent information on alleged offenders to all jurisdictions that are parties to a Double Tax Agreement, such as information on clients who have local bank accounts solely for tax reasons. Singapore also will be able to exchange information with the signatories of the Convention on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters, a multi-national

tax cooperation agreement. In total, Singapore will be cooperating with over 80 jurisdictions on cross-border tax offences. More specifically with regard to the USA, Singapore is compliant with the Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act (FATCA), which requires banks operating in Singapore to proactively disclose account data of American citizens to US authorities.

The efforts of Singapore to exchange information and promote transparency in tax administrative matters provide substantial evidence that Singapore does not want to be labelled as a tax haven and has already taken action to deter tax evasion. To label Singapore a tax haven despite these steps would be to turn a blind eye to the evidence.

Thirdly, while it is undisputable that Singaporean companies can enjoy significant tax incentives, what is often ignored is that there are strict qualifying criteria for these incentives, which may themselves be applied at the discretion of the relevant authority. For instance, the pioneer status is awarded to companies at the discretion of Economic Development Board; importantly, its discretion depends on whether the benefits brought by the company to the Singaporean economy would be at least equivalent or more than the tax foregone through full tax relief. With regard to the other incentives, qualification is strict; a firm's activities must be clearly involved in those qualifying activities to apply for partial tax reliefs. Thus, it is arguable that Singapore is not a tax haven when the incentives do not apply to all companies, but only those who are in sectors the government is attempting to develop as part of the broader economic strategy for Singapore's future.

Singapore can, however, improve in this area by doing a consolidated review of all its tax incentives for companies, ensuring that corporates are unable to extract more than their fair share of tax reliefs in the event that they qualify for multiple tax incentives, and preventing abuse of any tax incentive. Singapore can also strive to disclose more details regarding its tax incentives to the world to prevent outsiders from jumping onto the bandwagon and branding Singapore a tax haven. By making information accessible and easier to understand, the international community can then assess these facts and make a judgement for themselves.

Finally, the most common and harshest criticism of Singapore, and a key element to its being labelled a tax haven, is its comparatively low personal income tax and corporate tax, as well as the absence of certain taxes which exist in other jurisdictions. For example, Singapore has a maximum tax rate of

20 percent for personal income, higher than the tax rate of 17 percent levied by its Asian counterpart Hong Kong but lower than the global average of 25 to 30 percent. International commentators criticise the low tax regimes adopted by both countries for reducing foreign investment in other countries, as more businesses and individuals have moved to these two countries to take advantage of their comparatively low tax rates. The brain drain and capital outflow are exacerbated by foreigner-friendly immigration policies in Singapore and Hong Kong as well as their location within Asia, an emerging market with high growth opportunities.

International commentators forget that the significant difference in tax rates in Singapore and Hong Kong, as compared to countries such as the USA, can be attributed primarily to their different social structures and government policies rather than any overt effort to create tax havens. Social welfare in Singapore and Hong Kong by and large rests on a provident fund structure that emphasises individual responsibility, where employees and employers alike are required to contribute a portion of their monthly salaries towards compulsory saving schemes. In Singapore, it is mandatory for individual taxpayers to contribute a maximum of 20 percent of their monthly wage earned; whereas in Hong Kong, 5 percent of personal income or a fixed rate must be saved monthly.

These schemes serve as a form of social security for retirees, and seek to reduce reliance on government handouts. There is little or no unemployment welfare in Singapore and Hong Kong; on the contrary, subsidised skill-upgrading schemes are given to ensure reemployment in place of cash handouts. The principle in these societies is the expectation of self-sustainability and self-reliance, unless one has already exhausted all possible means to achieve this goal. Therefore because governments are not bogged down by unwieldy welfare structures, its expenditures are similarly low – with Singapore's government expenditure averaging just 10 percent of its GDP – hence, its taxation regime can afford to be equally minimalistic.

The USA, in contrast, has a different approach to social security; it provides relatively extensive social security coverage ranging from disability to retirement benefits. The United States Department of Labor also provides unemployment insurance and extended benefits for the ones becoming unemployed through no fault of their own . All these unemployment benefits are mostly funded through taxpayers' money and this explains the significantly higher tax rates for individuals in the USA – from a minimum of 10 percent to a maximum of

39.6 percent – about twice the amount of tax rate in Singapore or Hong Kong. Henceforth, if we account for the increased expense needed to fund the various welfare schemes for its citizens, it explains why the USA would need a higher individual tax rate than Singapore and Hong Kong.

What the preceding analysis reveals, therefore, is that the minimal taxation regime in Singapore is more likely attributable to a different social structure rather than any attempt at clinching 'tax haven' status. While it cannot be denied that an intended effect of such low tax rates is to attract foreign investment, as elaborated earlier, it cannot be said that the tax structure generates all economic activity in Singapore. Rather, low taxes facilitate Singapore's primary business activities and its long-term aspirations for economic development as an international hub in Asia.

If so, then the root of the criticism based on low tax rates is not whether Singapore is a tax haven, but rather whether competition in terms of tax structures between different jurisdictions is desirable and whether it creates a 'race to the bottom'. If that is what the conversation is about, we think it better to spell it out clearly rather than hide such rhetoric behind accusations of Singapore being a tax haven. As with all kinds of competition, there are downsides of inequity and injustice that come along with the greater efficiency in utilising tax revenue, but such a debate must be resolved on its own terms and not conflated with other issues. Commentators must come clean on their true message and not hide national or political chauvinism behind such accusations.

READING BETWEEN THE LINES

In sum, our analysis reveals that Singapore is hardly a tax haven at all. It does not fit the OECD definition of a tax haven as it has significant economic activities apart from those that facilitate tax evasion. There are strong enforcement mechanisms for the implementation of cross-border tax evasion laws, as well as willingness among authorities to collaborate with global counterparts on the implementation of such laws. Further, the low tax rates in Singapore can be attributed primarily to its social safety structure. As such, it appears that the criticisms levelled against Singapore as a tax haven are aimed at questioning the merits of tax competition. In our view, commentators should resolve the discussion of low tax rates as a matter of the merits of tax competition, rather

than confuse their audience by dubbing Singapore as a tax haven to buttress their arguments.

Though Singapore has done much to try to shed this undesirable image, critics persist with such a labelling to draw attention to their claims. It is crucial for Singapore to continuously update its tax laws to reduce exploitable loopholes and persecute tax evaders with zero tolerance, so that the world will know that while Singapore may be a haven in many aspects, it is not one with regards to taxation.

Sputtering or Starting Up?

Darren Lim

Ella Lim

THAT WAS THEN, WHAT ABOUT NOW?

What do we think of when we mention 'Silicon Valley'? Instinctively, the most dominant technology firms of our time come to mind. Many household brands such as Apple, Tesla, and Snapchat – names we see in our everyday lives – have utilised this leading start-up ecosystem to facilitate their ascent from nascent companies to the behemoths that we see today.

On the other end of the Pacific Ocean, our little island has been perennially lauded as a premier destination for established businesses. The quality of Singapore's financial and legal services, which are arguably peerless in the Asian-Pacific region, have attracted flocks of multi-national companies (MNCs) to set up their regional headquarters here. This flourishing economic power's allure to foreign investors and established companies has never been in doubt. However, what about the little Red Dot's aspirations to be an entrepreneurial hub?

The view expressed on this question, whether justified or not, is negative. The more popular negative views of Singapore in this regard are:

1. The Singaporean inclination to follow an established route to success;
2. Lack of facilitative tools and clear structural framework for new businesses to thrive; and
3. The paucity of internationally renowned home-grown businesses or start-ups.

The first opinion is the most commonly heard. From a young age, Singaporeans are encouraged or even drilled to excel in school. They are pushed to build a sterling resume and land a dream job. Risk-taking and unorthodoxy are absent in light of this predefined route to success – decisions to postpone education and abandon a steady flow of income for a risky enterprise are more of the exception than the norm. This preference for high-paid jobs might have stymied the creation of an indigenous start-up culture in Singapore.

Are such opinions defensible or are they merely uninformed views of the current state of affairs? To assess these opinions for ourselves, we made an extensive search for local entrepreneurs, and interviewed them to understand their decision-making process before taking the road less travelled. These

entrepreneurs provided an insight into the evolution of our start-up culture since their first entrepreneurial endeavours – and surprisingly, their answers displaced the many prevailing conceptions about the start-up scene in Singapore. We posit that the widely-held perspective of Singapore as a place where creativity is stifled and risk-taking is frowned upon might be an anachronism of the past. In our view, while there may exist locations more attractive for start-up incubation, Singapore is making great strides towards becoming a competitive destination for new businesses to put down their roots.

In other words – isn't Singapore an upstart in this global start-up scene?

HEARING IT STRAIGHT FROM THE (ENTERPRISING) HORSES' MOUTHS

The starting point of our search for entrepreneurs was from among our course mates. We discovered that, from our diverse mix of international and local students, there were many accomplished entrepreneurs who could give us a peak into the world of entrepreneurship.

Our classmate, Kenneth Lim, a fourth-year student in the Lee Kong Chian School of Business at Singapore Management University (SMU), owns two businesses that have been in operation for eight years. He manages an events planning firm that operates primarily in Singapore; he also oversees an international company that acts as an intermediary for the export of mechanical parts from Singapore to Thailand. Kenneth's story is not a unique one for a scholar – he was an academically excellent student who was awarded a statutory board scholarship (from Singapore Tourism Board) while he was completing his Diploma at Republic Polytechnic (RP).

The only difference between him and his peers, who were also scholars, lies in how they used their scholarship stipends. He candidly suggested that his peers "spent too much money on clothes and other luxury items" and that he wanted to do something "more productive" with the funds that were at his disposal. Kenneth's idea of a start-up was conceived only after having an informal conversation with a passionate lecturer. The talk convinced him to take advantage of RP's Centre for Innovation & Enterprise. A steep learning curve was made gentler with the supply of information and resources from this educational arm. It is clear from Kenneth's experience that he was put on

this path because of the influence and support he received during the course of his education – be it through an inspirational figure such as his favourite lecturer or guidance from his school's entrepreneurial centre.

This is ironic. Singapore's educational system, commonly maligned for stifling creativity and making people risk-averse has instead played a pivotal role in pushing aspiring students like Kenneth to work towards realising their entrepreneurial dreams. Higher education, instead of perennially focusing on rote learning and the preparation of students for the work force, has instead shifted its focus to the provision of a holistic academic experience. Entrepreneurial centres are now commonplace, and are becoming the mainstay of our higher education institutions in the 21st century. For example, the SMU Institute of Innovation and Entrepreneurship (IIE) "provides support for innovation and entrepreneurship-related activities across all faculties". This support comes from a wide-ranging list of activities that includes networking sessions, workshops, training programs, study missions and internships with key industry players.

Furthermore, professors in our institutions encourage students to take the leap to start projects, initiatives, or businesses beyond the classroom setting. We can attest to no shortage of such professors based on our time as students in SMU. Even students outside the business school at SMU, such as Darren, can get an insider's opinion and learn the tricks of the trade. As a law student, Darren spends only a small part of his in-school time in business classes. Despite this, Darren feels he has received instruction in the key aspects of setting up and running a start-up, as well as encouragement to do so from seminars conducted by Professors Cyndi Zhang and Pang Eng Fong. Attending Professor Zhang's lessons as a bright-eyed freshman was a revelation for Darren – she broke down the arduous task of starting a business into the simplest elements and actively encouraged enterprising pursuits. Fast-forward to our sophomore years – Professor Pang's exhortation of risk-taking, in this very class, has also left a deep imprint on both of us. Kenneth, a final-year student, agrees with our characterisation of the experience in SMU, saying, "the school, be it through the institutional arms such as IIE or individual professors, has always been supportive of our ventures." Thus the view that the education system unduly confines our students to predefined routes of success deserves re-evaluation.

Delving deeper into the world of entrepreneurship, we spoke to a mid-career entrepreneur, Clifford Teo, from ICarsClub (ICC). Clifford, an accountant

by training, has been the managing director of ICC since 2013. However, Clifford's story is very different from Kenneth's. The main distinguishing factor would be that Clifford was considering a mid-career switch during his early 30s and he was potentially abandoning a lucrative management position at a China-based green-technology firm. Ultimately, Clifford's decision to join ICC could be said to have been a masterstroke. With Clifford at the helm, ICC recently raised US$60 million dollars in 2014 during its series B funding. This was a "satisfying accomplishment" for Clifford and he suggested that, prior to taking the job, he would not have predicted ICC's current level of success.

As the familiar adage goes, hindsight is 20/20. However, as clearly evinced by our conversation with Clifford, he did not make the jump to manage a start-up with the benefit of hindsight or accurate divinations. Instead, the main reason he gave was a lack of work satisfaction in his previous positions. For one, he was disillusioned by the rigid corporate hierarchy from his time as an accountant at KPMG. Furthermore, he did not feel he was tasked with enough responsibilities during his stint at the green-technology firm. In summation, he had left those companies with a bad aftertaste – the confluence of the stressful corporate life and the lack of responsibilities had created a less-than-favourable outlook on being an employee.

Clifford's experiences as an employee are not unique. In fact, they reflect the opinions expressed by a large proportion of Singaporeans at some point in their working lives. This is reflected in a number of surveys, including one conducted in 2015 by Regus, the workplace provider, which found that our business professionals are significantly "more stressed now as compared to five years ago". Despite the added stress, employees seem to have less responsibilities and ownership of their tasks. This is most obvious among the entry-level position-holders, who are given mostly unchallenging and facile tasks. This is a natural and logical state of affairs – junior employees would usually have to bear the brunt of a steep learning curve – arising from the hierarchical nature of most companies in Singapore, which have a predominantly top-down design.

In contrast, ICC does not have a clearly-defined hierarchy within their ranks. The flatter structure at ICC means even as a managing director, Clifford deals with the hiring and development of talent – one of the many obligations that he relishes in higher management. He is determined to find colleagues who are in sync with ICC's culture and who believe passionately in the company's potential.

The hierarchical nature of the firms, and the environment it creates has contributed, and perhaps even caused the increasing exodus of young, ambitious people from their respective industries. This is especially obvious in professions like accounting and law. In fact, a combination of factors has led "three out of four local lawyers [to] leave practice in the first ten years of practising". Clifford suggests that this development might have, inadvertently, contributed to an increase in the amount of young mid-career entrepreneurs that are taking our start-up scene by storm.

This is true – legal eagles, disenchanted with the rough-and-tumble of monotonous legal work, have produced ventures with varying levels of success. In the realm of high-technological innovations, Mr Tan Min-Liang, a Singaporean co-founder of Razer, left legal practice after three years and never looked back. The global gaming accessories market has been dominated by his brand for a large part of the last decade. On the other hand, there are also other smaller ventures in the form of restaurants (e.g. Awfully Chocolate, Plain Vanilla Bakery, etc) or nightclubs (e.g. the now defunct ButterFactory). The emergence of these businesses underscores the point that even well remunerated professionals are abandoning their bread and butter to try their hands at something potentially more fulfilling than being a listless corporate drone.

In encapsulation, the interviews with Kenneth and Clifford provided one simple takeaway – Singaporeans are now, arguably, more motivated to be entrepreneurs. Two observations can further be made. First, the incremental changes to our educational system have facilitated the growth of a small but ever-increasing student body of entrepreneurs. Secondly, the disillusionment with employment opportunities has chased many ambitious and competent professionals out of their firms' doors and into the vagaries of the entrepreneurial world. These two phenomena could help potentially displace the traditional notions that Singaporeans are too risk-averse or unmotivated to create start-ups.

NO LOVE FOR START-UPS?

We turn now to the second negative opinion: Singapore has a lack of facilitative tools and clear structural framework for new businesses to thrive. This will

require an assessment of whether there is sufficient institutional support for new businesses to prosper in Singapore. In our opinion, various efforts have been taken to create a fertile business climate.

There have been a variety of funding and financial assistance schemes that have been introduced to remove one fundamental obstacle – lack of funding – to an entrepreneurial dream. Statutory boards like Spring Singapore and Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore have rolled out cash grants or equity financing schemes to dangle the financial carrot and incentivise people to work towards materialising feasible and concrete ideas. These government bodies are not the only deep pockets bankrolling these start-ups; private venture capitalists such as BioVeda Capital have also been partnering with statutory arms like the National Research Foundation to provide early-stage investment for Singapore-based high technology start-ups.

Efforts have not been solely concentrated on providing financial assistance – there has been a dissemination of know-how and guidance. The top brass policy-makers in Singapore recognise that these intangible resources are invaluable and vital to an entrepreneur's development of his business. Hence, there has also been a focus on the provision of this expertise and advice. The Interactive Digital Media Jump-start and Mentor scheme, administered by the Media Development Authority, appoints business incubators to "identify, nurture and administer funding to technically competent start-ups." This business incubation scheme is just but one of many that provide regular support, mentoring and networking.

The established infrastructural groundwork laid has reaped some early results. Some start-ups have ridden on the momentum of these schemes and have been billed as the hottest upstarts from Singapore. An emerging start-up that hails from Singapore would be the smart-phone application, *Paktor*. '*Paktor*', a phrase in dialect, translates loosely into 'dating' in English. The name alludes to its business model – the application provides an interactive matchmaking platform for individuals to find partners.

Just as its users have found their compatible matches on the *Paktor* platform, *Paktor* itself has found Singapore a compatible springboard from which to launch its regional expansion plans. *Paktor*'s incubation in Singapore has culminated in its peak of seed funding in 2015 – Vertex Venture, a heavyweight venture capital subsidiary of Singapore sovereign wealth fund Temasek Holdings, had

made a calculated $3 million bet on *Paktor* to continue its trailblazing ways of expanding its user base in Southeast Asia.

Our concerted efforts in creating an indigenous start-up culture have resulted in optimistic results. This should dispel the pessimistic assessment most critics have of the level of infrastructural and institutional support in Singapore.

FAILING (SURELY) AT HOME OR SUCCEEDING (MAYBE) ABROAD

The last negative opinion we turn to is the view that Singapore has not been particularly successful in exporting its home-grown start-ups. We disagree with this proposition for two reasons: quantitatively, there are multiple success stories from Singapore; and qualitatively, this is not an apt time to judge the success of the start-up scene based on success rates abroad.

First, responding quantitatively – some of our local start-ups have already established international presence in their respective industries. For one, Creative Technology is a major international player in the manufacture and distribution of digitised sound and video boards. Furthermore, Glints, a Singapore-based internship portal that matches students and businesses, has traversed across international waters to shake up online recruitment.

Secondly, a qualitative response to these criticisms would be that it is pre-mature to judge the success of our start-up scene. Incubation hotspots like Silicon Valley have had almost 60 years to develop as an ecosystem of research, innovation and technology. The time that Singapore has had to develop this facilitative environment pales sharply in comparison. Furthermore, it is only recently that Singaporeans have shown some willingness to depart from our traditional conception of success and immerse ourselves in this entrepreneurial wave. Professor Sarah Cheah from NUS Business School's Department of Management & Organisation similarly noted in a ChannelNewsAsia interview: "It takes time for start-up ecosystems to develop and mature and Singapore is not as developed yet." Thus, before we can make such evaluative statements, more time should be granted to the start-up scene in Singapore.

To further understand negative opinion levelled against Singapore in this regard, we sought to understand some factors an entrepreneur considers

before making that leap of faith to commence expansion plans. We interviewed co-founder of MarineNexus, Timothy Ong, and asked him whether he had any concrete plans for regional or international expansion.

Timothy explained patiently, in a short summary, that MarineNexus creates economic value by connecting ship owners and ship charterers via their web portal. Their business model highly resembles a "subscription network where users pay to use the site." This is in sharp contrast to how traditional ship brokers (who also match ship owners and charterers) are paid by commission. Timothy is attempting to shake up this antiquated business model.

When probed further on whether there were any plans to expand beyond Singapore's shores, Timothy gave an affable chuckle and replied that "expansion is definitely in our prospective plans but the priority lies in making sure that our current services satisfy users' demands". He suggested that MarineNexus still needs to capture more local users in the market (ship charterers and owners) and evaluate whether there are "any service gaps" which necessitates service modification. In other words, Timothy wants to ensure that the foundation of the business is laid firmly before moving into any subsequent channels of expansion into China which "owns seven of the ten busiest ports in the world." This cautious and deliberate approach in making sure that one's business has the capacity to operate on a regional or international scale should be applauded. In a similar vein, observers in the local start-up scene should be patient – it might only be a matter of time before the alleged "paucity of renowned businesses" becomes a thing of the past.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Singapore has evolved – it is not the same country that had its initial misgivings about start-ups. And the word on the ground, as we speak to entrepreneurs, is that there has been deliberate institutional investment to create a conducive environment for new businesses to prosper in.

However, a more pertinent question moving forward would be – how should the Singaporean start-up scene make its impact on the world stage? This is a conundrum that the local start-up community has been fixated on for a while. Singapore suffers from some serious disadvantages as a launching pad for start-ups. We are a small market with 5.4 million residents; we speak

different languages and have different cultures from our ASEAN neighbours. Further, Singapore's neighbours are not in the same economic developmental stage. Thus, our local start-up's services or products may not be as popular or well-received in the region. One key example is *Paktor*'s online dating application being relatively unpopular in relatively religious, conservative and poorer countries.

However, all is not lost in this search for our place in the global start-up scene. Singapore should strive to be Southeast Asia's (SEA) premier destination for MNCs that dabble in real innovation. We should not merely attract MNCs to set up regional headquarters to coordinate production, sales and distribution, only for their core innovation to be done in their home markets. Singapore must also become a producer of innovations in areas where it has key advantages. Lastly, Singapore's unique blend of Eastern and Western characteristics, and its adoption of bilingualism, makes it an ideal springboard for start-ups that plan to tap on multiple markets with different cultural makeup.

If continued success follows from our start-up scene, a colloquial name for Singapore's scene might be coined – SEA-licon valley, anyone?

Songs from The City in a Garden

Ang Yu Ann

Benjamin Tan

SING YOUR WAY HOME?

> "Maybe what we need for the local music scene to grow are a handful of small live music venues where up-and-coming acts can woo their audience without management pressure to pack in hundreds of people. And Singapore falls behind many other cities when it comes to paying attention to and working together to ensure a better live music experience for both musicians and audiences."

> (Sethi & David, 2014)

From the traditional musical forms of its three major ethnic groups to the non-mainstream 'indie' music genre which emerged in the 1990s, the music scene in Singapore seems highly diverse, vibrant and bustling with activity. Yet, behind a façade of international music events supported by state-of-the-art infrastructure, the harsh reality is that Singapore can only serve as a global stage for performances. The capacity for local artistes to develop their careers and expand abroad is restricted by several constraints. Be that as it may, we are hopeful that the strong dynamism and energy we see in musicians of younger generations will allow them to transcend the boundaries of Singapore's music scene and soar to greater heights on a global stage.

FROM NATIONAL DAY THEME SONGS TO XINYAO

> "*So we'll build our dreams together, just like we've done before,*
> *Just like the river which brings us life; there'll always be Singapore.*"

> From *Home*, composed by Dick Lee

The soothing lyrics, speaking of love for our island's shores, coupled with the mellifluous voice of Kit Chan, in the song titled Home, touched the hearts of Singaporeans both at home and abroad. Indeed, music composed along nationalistic and patriotic themes can serve as a catalyst for creating a national identity. In 1958, Zubir Said's Majulah Singapura was performed for the first time in Victoria Theatre by the Singapore Chamber Ensemble. It turned out to

be so popular among our founding fathers that a year later, it was chosen to be the national anthem. The year 1984 marked the inauguration of a continuing tradition of having a new National Day theme song each year, when Hugh Harrison composed Stand Up for Singapore as part of Singapore's silver jubilee celebrations. This was followed by other songs which most Singaporeans are familiar with, such as Count on Me, Singapore in 1986, and We Are Singapore in 1987. In 1990, these songs gained international recognition when Jeremy Monteiro clinched a silver medal for his One People, One Nation, One Singapore at the International Radio Festival.

As we immerse ourselves in the heartland culture of Singapore, we observe that the local ethnic Chinese, who form the majority of the population, have developed a music subculture which has grown in its popularity and acceptance within Chinese pop music over the years. Beginning in the 1980s, musicians such as Liang Wern Fook, Roy Loi and Eric Moo pioneered the creation of a music subgenre known as *xinyao*, which simply means 'songs of Singapore' in Chinese. Among other features, xinyao is characterised by its simple and folksy tunes with only guitar accompaniment.

Singapore's music scene is a bustling fusion of multiple music cultures from across the globe – where East meets West – and reflects the cultural diversity embedded in the nation's social fabric. In the 1970s, musicians such as Phoon Yew Tien and Tsao Chieh started a novel trend by using Western-style compositional techniques to create pieces reflecting Oriental themes. Shortly after a decade, Dick Lee released *Life in the Lion City*, which bore his signature touch of mixing Western and Asiatic styles. Lee's most critically acclaimed album, *The Mad Chinaman* (1989), similarly displayed familiar themes of cross-cultural fusion and went on to win awards not only in Singapore, but also in Hong Kong and Japan.

IMPORTING AND BLENDING POP CULTURES

"Music development in Singapore essentially began with migration patterns and colonial influences. There is much that is unique to the country, lying between the main strands of Western, Chinese, Malay and Indian music."

Overseas influences have had a strong presence in Singapore's music scene since the 1960s. The rock-and-roll wave, popularised by bands such as The Beatles and The Rolling Stones, not only found its fans in Singapore, but also permeated the music industry so deeply that even local artistes such as Rahim Hamid and Patricia Pestana started imitating their styles (Perera & Perera, 2010). There were also Eastern influences, as Cantonese and Hokkien pop songs from Hong Kong and Taiwan were highly popular among the local ethnic Chinese.

Moving to the present, we see local deejays and radio stations such as 98.7 FM and Gold 90.5 FM providing Singaporeans with our daily dose of entertainment, and combining these broadcasts can create quite the eclectic mix of music. Over the decades since the 1960s, consecutive waves of pop music from different parts of the world hit Singapore and strongly influenced local trends. The popularity of pop music in the 2000s inspired MediaCorp to organise reality singing contests, such as *Singapore Idol* and *Project Superstar*, modelled after their foreign counterparts. These contests allowed local singers such as Taufik Batisah and Sylvester Sim to showcase their talents and rise to fame overnight. The Korean-pop fever struck Singapore in the early 2010s, bringing with it not only pop music and dance, but other forms of entertainment such as dramas and reality shows. Overall, Singapore's music scene is highly dynamic and changes with the multitude of trends from abroad that come to our shores.

The local government has supported the music industry's development structurally. For instance, it has hosted and generously funded music festivals such as the Singapore Arts Festival, Singapore International Jazz Festival, and Mosaic Music Festival. The hosting of such events has also led to advancement of the infrastructure for the music industry, including the construction of new state-of-the-art facilities and the upgrading of existing ones. Some of the best examples of these are the iconic Esplanade and the recently upgraded Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall. In terms of music education, the government has established institutions such as LASALLE College of the Arts, School of the Arts, and the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music to groom and nurture budding local artistes. Despite these efforts, the results lend themselves to a lingering air of doubt over whether a new approach is needed to revitalise the somewhat stagnant or even ailing music industry.

EXPORTING OUR BLEND

> "There have been several moments in my career when I was unsure if music was the right choice for me. However, these moments forced me to re-invent myself, and opened up new doors and broadened my experience."
>
> Dick Lee

Flying our Singapore flag at the international stage are prominent artistes such as Stephanie Sun, JJ Lin and Tanya Chua. While few, these Singaporean music stars have not stopped at winning numerous music awards; they have also gained international recognition, and garnered the love and support of countless fans across the globe. Like many Singaporean men, JJ Lin, the 'Prince of Mando-pop', graduated from a junior college and performed National Service (NS). However, instead of pursuing further studies at a tertiary institute, he boldly took the plunge to become a singer-songwriter. Signing with Ocean Butterflies in 2003, he has since overawed many audiences with his voice and music. His success is what many budding Singaporean performing artistes hope to emulate or outdo.

However, the reality is that the path towards success in the international music industry is a daunting one, as Jude Young, a Singaporean singer-song-writer told us:

Q: What made you decide to pursue a career as an artiste?

A: A friend once asked me many years ago if I would consider entering the music industry as a career; my answer was a straight "no". There wasn't a clear point in time where I actually made a conscious decision that I wanted this to be a career – this journey started from a simple interest and has been spurred by the same heart since.

Q: What are generally some of the frustrations encountered by local artistes?

A: Lack of money, lack of support; not that I represent these ideas. However, there is a growing consumer base for local productions but still it is limited in size.

Q: What kinds of challenges did you face since you started out until the release of your first single?

A: Apart from the more simplistic challenges of improvement in terms of singing, songwriting and managing school at the same time, this ongoing "project" has made my flaws apparent to myself. It has challenged my identity and the way I perceive myself. Young's views point to multiple hurdles faced by novices in the music industry. Among these hurdles is the burden of balancing their passion for music and academic pursuits. This is a purely practical approach taken by the pragmatic budding Singaporean artistes, who recognise that the local music scene is unable to support too many full-time artistes. However, the success stories in our music scene serve as a glimmer of hope that local artistes do have a shot at achieving international recognition.

FROM MANDO-POP TO ENGLISH POP

The pragmatism of local artistes has likely contributed to the adaptive nature of the Singapore music scene. Most recently, this is observed in the shift away from Mando-pop to English pop. Over the past the decade, we have witnessed some prominent Mando-pop singers from Singapore rise to stardom. Meanwhile, competitions such as Project SuperStar have served as a crucial springboard for local amateur singers such as Kelvin Tan and Ang Junyang, to become professional musicians in the Mando-pop market. This seems to have filled the Mando-pop scene, seemingly leaving a gap in the English pop scene in Singapore.

However, we believe that this is merely an illusion due to a lack of coverage by the local media of performances and musical works of local English pop artistes, and it is compounded by minimal support from the local government. The impression of having minimal support led many local English pop artistes to feel dejected. This was highlighted by Inch Chua, a local singer-songwriter, in a Facebook post, where she wrote about the many negative connotations attached to being an artiste in Singapore. This frustration among local artistes is further exacerbated by the Singaporean public's general disapproval towards the standards and prospects of locally-produced English pop

music. Consequently, many local English pop musicians have left for greener pastures overseas.

We were delightfully surprised when our online searches led us to find names of Singaporean artistes who had thriving music careers overseas. Some examples of these include bands such as Ming Bridges and The Sam Willows. The latter has performed in Music Matters Live 2014 and composed a song for the 2015 Southeast Asian Games. Last, but not least, we have "Gentle Bones", which is perhaps the leading local of our generation, highly popular and familiar amongst the younger crowd. Naysayers who criticise the local pop music scene for the lack of talents and prospects are simply not aware of such successes, and Singaporean youth are likely prepared to correct persons labouring under such misinformation.

A MUSICIAN'S MUSING

"**Q:** If you were presented with the opportunity to base yourself as a musician overseas, would you totally do it?

A: I can definitely imagine finding motivation and inspiration in a more musically diverse and mature environment. But I expect that that might interfere with – and distract from – the normalcy and banality of everyday life, which is the place from which I experience and write things."

Interview with Linying, a local singer-songwriter

Despite the success of some of our artistes in the international stage, one concern from the critics and ardent fans of Singaporean music deserves to be addressed – that Singaporean pop music is 'inauthentic', especially certain English pop songs written by local artistes.

Such claims of inauthenticity may be partly due to the multi-cultural nature of Singapore; many songs recognised as being 'authentic' are those which reflect multi-racial themes and elements. Some artistes seem to better understand how to capture the 'authentic' Singapore spirit in lyrics that resonate with their audiences, as evidenced by the good reception by locals to Dick Lee's compositions on everyday life in Singapore .

Other local artistes however, are unable to capture this authenticity. Such cultural barriers may stem from the genre of music being foreign by its very nature. Afro-American jazz is often regarded as the original version of jazz music as compared to Singaporean-style jazz. Similarly, hip-hop performed by local artistes tend to lack its American identity due to social and cultural differences between the country of origin and Singapore. It is difficult for locals to appreciate these adaptations, and are hence, they are labelled as 'inauthentic'. To get around this, local artistes have to create their own brand of music, inspired by distinctive socio-cultural elements, rather than imitate foreign music styles. Successful artistes such as Dick Lee and Liang Wern Fook have done so, through songs which highlight Singapore's unique historical background and heritage, often featuring artistic elements related to the three major ethnic groups.

Another daunting and longstanding challenge encountered by most local artistes is the negative perception among locals of Singapore's pop music industry. Despite the creation of various arts institutions and generous funding by the government, the industry is still largely constrained by the traditional Singaporean mindset that it is crucial for youths to secure high-paying, white-collar jobs; doctors, lawyers and bankers still remain as the top ideal career options. Given Singapore's pace of economic development, Singaporean pragmatism directs that unless the music industry can facilitate the propagation of economic consumption, tourism and foreign investment, it is unattractive for most locals to devote a lifetime in pursuit of a music career. In the meantime, a career as a pop artiste continues to be largely frowned upon in an Asian society.

The final concern raised is that Singapore is rarely seen as a viable hub for music production. This is despite Singapore being often regarded as a cultural platform for artistic and musical displays. The use of technology and media is highly crucial in this respect. Singapore's media, be it television channels or radio broadcasts, spend far more time promoting Western music over local pop songs. To a certain extent, local consumers are heavily influenced by the media, thus they tend to regard Western pop songs as the more authentic version and better substitutes for local productions. Furthermore, some consumers tend to link Singaporean music to patriotic songs produced with governmental support, performed and broadcast during National Day celebrations.

Consequentially, it is difficult to pin down a unique identity associated with local pop music. In Singapore, there is a lack of equivalent to the British punk, Afro-American hip-hop, or Jamaican reggae. Local pop music is often regarded as an amalgamation of various genres and hence Singapore has struggled to mature into a music production centre.

CREATING A DISTINCTIVE BLEND OF POP MUSIC

On the whole, Singapore's pop music industry is still rather green in its development and it is likely to take a while before more local artistes emerge successful in the global arena. Singapore is making progress slowly but surely. And in 2016, events such as Rockestra and Baybeats served as excellent avenues to promote the vibrant pop music which Singapore can offer the world.

For Singaporean music to rise to an international level, we need more than support at an institutional level from the government, it is crucial also for Singaporeans to support local artistes. Bourdieu, in explaining his conception of cultural capital, argued that for the public to appreciate certain artistic productions, they must have the necessary cultural competence, which is influenced by various social and environmental factors. If we accept this premise, then it is vital for the state and the media to paint pop music production in a positive light, because having an entrenched paradigm that the industry contains only a few struggling artistes is not going to encourage any greater acceptance of local pop music – at least in the near future.

From a personal perspective, we believe it is important for Singaporean artistes to continue creating music that taps into the local heritage and culture. Such pop music may contain elements or lyrics which are unique to our equatorial Asian culture; it does not necessarily have to reflect only themes from a multi-cultural society. Our social history entails memories that are special and personal to every Singaporean. This would generate greater acceptance of local productions as they hold fragments of memories to which the audience can easily relate . It can also serve to reinforce our sense of belonging to Singapore, strengthening our social fabric while building a stronger local culture and identity. Exporting this unique style of pop music abroad can help foreigners gain a better understanding of Singaporean culture, increasing the possibility that local productions may hit international charts.

As the music industry expands and gains acceptance as a career choice, Singapore can definitely brand itself as a garden city filled with talented musicians and melodious tunes. By then, the hope is that foreign visitors and media may no longer call Singapore a 'soulless city', but start seeing it as an all-rounded one with a thriving arts scene and unique culture.

Singapore™ in a Brand-Mad World

In Jin Zaw

Muhammed Ismail

S ingapore has been known to top world rankings on a regular basis. In fact, news stories of Singapore topping the charts appear so often that one of our classmates has made a habit of poking fun at these stories by sharing them with quips about Singapore clinching the top spot yet again. One such list which Singapore topped in recent times is international marketing firm BrandFinance's ranking of the strongest nation brands.

The strength of the Singapore brand is largely due to the efforts of public bodies such as Singapore Tourism Board (STB) and Economic Development Board (EDB). Sourcewatch.org states that Singapore "over decades represented much more consistent brand leadership than most global companies exhibited". Their efforts, however, were largely focused on attracting the world to Singapore. The success of this is well-known, and will be considered shortly.

This essay focuses on whether the Singapore brand can be leveraged to bring Singapore into the world. After examining examples to illustrate the value of the Singapore brand, we offer two main pitfalls Singapore should avoid in its continued nation-branding effort in light of calls to remain relevant in the changing world.

A SINGAPORE BRAND?

Nation brands can be a difficult concept to understand. More so in the case of Singapore which, as Kevin Cheong, President of the Association of Singapore Attractions, notes, has not developed to the point of having Singaporean brands that embody or are more obvious expressions of the Singapore brand. For clarity:

> A **Singaporean brand** refers to a brand based in, or somehow linked to Singapore.

> The **Singapore brand** is a nation brand, which represents the "nation's distinct and unique value among diverse international publics".

In essence, the Singapore brand presents the value proposition Singapore has for various stakeholders in one package. However, despite its purporting to be a package, the Singapore brand is somewhat elusive to describe. K. F.

Seetoh, a local celebrity and the man behind Makansutra, agrees that there is a Singapore brand, but noted that the Singapore brand is not something you can put your finger on; describing it as being "like water".

Despite being a nebulous concept, the Singapore brand is worth exploring since it encapsulates how Singapore is viewed by those who bring the world to Singapore, and can be harnessed in bringing Singapore to the world.

LURING THE WORLD TO SINGAPORE

As Cheong, who was involved in setting up Resorts World Sentosa, highlights, Singapore representatives looking to attract tourists and investors to Singapore have to sell 'Singapore' to foreign investors or tourists. In this crowded market-place, Singapore's value proposition for the potential investor must underpin each proposal by the Singapore representatives.

Cheong stated the following as part of this value proposition which prompts corporations "to pay a premium to [set up regional headquarters and offices] here":

1. A favourable tax regime;
2. Global accessibility with its recognition as a transport hub;
3. Strong rule of law, facilitating business;
4. An entrenched expatriate community, allowing for easier relocation of managers to Singapore; and
5. Singapore's westernised business environment, offering familiarity to western international businesses while serving as a gateway to booming Asian markets.

A recent example of the draw of these value propositions is the opening of an S$80m data centre by LinkedIn, whose regional headquarters is also in Singapore.

This type of promotion of the Singapore brand is being done by various private and state actors, leading to foreign direct investments to Singapore, growing from S$625bn to S$1,005bn between 2010 and 2014. This is clear evidence that the Singapore brand is capable of attracting investments to Singapore.

TAKING SINGAPORE ABROAD

In our view, the value of the Singapore brand should extend to empowering organisations and individuals to venture beyond our shores. Steps are already being taken towards achieving this, albeit with less success than those cited above.

One such measure is International Enterprise (IE) Singapore's Tasty Singapore brand ambassador programme. This attempt to realise the value of the Singapore brand by getting companies to leverage the Tasty Singapore brand to enhance their global exposure is to be lauded. IE Singapore has sought to crystallise some of the value of the Singapore brand into a niche, albeit national brand. However, in our view, this is not the best way forward in framing the Singapore brand.

Singaporean brands that have ventured overseas and attained success are by and large still fledgling. Successful international businesses which have Singaporeans at their helm, such as Razer Inc., and Eu Yan Sang do not rely on the Singapore brand. This sentiment was echoed by Seetoh, who felt that the internationalisation of Makansutra did not involve leveraging on the Singapore brand.

The Singapore brand, in our view, holds value for Singapore-based organisations or individuals seeking to head overseas. To understand this value, we need to better understand the Singapore brand.

WHAT THE SINGAPORE BRAND REALLY STANDS FOR

There is a reinforcing cycle in the use of nation brands: as individuals and businesses rely on the nation brand to internationalise, the strength and value of the nation brand increases, and vice versa.

This reinforcing cycle seems to tie nation brands with national brands. This conflation was brought to the fore when discussing the Singapore brand with fellow students. The idea of a Singapore brand that is independent of any Singaporean brand was almost foreign to those without a marketing background!

Cheong recognised this common conflation, but felt that the presence of a distinctly Singaporean brand would cement the Singapore brand in the minds of locals, and was optimistic that "we will get there".

SINGAPORE[TM]: WHO BENEFITS?

The Singapore brand benefits not only businesses; individuals stand to gain as well. Cheong felt the Singapore brand should not be tied to aiding local companies bringing their businesses overseas. Instead, there can be multiple manifestations of the Singapore brand. Thought of in this way, individuals who venture abroad and who rely on their experience in Singapore to clinch roles in international or foreign organisations are also using the Singapore brand.

With this wider conception of the Singapore brand, we next consider whether there is sufficient recognition of the Singapore brand.

SELF-IMAGE AND FOREIGN PERCEPTION

The wider identity or value system that the Singapore brand presents to the world is often explained as values that Singapore's founding fathers imparted to the nation. Thus, Singapore's significant goodwill does not manifest as something unique to Singapore. Instead, the Singapore brand is perceived as a set of virtues, which include: incorruptibility, efficiency, and competence.

These values are generic to the point of Singapore being a convenient shorthand for the virtues rather than representing the Singapore brand! This shorthand-use of Singapore has crept into the lexicon in several 'Singapore' names, and arguably the Singapore brand. One upside to this is a reflection that the Singapore name, if not the brand, is well-regarded and recognised in other countries.

This somewhat generic nature of the Singapore brand appears to have led many to see Singapore as a collection of best practices. This is observed in multiple parties seeking to export or transplant Singapore's solutions or 'models' to their home country.

We can clearly see the value of the Singapore brand in this sense from the popularity of programmes such as the NTU Chinese Mayors' Class, and the increased attendance of foreign nationals to the NUS LKY School of Public Policy.

There have also been tie-ups between Singapore and foreign governments for two-way exchanges on best-practices. The very fact that foreign nations are willing to enter into such exchanges with a small country that has no natural resources indicates the recognition of the Singapore model, and its constituent Singapore brand.

SINGAPORE-STYLE KINDERGARTEN ABROAD

In fact, the Singapore brand also holds goodwill with private individuals, at least in the ASEAN region. One example is a school set up in Myanmar by Khin Than Myint, who spent several years in Singapore taking care of her nephew. While here, Myint saw how kindergartens in Singapore operated. She was particularly interested in the bilingual education system which commenced at preschool.

When she returned to Yangon, Myint brought Singapore to Myanmar. Using the knowledge gained from watching how kindergartens operated in Singapore, Myint started a kindergarten in her own house in Yangon.

To do so, Myint bought children's posters, textbooks, colouring books, and activity books from Singapore and brought them to Yangon. With all these resources, she started her kindergarten in Yangon.

To strengthen the association of her kindergarten with Singapore in the eyes of her customers, Myint even manufactured school uniforms similar to those used by the Singapore kindergarten her nephew attended.

Myint's kindergarten spread in popularity through word of mouth and advertisements in the newspaper marketing itself as a 'Singapore-style' kindergarten. The bilingual nature of the kindergarten, where students were taught in both English and Burmese, coupled with 'Singapore' resources were a particular draw to parents.

As students graduated from the kindergarten and went on to perform well in their education career, parents in Yangon were increasingly sold on the idea of putting their children into a 'Singapore-style' school.

Today, Myint has expanded her school to accommodate the increased demand. She has also set up a summer school programme for primary school students to learn English in a bilingual environment.

She has attributed the success of her school to the value of the Singapore brand, and has described her understanding of the shared values of the

Singapore brand as "safe, everything check, high standards".

This example of a private individual attempting to transplant the Singaporean model of education to her home in a foreign land, and her school gaining popularity through its marketing as a 'Singapore-style' school, indicates the recognition of the Singapore brand overseas.

However, one has to ask whether this recognition is somewhat hollow. As Myint herself highlighted, her school gained far more popularity after students who graduated began performing well in primary schools. This might point to the school's success being tied more to the success of the students, rather than directly to parents being told the school is 'Singapore-style'.

This begs the question of whether the Singapore brand is merely a function of the success that its practices bring.

In our view, this should not be the case. The Singapore brand should be an embodiment of the distinct and unique value Singapore represents to the world. We will attempt to illustrate this value by considering Singapore-led or Singapore-based organisations that operate abroad in search of some common threads of the Singapore brand that manifest in their activities.

MAKING A NAME

Ya Kun

The first organisation we will consider is Ya Kun, which has achieved significant success overseas. Of particular interest to us is Ya Kun's choice of internationalisation strategy, which displayed prudence, attention to detail, and cultural sensitivity.

Ya Kun went overseas in 2004 (World Intellectual Property Organisation, 2016) using a franchising model that relied heavily on exploiting its intellectual property rights (IPR). Ya Kun makes a proprietary sweetened egg and coconut jam, selling it to their franchisees, while controlling the Ya Kun brand image through training, supplier control, and store layout standards.

The control it has over its franchisees to retain its unique Ya Kun brand is not an accident. It is borne out of attention to detail, prudence, and cultural sensitivity. As Cheong explains, Singaporeans have been conditioned with a culture of understanding rarely seen elsewhere. This culture of seeking understanding of different modes of operation rather than imposing our standards on others

is, in our view, a strength borne out of our oft-celebrated multi-culturalism.

This has two implications. From the view of the franchisor, there is an aversion to committing without understanding the context. When employed together with attention to detail, and focus on objective facts, it manifests as prudence. This prudence is seen in Ya Kun's refusal to simply hand out franchisee licenses to the highest bidder. Instead, Ya Kun adopts a long-term view, seeking partners that will help the Ya Kun brand grow long-term in the foreign market rather than partnerships that might sour quickly. Such a calibrated, careful, and calculated nature is seen as part of the Singapore culture, and when adopted as part of a strong business plan, can be recognised as part of the Singapore brand.

For the franchisee, the prudence of the franchisor coupled with their cultural sensitivity and tolerance creates a trusting relationship. This can in turn allow franchisees to confidently re-invest in their stores without worry of the franchisor pulling out, or awarding franchisee licenses to a competitor. This perception of trustworthiness further strengthens the Singapore brand.

WTO

Embodying the "size does not matter" motto, there are several Singapore-based or Singaporean-led organisations making an impact on the global stage. These organisations further the firebrand or more appropriately 'chilli-padi' attitude, which is a valuable part of the Singapore brand.

One such organisation is a relatively small NGO started in Singapore called the World Toilet Organisation (WTO). Despite its small size and relatively small annual budget, the WTO has consistently punched above its weight. It shone bright when its efforts led to the UN's adoption of a Singapore-sponsored Resolution: "Sanitation for All".

The success of WTO cannot be confined to its being Singaporean. However, WTO's success does strengthen the Singapore image on a global stage, because it holds itself out to be 'Made in Singapore'. Similarly, international organisations that are formed in Singapore, or headed by Singaporeans, contribute to the recognition of the Singapore brand beyond our shores.

This has contributed to Singapore gaining a global reputation, feeding into the Singapore brand. The Singapore brand was most recently noted in a survey which found that Singapore law is the second most common choice

in cross-border transactions.

STAYING RELEVANT, MOVING FORWARD…

We are supportive of Singapore's continued nation branding efforts. However, we do feel it apposite to assess whether the goal-post has shifted from focusing on attraction to encouraging outward movement.

This is in light of a warning by Ho Kwon Ping, Executive Chairman of Banyan Tree Holdings, that Singapore has to stay globally relevant and not become a "second-tier city". This global relevance, he argues, can be achieved by focusing on development of absolute or proprietary advantages. This can facilitate the shift toward becoming a value-creating economy that can remain globally relevant.

One way of creating an absolute advantage is by building a nation brand. It is well-accepted that to not compete in a race to the bottom, corporations employ brands to set their products and/or services apart from their competitors. In this way, brands create an absolute advantage since the product can be seen as so different from those currently available in the market that the only one capable of providing it is the holder of the brand.

Just recently, in light of the Panama papers leak, lawyer Stephanie Yuen-Thio stated that "Smart money will move [to Singapore], away from dodgy jurisdictions" (Siow, 2016). This is recognition that the Singapore brand is capable of keeping Singapore relevant in an increasingly flat world (Friedman, 2006).

To realise this potential absolute advantage, we support the view that the core of the Singapore brand is the Singaporean identity. This brings the issue closer to our shores, and brings to the fore yet again the question of what the Singapore national identity is.

In this regard, we call for avoiding two pitfalls in continuing to shape the Singapore brand. Building on research on the utility of the national identity in building a brand, these are:

1. Flattening micro-identities within the nation as part of a nation branding movement; and
2. Failing to recognise that the existing national identity is itself of some utility.

KEEPING MICRO-IDENTITIES

Often, nation branding efforts can simply seek to create conformity in a pluralistic national identity, essentially stamping out valuable components of the national identity.

The avoidance of conformity is especially important for Singapore since it has recently been recognised that there is "no 'essence' to being 'Singaporean'". Rather than a single common characteristic, Singaporeans are tied together by relations and historical events.

Using the Centre for Strategic Futures's understanding of the national identity as more akin to belonging to a family than a common shared characteristic is consistent with allowing the Singapore brand to take multiple manifestations, catering to the varied "international publics".

REMEMBERING OUR ORIGINS

Aronczyk points out that creating a national brand does not always entail plucking something out of thin air. A nation is a unique institution which has its own set of value system(s) and a history which needs to be respected and incorporated into the nation brand.

This recommendation of not throwing the baby out with the bathwater was recognised by Seetoh, who felt that "failing to look back at where we came from" can be fatal to the creation of a nation brand that sticks.

An artificial nation brand will not resonate with members of the nation, and is unlikely to resonate with those whom the brand is intended to entice. Hence, a strong nation brand that has value is one which builds on the existing national identity rather than crafting a new identity without consultation or support of the constituent members of the nation brand – its people.

IN SUMMARY

Singapore has come a long way in the last 50 years, making a name for itself through careful and intentional positioning of the Singapore brand on the global stage.

As the world changes, however, Singapore's principled pragmatism should kick in to wind down an overly interventionist approach to nation branding. Instead, the focus should shift to creating a "cohesive diversity" as Ho suggests, building on our shared history to develop a truly authentic Singapore brand. Such a brand will not only enhance our presence on the international stage,

it will be cherished by Singaporeans who wish to bring Singapore to the world in their own ways.

Char Kway Teow Goes Global

Edwin Tan

I n between bites of Turkish eggplant kebab and sips of *bak kut teh*, I asked
my friend, Türkay, whether he had heard of Singaporean food. Türkay, as his
name suggests, is "naturally from Turkey" (his words, not mine). The answer
was "no". This was an answer I heard repeatedly from others who were asked
the same question. Whilst on exchange in Hamburg, my Singaporean friends
and I regularly hosted other overseas friends to dinners of chicken rice, *bak kut
teh*, and chilli mussels (crabs were priced out of the student budget). Barring
those who have been to Singapore, all the people I asked had never heard of
Singaporean cuisine.

As Singaporeans, my friends and I regularly found ourselves using food
as a way of promoting Singapore. At an international exchange fair held by
my host university in Hamburg, Bucerius Law School, my friend Jason and
I found ourselves telling the German students about food in Singapore. Of
course, we did not talk only about food. In our sales pitch, we did not neglect
the usual formula: Singapore is very safe, has a good public transportation
system, and so on. A quick informal survey of my friends who have been on
exchange revealed the same – that we almost always mention food when
talking about Singapore.

Clearly, food has a certain primacy in our list of reasons suggesting why
foreigners should visit Singapore. The Singapore Tourism Board (STB) relies
on food heavily as a draw factor – a look at the Facebook page of the "Your
Singapore" campaign will show plenty of posts about food. Yet, despite how
proud we are of our cuisine, most people outside of Singapore do not know
about it. Singaporean food has not reached the same level of pervasiveness
as Italian, Japanese, Thai and Korean food. Simply put, Singaporean cuisine is
not a key flavour on the world's palate.

This begs the question – is there something we can do about it? We rely
heavily on food to draw the world into Singapore, but why do we not use our
food to project Singapore onto the world stage?

Upon research, I was hard-pressed to find many examples of Singaporean
food overseas. If anything, the primacy that we accord to our cuisine at home
does not translate to ubiquity in the world. JUMBO Seafood, Ya Kun Kaya
Toast, Wee Nam Kee Chicken Rice are some oft-cited examples of Singaporean
cuisine moving abroad. However, their presence abroad is not truly global

but is confined to Asia. The same applies to BreadTalk (although I hesitate to label BreadTalk's bread as Singaporean food). Outside of Asia, one finds even fewer examples. A notable one would be Chomp Chomp in New York City, which has garnered an admirable two-star rating from the New York Times. IE Singapore's website reveals that the current focus on Singaporean food brands is on Singapore's "strong reputation for safety and quality". The Tasty Singapore mark, in IE Singapore's own words, stands for "a world-recognised quality mark that stands for diversity, dynamism, innovativeness, quality and safety for all consumers, chefs and industry professionals worldwide". Nothing is said about how *tasty* the food actually is. In fact, after browsing through the website, one gains the impression that the efforts are centred on export-ing cans, mixes, and sauces, rather than selling Singaporean cuisine overseas.

Hence, I wondered: why are we not doing more to promote our Singaporean food overseas? Surely this will increase awareness of Singapore's culture and promote the Singapore brand. It might even help secure the future of our hawker food heritage. Gastrodiplomacy, which is defined as using "a country's culinary delights as a means to conduct public diplomacy and to raise nation brand awareness" is not exactly a new thing. Countries such as Thailand and Korea have launched such campaigns to great success.

But what really is Singaporean cuisine? The multi-cultural, multi-ethnic make-up of the Singaporean society has brought us a rich mix of hawker food that has influences from all over. It is precisely this great asset – this rewarding cornucopia of flavours – that also creates a protean definition of Singaporean hawker food. Perhaps an anecdote would be apt here.

In Hamburg, I made friends with Deborah, a fellow exchange student from Hong Kong University. She had visited Singapore once, and fell in love with Hainanese chicken rice.

"So what's your favourite Singaporean food?" I asked.

"Chicken rice!" she replied in her American-accented English.

"Oh! Which one?" At this point I was half-expecting one of the more famous names – Boon Tong Kee, Tian Tian, Five Star, or even Loy Kee.

"I tried the one at the MBS basement! It was really good!"

"Huh. Seriously?" I turned to the other Singaporeans who were nearby,

and said, "Eh, Debbie says the chicken rice at the MBS food court is good."

I was rewarded with rather bemused expressions.

"That's not legit chicken rice," said Wayne, a fellow Singaporean student.

"Yah, that's not legit," I parroted.

"I didn't know! We had no time. I was on a school trip," she protested.

Thankfully, she did not ask us what was 'legit' chicken rice. I doubt we would have been able to give a satisfactory answer, although we did promise to treat her to the best chicken rice when she visits. I suspect the same probably applies to many Singaporeans. In a sense, we do not know what an authentic Singaporean dish is exactly, but at the same time, we know what it is probably not.

Examples of these abound in our hawker food. Many of our dishes can be found in neighbouring Malaysia, and as a result, we often have to append the place of origin to the name of the dish. Take for example, *char kway teow*. There is *char kway teow*, and then there's Penang *char kway teow*. The primary difference between the two rests in the addition of yellow noodles in the former. As for fried carrot cake, it is also available on both sides of the Causeway. The same applies for *roti prata* and *bak kut teh*. Are these then Singaporean dishes or Malaysian dishes? Which version is authentic? To add to the confusion, the Hainanese on Hainan Island do not do chicken rice the same way. As I am Hainanese, I had the opportunity to visit Hainan twice, and the chicken rice that my relatives served us was very different from the ones available here.

Unlike Thai or Japanese food, it is far harder to define what really is Singaporean food. In a way, the struggle for definition in our hawker food functions as a metaphor of our national identity. We have yet to firmly establish what the true Singaporean identity is, or what it really means to be Singaporean. With the influx of immigrants and changes to society, there is also the real possibility that Singaporean hawker food, as we know it now, will evolve. Perhaps the chicken in chicken rice will be cooked *sous vide* in future. Or perhaps our entire hawker food culture will be extinct because of the lack of young people taking over the stalls. Or perhaps Soylent or 3D-printed food will be the future.

The fact that our Singaporean hawker cuisine escapes firm definition because it has influences from various sources is not a bad thing. The successful integration of disparate groups of people gave us a vibrant food culture. Out

of necessity or otherwise, our forefathers adapted. If continued immigration is the way forward for Singapore, we will do well if we continue the same spirit of accommodation and adaptation. I am only 25 this year, but in this short period of time, I have observed how, with the influx of Chinese immigrants from China, stalls selling distinctively Chinese dishes such as *ma la xiang guo* have sprouted up in our hawker centres and coffee shops. Maybe, over time, we will assimilate that dish and come up with a uniquely Singapore version. The variety and vibrancy of our Singaporean hawker food culture means that there is always something for everyone. I hope this also applies to our society. A part of it may always be in flux, but we should strive to be inclusive and open, with something for everybody.

So, should we do more to promote Singaporean food overseas? Assuming that we can come up with a minimum list of core Singaporean dishes, should there be a concerted and coherent national effort to do so?

When I first conceived of this essay topic, I thought it would be a good idea to open Singaporean marketplaces in a few global cities. I had in mind a concept similar to Eataly, where a single megastore will sell ingredients, have a food court, bakery, and even a learning centre. Singapore, in a similar style, could have its Tasty Singapore products sold, a food court for foreigners to sample Singaporean cuisine, and even provide lessons in Singaporean cuisine.

However, the difficulties are obvious. First, it is questionable whether a Singaporean-version of Eataly will have as much a draw as Eataly; Eataly's success depends significantly on the global popularity of Italian cuisine. It is clear that Singaporean cuisine falls far short in terms of popularity and recognition. Second, given that our local hawkers are facing problems finding successors, it is doubtful whether we can muster the skilled manpower for a successful push overseas. There are programmes such as the Hawker Master Trainer programme to train a new generation of hawkers. But it is far from clear whether these programmes can train enough hawkers to preserve our heritage. The last thing Singaporean cuisine needs is to produce pale, poor-quality imitations of the originals being sold overseas, not unlike the many limp and uninspired versions of *pad thai*, *sushi*, and *kimchi* that you can easily find here and overseas.

At present, given the threats facing the Singaporean hawker food culture, it may be best to focus on ensuring that it survives and thrives locally first. Quite a few have written about the issues facing our hawker food culture. These

range from a poor perception of the trade, rising rents, a lack of renewal, to a "culinary prejudice" that Singaporeans have against their own food. I have many friends who will happily queue to pay $18 for a bowl of *ramen*, but whine and complain if the prices of their bowl of *bak chor mee* or *laksa* increases by a dollar to $5. Clearly, Singaporeans are at times ambivalent. We praise the wonders of our cuisine but at the same time are unwilling to reward those who serve it.

Instead of a concerted and coherent national drive to export Singaporean food culture, our efforts should be focused on protecting what we have. Singaporean food is an excellent example of our national identity, and we ought to preserve this social glue for the future generations to come. The task of promoting Singapore food need not fall on the government and private companies. As citizens, we too can share the joy of Singaporean cuisine with our overseas friends, one at a time.

Myself and the Other: A Cross-Cultural Exchange

Alex Cherucheril

Wong Ee Vin

We remember one backhanded compliment (or veiled complaint) that was aired during class – that Singapore was especially successful because Singaporeans were uniquely and particularly deferential to authority. Was that really how the world perceived us? How much truth is there in that statement? Are we really that different from others? What are the consequences of such stereotypes?

To that end when we – an American and a Singaporean – were tasked to write an essay, we thought it was a perfect opportunity to examine our conceptions of the Self and the Other. These stereotypes are often perpetuated and reinforced in the media and other forms of dominant discourse. We thought a good medium to explore this dynamic was through film, since it is a medium that is consumed by billions worldwide. To make such exploration more interactive, we imagine a discussion between two film directors, one from Singapore (Jack N) and the other from the United States (Woody A), on watching foreign films and experiencing the world through the other's eyes. They talk about the role of films in shaping self-image and the notion of the Other, as well as ideas about personal growth and the good life.

Jack N:

An interesting concept in international relations is Othering: discourse that attempts to highlight differences between us, the 'Self', and them, the 'Other'. Through this interactive process, societies define their uniqueness in opposition to the traits of the Other, as with Rome against the barbarians in the past, and the USA compared to China today. The consequence of such apparent differences is often judgements of moral or political superiority of the Self; after all, civilised Americans don't eat dogs or cheat like Chinamen do. And according to constructivists, such labels construct existential threats to societies, and the attendant righteousness help justify extraordinary measures in the name of security.

Woody A:

We thought we could examine such issues through films that touch on domestic issues in Singapore and the United States, because films often provide social commentaries or push agendas through storytelling about domestic problems. We would each

select films or TV shows relevant to our individual experiences in our respective societies, for the other to watch. After which, we discuss our thoughts on the subject matter. Our aim is neither to generalise amorphous concepts of Singaporean or American culture nor to moralise societal differences. Our focus is instead to dismantle dichotomies – us against them, right versus wrong, superiority and inferiority – and bring to the fore the various shades of grey that humans inhabit. Apparent alien and foreign differences are, on deeper introspection, the result of reasonable decisions, or do not matter much in the grander scheme of things.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HAVE A GOOD LIFE?

Jack N:

The good life is essentially a paradigm to achieving happiness; it is an idea as to how one can find success in a particular social context. The American one, at least from my point of view, is obvious – a life that embodies the American dream. In the land of opportunity, success follows hard work, and happiness along with it. Stories of social mobility through individual ambition, such as the industrialist Andrew Carnegie, are celebrated in the national mythos. It sets itself apart because the central conditions of individuality, freedom, and opportunity are seen as distinctly American, unlike the stifling political structures of Victorian England or the communitarianism of China today. As a cultural export it has been wildly successful; immigrants all over the world aspire to move to the United States to chase this dream.

The Singaporean good life, however, is much more difficult to define. That's partly because in some ways it is similar to the American one, such as the pervasive national ethos of meritocracy; but in others it is wildly different. As a Singaporean I find the American dream distinctly foreign because of Singapore's fixation on academic merit as the sure-fire path to success – a view shared by businessman Ho Kwon Ping. It must seem strange to Americans that success in life is thought to be dictated by one's ability in his first 20 years

of education;indeed, Andrew Carnegie himself was never formally educated past elementary school.

Woody A:

That's true. The movie you picked for me was *I Not Stupid* (2002), a comedy film about three young students who are streamed into the EM3 band due to their poor academic performance. The idea that you won't make it because of poor academic performance isn't widely accepted in the States; a popular description in American lexicon, "hustle", embodies the belief in hard work by acquiring other kinds of skills to achieve success. I think a single-minded fixation on academic success may hinder the success of these children – as we see in *I Not Stupid*, where Kok Pin's artistic talent is neglected by his mother who is adamant that he should focus on his studies. Furthermore, it was interesting as it depicts the societal pressure on these students in Singapore due to the EM3 label, which is particularly unfathomable given the young age of the protagonists. In the States, banding students by intelligence and/or perceived ability rarely happens before college. Such labels may psychologically limit Singaporean children from striving through failure, especially when assigned at such a young age. In my view what should matter is whether the person has 'hustle'.

Therefore, to the ordinary American the centrality of education to the Singaporean conception of success is as mystifying as it is foreign. This Othering discourse perpetuates stereotypes of Singaporeans, or Asians in general, being academically gifted due to such single-minded focus but stunted in many other areas. The film *I Not Stupid* commentates where such Othering discourse has conversely been internalised by Singaporeans: businessman Richard overlooks the local marketing team's efforts because he believes the American marketing consultant's work is much more creative, lead-disastrous results. It isn't difficult to see how such discourse can ing   toperpetuate superiority complexes or xenophobia in either society.

Jack N:

To some extent I do agree with you that a good life should not have to flow from academic success, and that our happiness is affected by an extreme pursuit for academic excellence. But the American dream necessitates a system that guarantees equal opportunity for all, regardless of educational or socio-economic background; and we're increasingly seeing an America where this social mobility is but a pipe dream, and where social capital matters more than merit. This is stridently propounded by Noam Chomsky in *Requiem for the American Dream* (2015). Chomsky, whose views are somewhat radically leftist, makes a point that academic credentials perversely open opportunities in an unjust system and gives a limited degree of social mobility. Ultimately, if American society does not want to emphasise academic meritocracy as a social leveller, then it must find another viable alternative. Without any realizable equality of opportunity, the American dream will remain but a dream.

In this regard the Singaporean perspective may just be brutally pragmatic if we extend Chomsky's historical materialist view to Singapore's role in the global economy. The main drivers of Singapore's economy – high-end manufacturing and business services – are value-adding processes to core economies such as the United States, China, and the greater Southeast Asian region; to that end workers with managerial and facilitative skills are in high demand. Success in this economic context therefore is very much predicated on possessing these skills, which in turn can be taught and measured via academic tests. To the extent that conceptions of the good life follow the economic base of each societal context, then you can understand the central role of academic merit in the Singaporean ethos.

Woody A: I believe this conversation shows that while both conceptions of the good life are different, there are fundamental similarities in that both ideas of success privilege material

wealth over other sources of happiness. Of course, these are not ideologies that all Singaporeans or Americans subscribe to, but the prevailing *zeitgeist* that underlies both societies is consumerism, and wealth is required to fund such happiness. There are alternative models of a good life – famously, happiness even in the face of abject poverty in Bhutan – but these are largely not considered as viable alternatives by either society as a whole. Instead, problems arise when individuals cannot see these alternatives for themselves and become disfranchised with chasing that consumerist fantasy – as in *Singapore Dreaming* (2006), where Seng despairingly cries to his wife when she chides him for his impulsive spending on a new car: "If you want to make it, you've got to look like you've already made it".

As a whole, I think our discussion reveals that Singaporean and American differences may be misinterpreted without understanding the societal context, especially with regard to the economy, politics, and sociological context of each country. I don't think Singaporeans truly believe in the superiority of academic education; rather, that there are simply no viable alternatives. Such belief is also a product of economic forces; as the Singaporean economy shifts towards value creation, the academic focus in

as an actionable plan, given the flaws of its duopolistic system, nevertheless, equality of opportunity, Americans probably all do strive towards. Nevertheless, what is clear is that neither the American dream nor the Singaporean equivalent may mean what a plain reading would suggest, and are not as immutable as

they seem..

HOW SHOULD I GROW UP?

Woody A: Another related point that is often brought up in relation to the good life is the pursuit of self-fulfilment. Humans across all societies strive to find purpose and fulfilment in life, but the manner in which they do so is vastly different. While

such a search is often a lifelong journey, we wanted to focus on the search in the formative years as a child. A common theme in literature is coming-of-age, which often features a realisation of an aspiration in the transition to adulthood.

Jack N: *Zootopia* (2016) is a family film that focuses on the struggle of the protagonist, Judy Hopps, in her childhood aspiration to be a police officer despite her small stature. The movie commentates on race and prejudice in contemporary America through the different animal species in the film. Judy herself, a rabbit, is discouraged from pursuing her passion – by both her parents and her superiors in the police force who see her as a 'token bunny' in an organisation dominated by much bigger animals – but she ultimately proves herself through persistence and wit.

While the movie was specifically made for international export, the central theme of overcoming prejudice is quintessentially American. For our purposes however, we are more interested in Judy's individual journey as she works to realise her childhood aspirations in the face of such obstacles. This relentless pursuit of self-fulfilment is very much celebrated in American media as a facet of the greater concept of liberal individualism. In another movie, *Pitch Perfect* (2012), the protagonist Beca pursues her dream to become a music producer in the face of her father's disapproval; her will in maintaining this personal autonomy is celebrated in eventual outcome of the film. These films imply that this form of personal independence is a necessary trait for adulthood.

As a Singaporean this devotion to individualism seems somewhat strange especially when taken to its logical extreme. This is for two reasons. Firstly, that pursuit for self-fulfilment presumes that one knows what goals would be appropriate for oneself. In reality, people rarely have such clear goals in mind, much less youths in their formative years. Without a clear goal the pursuit for self-realisation often then turns into a hedonistic chase for anything that feels good. Secondly, external feedback, whether from parents or persons of greater virtue, is generally valuable in framing goals that are deemed appropriate for youths. There is no reason why such

o b j e c t i v e feedback should be regarded as being subordinate to one's own wishes. Should self-determination as a value be upheld even in the face of folly? I am not too sure – there are fewer happy endings in real life.

Woody A: On a broader level I think this form of Othering engages a perennial dialogue between individualism and collectivism, which was introduced to us during this course as part of the Hofstede cultural framework. Western individualism, along with liberal democracy, has often been touted by the United States as a political solution to many problems. In response, the need to delineate itself apart from Western values led to the conception of 'Asian values' in Singapore during the 1990s – loyalty, social harmony, and communitarianism. In turn, western critics propounded that these Asian values were used to justify authoritarian governance or the curtailment of human rights. To that extent we see Othering discourses creating an existential threat – an Asian one – that was wholly foreign to American society.

Back to our current discussion. You chose *Ah Boys to Men* (2012) as a film highlighting the National Service experience for Singaporean males, but it is also a coming-of-age film. The protagonist Ken Chow, from a rich family, enters basic military training and must learn to cooperate with other youths from diverse backgrounds. Despite his initial reluctance, Ken slowly develops a sense of camaraderie with the other trainees in his platoon as they endure hardships together; through adversity, we also see him growing as a man. Of course, *Ah Boys to Men* depicts a rite-of-passage that only Singaporean males experience. However, the movie depicts a serendipitous discovery of the Self through doing something that one is compelled to do, which is somewhat foreign in American film. I think this message – of growing into a role and learning to love what you do, rather than just doing what you love – can very much be considered a Singaporean form of self-fulfilment and a rite-of-passage.

This communitarian form of self-fulfilment, with undertones

of Confucian role ethics, has its downside. Societal obligations can cause the stagnation of personal development, and social expectations can stifle the desire to try new things. Uncritical insistence on following the 'Singaporean Plan' rather than giving space to dream hampers young Singaporeans' freedom to create and the will to improve the system. And rampant materialism as the motivator for following the plan – infamously immortalised in the 5 'C's mantra – makes a mockery of such Asian values.

Nevertheless in reality, I think Americans do not fully subscribe to a radical form of individualism. In my own experience, most people do balance their responsibilities, roles and obligations, against their passions and dreams. Whether subconsciously or not, such communitarian self-fulfilment does feature significantly in the ordinary American's life. For example, I doubt people scoff if someone

makes an   informed choice to follow their parents' wishes. As a whole, we see American society slowly accepting the idea of 'tiger mums' as a valid child-rearing technique. Despite the differences portrayed in the media, I think reality is much more complex than such Othering would lead you to believe.

Jack N:

I would agree that reality is much more nuanced from that portrayed in either American or Singaporean films. While there is a bias towards following the 'Singaporean Plan', I think that there is a great deal of critical introspection towards finding what works. For example, *I Not Stupid* sparked a debate in Parliament on education; in subsequent years, the education system has been relaxed somewhat. And in my personal experience, I think younger Singaporeans often pursue what they are passionate about – as evidenced by the excessive number of trendy cafes, opened in recent years by young professionals disfranchised with their former managerial jobs.

What we learn from this debate is that reality often resists simple categorisations, and that universally people often find a reasonable balance in their pursuit of self-fulfilment. Apparent differences are often overstated to alienate a foreign Other. Perhaps the true mark of adulthood for all cultures is learning to choose with

virtuous intentions; the eventual choice – whether doing what you love, or loving

what you do– doesn't really matter.

TO SUM IT UP

Woody A: In summary, we have spoken about two aspects of the foreign Other – the path to success, and the pursuit of self-fulfilment – from Singaporean and American perspectives. In the former, we discussed how one may misinterpret or misunderstand different pathways to success. Do Singaporeans truly regard academic education as the silver bullet to its problems? Similarly, do Americans believe entirely in the concept of the American dream? Yes and no. We showed how an in-depth understanding of historical and socio-economic contexts is required when answering these questions, as well as how the foreign Other can be entirely reasonable and relatable. In the latter, we discussed opposing views on self-fulfilment and showed that neither perspective is entirely correct. In reality, there are also advantages in the Other's perspective, and people do strive for a balance between fulfilling communal obligations and pursuing self-interest.

As we watched these films, we noticed the need to pay attention to its authenticity and its purpose. Films, as with any other forms of discourse, are never objective in their treatment of the facts; one must be mindful of simplistic generalisations. One must also realise that he or she is complicit in such Othering discourse, through implicit stereotypes or hidden assumptions in everyday speech, and that only an open and honest discussion with a foreign Other can dispel such myths. The danger is acquiescing to such discourse to the extent that existential threats are created, such as Donald Trump's discourse on Mexican migrants being criminals and

rapists.

Jack N:

Without a doubt, Singaporean and American societies are different from each other; there are many things on which both societies will disagree. Nevertheless, differences should never be overstated. I challenge all to re-examine their conceptions of Self – whether our supposed love for complaining, or food – to see if we are truly unique from the Other.

Part Three

Hearing Different Voices

On Play and Profit

<div align="right"># Foo Xian Fong</div>

As the fervour of the SG50 celebrations fades along with the fireworks illuminating the glitzy Marina Bay, Singapore enters a pensive period not unlike a person's mid-life crisis. What now for Singapore? In an age of rapid technological disruption with multiple instabilities plaguing the world, this question has been the subject of much interest, forming the Singapore Parliament's key agenda during its first sitting of 2016 as well as spawning numerous news and academic articles titled 'Beyond SG50' or the like.

A common theme emerging from the 'Beyond SG50' discourse is Singapore's need to engage in value creation to secure its future, over and above the value-adding industries that Singapore has traditionally relied on to expand in a global economy. To that end, there is a need to encourage innovation and entrepreneurship amongst its citizenry since value creation involves doing things that others are not doing or, at least not doing much of. In response, the Government has introduced many initiatives to ignite the innovative and entrepreneurial spark in Singaporeans.

While these initiatives are a step in the right direction, we need to dig deeper, and reconsider the education of Singaporean children. Specifically, how can we instil in them during their formative years the traits and qualities that would incline them towards innovation and entrepreneurship in adulthood. By 'education', I refer not to the formal education that children receive in school – much is already being done in this regard to refine the education system and reform the curriculum. Instead, I refer to the education of children outside of school, especially during their playtime.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAYING

Be it building a replica of the *Death Star* out of Lego bricks, hanging out with the other children at the estate's playground, or slaying orcs in the *World of Warcraft*, I believe that playing encourages the development of traits and qualities that would gear an individual towards innovation and entrepreneurship. The characteristics that play builds include perseverance, a willingness to take informed risks, a desire to change the *status quo*, cooperation, communication skills and perhaps most importantly, an unbridled imagination.

A child during playtime, temporarily freed of academic constraints, is free

to explore and discover the possibilities that the metaphorical playing field offers. It is a time when a child can let his imagination run wild, limited only by the resources available to him and his corresponding ability to improvise, such as when he realises that he does not possess the requisite LEGO brick needed to complete a spaceship modelled after S.H.I.E.L.D's heli-carrier in *The Avengers*. It is also a time where a young mind learns, after failing 49 runs of a *World of Warcraft* raid, of the need for perseverance and cooperation to seamlessly execute the strategies crafted using the experience gleaned from the last 49 rounds of failure. All of this, in hopes of slaying the raid boss guarding the chest that contains the much sought-after loot of virtual weapons and armour.

PLAYING TO LEARN… OR LEARNING TO PLAY?

More importantly, play provides a contextualised mode of learning. During play, one immediately perceives the consequences and implications of a learning point and in a relatable manner, thereby facilitating internalisation of the learning point. This, perhaps, explains why I found myself understanding economics concepts such as demand and supply elasticity more readily while trading virtual commodities in *World of Warcraft* than listening to the economics lectures during my junior college days. This was because I witnessed how my in-game earnings were drastically reduced when the virtual commodities' prices plunged upon the occurrence of economically significant virtual events. Moreover, I could actually relate to what was happening in the game because it was hampering my progression, unlike the Great Financial Crisis ravaging the global economy, which seemed to me then like folklore from a faraway land. With a heightened understanding of the learning point, one is consequently better placed to apply it from the current context to other aspects of life. This broadens one's horizons, enabling one to see potential opportunities for transposition of ideas across different contexts – a crucial ability underpinning innovation and entrepreneurship.

The fun derived from playing also incentivises acquisition of knowledge and development of skills crucial for progression in the particular field of play. The learning that occurs while playing is thus a spontaneous process that an interested individual engages in voluntarily; it does not occur because the person has to, but because he wants to. This tends to lend itself to a continuity

of the learning process – sustained because one is not forced to learn about something that he has no interest in, for example, in the contrived context of having to study a subject for the GCE 'A' Levels. Be it learning substantive knowledge or important life skills, play provides an effective mode of learning that should be embraced rather than shunned.

PARENTAL ATTITUDES

With all the benefits of play identified above, one may wonder why so little has been devoted to developing this aspect of a child's formative years. Paradoxically, however, the nature of play is such that attempts to improve the playing experience by devoting more resources to play may in fact be counterproductive to the development of the desired traits and qualities of an innovator and entrepreneur. After all, it is the scarcity of resources that spurs one to stretch his imagination, to improvise and ultimately, to innovate. Instead, drawing from personal anecdotes and that of other millennials, the key obstacle preventing the reaping of the full benefits of play appears to be parental attitudes towards playing.

IS PLAY COUNTERPRODUCTIVE?

At the risk of over-generalising, Singaporean parents appear to perceive play as an unproductive activity antithetical to the productive efforts necessary for progression in life. I am not suggesting that they do not allow their children to engage in play. Rather, they view play only as a means of relieving the stress that accumulates from engaging in what is commonly perceived as productive work. Play is thus not seen as an inherently productive activity but as a distraction that should be discouraged unless necessary to supplement productive work. Parents are consequently inclined to restrict their child's playtime in order to facilitate and prioritise what is, in their view, productive work.

This phenomenon was indeed a defining aspect of my childhood, where I struggled daily to complete the assigned chapter of the assessment book as fast as humanly possible in order to join my friends in a game of 'block-catching'. Digressing slightly, this is incidentally the same concept underpinning the

globally renowned South Korean reality show, *Running Man* – yet another demonstration of how creative ideas developed through improvisation in the course of play have the potential to be commercialised for significant value.

Returning to the point here, such parental inclinations deny the child of opportunities to develop the traits and qualities crucial to catalysing an innovative mind and entrepreneurial spirit. Ultimately, while the substantive knowledge one gains from formal academic education is no less important, the crux here is to recognise the value of informal, non-academic forms of education and to strike a balance that will offer Singaporean children the best of both worlds.

'PLAYING' THE PARENTS' WAY

Another aspect of Singaporean parenting impeding the realisation of the benefits of play is their obsession with sending their children for a myriad of classes for non-academic activities – swimming, ballet, music, tennis and the list goes on. To the extent that such activities constitute 'play' and the child actually enjoys it, there is no issue. The difficulty arises when a child is compelled to participate in activities that he has no interest in. The parents' intentions in wanting to expose their children to as many different experiences as possible is laudable but unfortunately, we do not exist in *Interstellar's* five-dimension reality where time can be manipulated as easily as stretching a rubber band. The opportunity cost of involuntary participation in such activities is less benefit from engaging in play. This is owing to such activities effectively depriving the child of already limited playtime, given the rigours of the Singaporean education system, and eating up time that could otherwise be spent pursuing a passion or at least something that he enjoys doing, which, as discussed above, would have been greatly beneficial to him.

Furthermore, Singaporean parents adopt a very protective approach in dictating the type of play that their children engage in. I recall my numerous requests for permission to head out with my friends to the beach being rejected because "it's dangerous to swim in the sea lah!" Even to this day, despite being 25 years old and having undergone National Service, my parents continue to discourage me when I inform them of my upcoming diving expedition or mountain climbing trip because they are "dangerous". In comparison, European parents appear more willing to allow their children to engage in inherently risky

activities. Just last Christmas, I was marvelling at a two-year-old German girl skiing pass me, down the slopes of the *Fellhorn* with her mother as I attempted to snowboard down the same mountain. Similarly, I encountered a Spanish family with young children while scaling the *Montserrat* near Barcelona. The trail up to *Sant Jeroni*, one of the mountain peaks, was no mean feat, featuring a physically taxing 45 degree incline at some points, littered with loose rocks waiting for the opportune moment to give you an ankle sprain. On both occasions, the first thought that occurred to me, sadly, was that Singaporean parents would never allow their children to engage in such risky activities given their risk aversion.

While a parent's concern for his child's safety is understandable, this risk-averse style of parenting limits the child's exposure to many new experiences and inevitably influences the child, causing him to incorporate the same risk aversion in his outlook on life. It is no wonder such a child would be less willing to take the plunge as an adult to engage in entrepreneurship, which by definition exposes him to financial risks.

Perhaps then, we can take a leaf out of the Europeans' book and reconsider our approach to parenting? After all, the Spanish kids made it up to *Sant Jeroni* without a scratch and the German child made it down the snow covered slopes of the *Fellhorn* safely. In both instances, the children pushed themselves out of their comfort zones and stayed the course; they emerged from their ordeals stronger, with a better understanding of their capabilities and a better appreciation of the exhilarating experiences that our planet offers. Ultimately, risk is inherent in virtually every activity one engages in. Instead of circumscribing their children's experiences, parents should teach children how to identify the risks, to make an informed decision whether to engage in the activity and if so, to take all the necessary precautions. A child familiar with such thought processes would be well-positioned to apply the same to his exploits as an adult, be it in the context of deciding whether to go sky-diving or whether to take a leap of faith and invest his life savings in a business to develop potentially ground-breaking technology.

LET THE CHILDREN PLAY

In our quest to forge a nation of innovative and entrepreneurial people, let

us start early and from within. While much can be done in respect of external factors, for example, the creation of a physical and financial environment conducive for start-ups to develop, doing less is sometimes doing more. Simply taking a step back and giving a child the space and freedom to play may be far more beneficial than all the start-up incubators he can be provided as an adult. After all, an innovative mind and an entrepreneurial attitude cannot be engineered in a classroom. Rather, these desirable traits are culminations of a synthesis of an individual's experiences. As parents or parents-to-be, let us not hold back the next generation from elevating Singapore's position in the global stage as we sail into the uncharted waters towards SG100 and beyond.

Life is School, School is Life: A Finnish Perspective

Lim Ziwei

Markus Rönnberg

This paper is a joint effort but written from the perspective of a Finnish student.

A FINN IN SINGAPORE

When I first started my exchange programme at Singapore Management University (SMU), I was fascinated by how much time the average Singaporean student spends in school. The students I met were always rushing to classes, group project meetings or Co-Curricular Activities (CCAs). With the opportunity to peek at the differences in university education at both SMU and back home, I cannot help but wonder what the local students go through growing up in Singapore. With the help of my Singaporean co-author, I analyse in this essay some of the key differences in the life of an average student in Singapore and Finland. I will avoid comparing Finnish and Singaporean school systems directly since many comprehensive reviews have already been done. I examine instead three tangentially related but important aspects in the life of a student – CCAs, tuition, and parental attitudes towards school.

CCA

As a Finnish student, the first thing that struck me was the extent to which a local student's life is entwined with a school's curriculum. In Finland, universities and schools are only an institution for education. While schools have sports or culture clubs, they are few and far between. Thus, should I wish to participate in such activities, I would have to look for them within my local community. In contrast, I have observed that SMU offers its students a wide variety of activities to partake in. In fact, students are even invited to participate in activities organised by school clubs without having to commit to long-term involvement in the club. Some examples at SMU include introductory dance classes and skating lessons. Should students eventually find their calling, they can then participate in the club's regular practice sessions, and even represent the school in competitions against other schools!

Upon further discussions with my co-writer and local classmate, I discovered that these CCAs are available even before education at the university

level. In theory, CCAs were meant to provide Singaporean students with a more holistic education. Through these CCAs, it was envisioned that students would discover their interests and talents, forge friendships with their peers and deepen their sense of belonging to the school . While CCAs are not compulsory at all levels, participation is strongly 'encouraged'. At the secondary school level (i.e. age 13 to 17) CCAs are both mandated and graded; performing well in them (by accumulating sufficient points) can aid greatly in a student's entrance score to a pre-university institution of their choice. Thus, students face a tremendous amount of social pressure from the school and parents to participate in these activities as non-participation effectively places them at a disadvantage compared to their peers when it comes to admission to institutions of higher education.

Hence, while students can still join CCAs they are interested in, it seems that students are increasingly 'encouraged' to pick up these activities not for the sake of enjoyment or personal development but because these CCAs can potentially give them an edge in the next stage of their educational careers. This effectively erodes the original purpose of CCAs. Rather than being an avenue for discovering oneself, CCAs have become another battleground for students to compete on. This is exacerbated by the Direct School Admission (DSA) scheme, through which students may be granted admission to a school on the basis of their extracurricular achievements and talents, even if they do not meet the eligibility criteria on the basis of the standardised exam results. It can even play a part in appeals for admissions to schools, acting as a differentiating factor for the candidate seeking admission to a school. As a result, my opinion is that students in Singapore do not have a choice but to participate in CCAs; effectively being forced to engage in school activities due to societal pressures.

Notwithstanding the seemingly negative implications of CCAs, the CCA system is not without its merits. In Singapore, the extent to which a student's life is integrated with school means that the average Singaporean would have their social networks more connected to the school (e.g. classmates, CCA-mates or schoolmates). This could encourage a student to view the school in a positive light by associating it with fun. It also allows students to build a wider array of contacts throughout the different stages of their education. With the strong network of contacts students can potentially build up over the years, an argument can be made that this makes it a lot easier to know people in

varying fields of expertise when entering the workforce.

In contrast, Finns have weaker social contact with their fellow students but a stronger social network outside our studies. Without the CCA system, we have shorter schooling hours. Instead, Finns would usually spend our time playing ice hockey, having a cold beer, spending time with loved ones or warming ourselves up at the sauna. Since the school does not readily present itself as an avenue for activities, we generally turn toward our local community instead.

Since each system has its merits and weaknesses, it is difficult to conclude which is clearly superior. On one hand, the CCA system compels students to interact, thereby creating opportunities to network. Within this setting, the bonds forged with peers tend to be stronger (by virtue of the amount of time spent together) but are less varied due to the similar background and age. In contrast, Finns would have to be intrinsically motivated to participate in community activities where we would then have the opportunity to network. While these bonds tend to be weaker, they are more varied as we get to meet people from our community rather than others of a similar background and age.

However, from my observations, Finns tend to lose this intrinsic motivation to participate in such activities after the age of 18, which is a real shame due to the advantages they bring. This is where I think the Singaporean system shines as universities provide excellent opportunities for us to continue pursuing our interests alongside our studies.

TUITION

In Finland, students can easily get into schools of their choice up to the pre-university level as schools are mostly viewed as similar. However, this changes when applying for universities as competition becomes tougher for more demanding subjects, while less demanding subjects remain fairly easy to be accepted into. While acceptance into universities differ marginally between schools, they are in most cases based on the results of both the pre-university national exam and an entrance exam. Heavy emphasis is placed on the entrance exam and students applying for the most competitive subjects sometimes study a whole year only for the entrance exam, as there are cases where less than 10 percent of applicants get accepted. While private tuition is almost unheard of in Finland, there are a lot of preparatory classes for these entrance exams.

For my university, there are currently three different companies organising such courses. For instance, you will find that students who were accepted into the law school in Helsinki would likely have taken a preparatory course for the entrance exam, not because it is mandatory but because it gave them a huge advantage.

The extent to which Finnish students have classes beyond formal lessons stands in contrast to the situation here. A survey conducted showed that seven in ten parents send their children for tuition , which is a billion dollar industry in Singapore. These tuition centres tend to teach ahead of the school curriculum to provide students with a competitive edge (Tan, 2014). While it is interesting to know that occurrences similar to 'prep-schools' are prevalent outside Finland, it is also a little alarming that students as young as seven may already be subject to such an experience.

This is especially disconcerting since tuition is over and above the numerous hours that students already spend in school due to CCAs and lessons. Additionally, students attend further lessons not because they are weak in their academics but rather, to get ahead of their peers and maintain a competitive edge. This leaves students with little time for leisurely activities or pursuit of their interests. With the early age at which the first national exam takes place (i.e. at 12 years old), the paper chase begins a lot earlier for Singaporean students as compared to Finns. Between having to juggle school, CCAs and tuition, one can only imagine how stressful a typical Singaporean student's life would be.

PARENTAL ATTITUDES

Apart from the school curriculum, parental attitudes are another aspect which shapes the activities that a student participates in outside of lessons. This is already evident in the decision to send their children for tuition.

After accounting for CCAs, school and tuition, the typical student in Singapore has very little time left in a day. Even this limited amount of time would sometimes be apportioned further by one's parents. Singaporean parents tend to view how a student spends his time mechanically. If the activity relates to academics, it is productive and should be encouraged. If it does not, it is considered unproductive, a waste of time and should be eliminated or discouraged. Thus, there is a disproportionate imbalance between the time a Singaporean student spends pursuing recreational activities and that spent

revising for school.

Unlike the Finns, Singaporean parents want to see their children go above and beyond the homework prescribed such as revising for tests, reading ahead or getting more practice papers done. This does not really happen in Finland. While parents in Finland want to see their children do their homework in their spare time, it pretty much stops there. I would even go so far as to say that it is more common among parents in Finland to be concerned that their children study too much than the other way around.

The reason is that parents presume that if their children study too much, they are not spending enough time doing other activities such as socialising with friends, doing sports or participating in any other social activities. The attitude adopted is one that values intangible experiences that help their children grow as individuals. This is in contrast to the typical Singaporean parent whose results-oriented attitude shifts the emphasis from a child's development to more tangible growth in the form of grades.

The difference in attitude may be because the general opinion in Finland is that success in the early stages of school is not determinative of success in the future. Singapore, on the other hand, uses grades as a determinant of one's ability to succeed – a by-product of the emphasis on meritocracy. As such, students in Singapore are assessed on their ability at every turn in determining their success and potential to succeed later on in life.

SINGAPORE IN A FINN

In my view, the typical Singaporean's life is one that is stressful and perhaps unnecessarily so. As can be seen, the events that occur after lessons are always inextricably tied to school itself. In this essay we have highlighted Singapore's approach towards personal development through CCAs. While it has its advantages, it represents an artificial and contrived method aimed at helping Singaporean students discover themselves, develop their talents and socialise.

However, its effectiveness is reduced due to its execution and parental attitudes where a CCA is often viewed as necessary only to the extent of furthering their child's academic career. Additionally, students that are disinterested are still forced to pick up a CCA, even when their talents and interests may lie elsewhere. On the other hand, the Finnish approach is more organic, with students encouraged to develop relationships and discover their interests

more naturally and on their own.

The second issue that presents itself from examining the typical Singaporean student's life is the results-oriented approach. As the proverbial saying goes: "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy". With the emphasis placed on work, as seen from parental attitudes and tuition, play along with personal growth and development is often sacrificed at the altar of work. If the current trend continues, Singaporean students risk becoming the proverbial 'Jack' who is uncreative, boring and nothing more than a drone. With this, perhaps it is time to re-examine Singaporeans' attitudes towards education rather than the education system itself.

Manufacturing a
National Myth

Mackenzie Schmidt

As a Canadian, I am familiar with our national animal – the beaver. Many of the beaver's characteristics – and the beaver itself – reflect Canada's history since the inception of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1670, which heavily relied on the fur trade of beaver pelts throughout North America. There are many reasons why the beaver is an appropriate animal to symbolise Canada's heritage and culture. It is therefore interesting to consider how and why some nations chose mythical creatures as their national animal – given that fictitious animals do not really exist – making it challenging to understand their cultural and emotional significance to those nations.

Singapore is one of the select few countries that have a mythical creature, the Merlion, as one of its national symbols. Although the lion is technically Singapore's national animal, the Merlion features prominently in the Singapore landscape, serving as a national symbol and is often perceived as its national animal. Other countries have more overtly adopted a mythical creature as a national animal; Scotland, Bhutan, and Greece have all adopted mythical creatures to reflect their national identities. We will uncover why such mythical national animals bear significant cultural importance, rendering them a worthy national symbol. We will then uncover what the mythical Merlion represents as Singapore's national symbol from both international and Singaporean perspectives. First, a strong understanding of what exactly a symbol represents is necessary to understanding the significance of national animals as national symbols.

Symbols are signs, images, or logos that represent objects, communities, entities, or qualities valued by individuals and communities. National animals are regarded as national symbols which are chosen to represent a country's identity as shaped by its history, resources, and/or societal evolution. These official civic symbols are present throughout cities, states, or other forms of established territorial entities, generally receiving passive disinterest, tolerance or enthusiastic reactions from the public. Societies that are recently established or reconfigured do not have obvious historic symbols; as a result, it is challenging for such younger nations to create, promote, and implement new symbols within their societies.

Generally, countries choose an animal that is native to their country. However, the lion – which is native to Africa – was adopted by many European nations, such as England. Thus, the main criteria for selecting a national animal are the

values that a nation's society identifies with certain animals, and perceives as a reflection of their society and culture. The lion, for example, symbolises strength, courage and royalty, which is used to symbolise the power of the British monarchy in England. In this way, a national animal typically becomes closely associated with a country over time.

However when a mythical creature is selected, this reasoning might not be so clear, since the creature is fictitious. According to Charles Poladian (2014) of *The Business Times*, only 7.1 percent of all national animals recorded by Silk's database of national animals are mythical. This figure is small enough to make mythical national animals somewhat of a novelty, yet large enough to raise the question of why some nations feel well-represented by mythical animals rather than real ones originating from their lands. We will examine the national animals of Scotland, Bhutan and Greece to uncover how and why mythical animals were selected as national symbols to represent those nations.

The most famous of all national mythical animals is Scotland's unicorn. Its use as a Scottish heraldic symbol dates back to the 12th century. According to Celtic mythology, the unicorn symbolises innocence, purity, healing powers, joy, and even life itself. On the other hand, according to Scottish folklore a free unicorn was a dangerous beast that was not to be underestimated. These two viewpoints made for a dynamic contrast, which led to its adoption to symbolise Scotland as a mystical and powerful entity.

Similarly, Greece's culture and history is deeply rooted in mythology, which is taught and studied globally. Its mythical national bird – the phoenix – symbolises rebirth and new beginnings in Greek mythology, as this animal rises gloriously from its ashes after death. In essence, the phoenix symbolises immortality, which carried international appeal in late antiquity. The phoenix was seen in ancient Rome, appearing on the back of late Roman Empire coinage as a symbol of the eternal city.

The last example we will analyse is Bhutan's *Druk*, also known as the dark thunder dragon. Considered a modern-day peaceful kingdom, Bhutan's decision to have a bold and fierce dragon as their national symbol comes as a surprise to many.

"In Dzongkha (national language of Bhutan), the true name of this
Himalayan land is Druk-yul, or Land of Druk (the 'Thunder Dragon').
Bhutanese leaders are called Druk Gyalpo – Dragon Kings. The dragon
signifies the purity of the country, while the jewels in its jewelled claws
stand for wealth and perfection."

(Rodrigues, 2013)

In analysing the significance of the mythical national animals of Scotland,
Greece and Bhutan, it is evident that these creatures grew out of the deep
cultural and social factors embedded in each country's history. On the other
hand, Singapore – a relatively young country that only became an independ-
ent republic during the 1960s – has also chosen to have a mythical creature
represent their nation. Although the national animal is technically a lion, the
Merlion has greater prominence.

The Merlion has the head of a lion and the body of a fish. Interestingly,
Singapore's mythical national symbol was created, not by a Singaporean,
but by a British ichthyologist. Mr Fraser Brunner designed the Merlion as a
registered trademark for the then Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, now
known as the Singapore Tourism Board (STB). On 15 September 1972, the late
Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, officiated the auspicious instal-
lation ceremony of a Merlion sculpture. The statue was later moved next to
One Fullerton, where it still stands today in Merlion Park. On a bronze plaque
near the statue, it is written: "The Merlion has been erected as a symbol to
welcome all visitors to Singapore".

There are currently seven authorised Merlion statues located throughout
Singapore, which have been built under the authority of the STB; but none
are as well-known internationally as the two located at Merlion Park. Each year,
Merlion Park attracts over one million visitors who post thousands of images
on social media, drawing even more attention to this mythical creature world-
wide. To add even more mystique to its auspicious nature, the Merlion statue
is east-ward facing "which is believed to be a direction that brings prosperity
as dictated by the guidelines of feng shui (Chinese geomancy)". Even after its
relocation to Merlion Park, the statue still faces east.

The significance of the Merlion's connection to Singapore is explained by
the STB in various multimedia campaigns and online resources. The lower-half

and fish tail of the animal is meant to reflect Singapore's history as a port city, symbolising its roots as the ancient fishing village of Temasek, meaning 'sea' in Javanese. The upper-half of the creature is a lion, which makes reference to a Malaysian folklore recorded in the *Malay Annals*, in which the tale is told that Prince Sang Nila Utama encountered what he thought to be a lion when he first arrived ashore Temasek, and renamed the island *Singapura*, meaning 'Lion City' in Sanskrit. By all accounts, this is certainly a logical and thoughtful explanation for choosing the Merlion as a national symbol.

Yet, social reality couldn't be further from expectations. Hayward's research on public reactions towards national symbols in recently established or reconfigured societies reveals the average Singaporean's ambivalent emotional attachment and self-identification with the Merlion's significance as a national symbol.

Hayward's publication in 2012 analyses whether the Merlion is a credible national symbol that is truly representative of Singaporean history, culture and society. One line puts the reason across succinctly: the Merlion was created back in 1965 for tourism purposes, an industry that was "a prime area for economic development in the early 1960s, with government formulating the 1963 Tourism Act and establishing the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board". At this moment in time, Singapore was also shaking off the vestiges of British colonisation and beginning to establish its position in the world, declaring its independence later in 1965. While it can be argued that the Merlion is also symbolic of Singapore's new era, it was not perceived to be so by Singaporeans.

Lest this be dismissed as an opinion held by international outsiders looking in, we look to local voices that have expressed their distaste for the Merlion. Alfian Bin Sa'at's poem *The Merlion* (1998) describes the limbless Merlion as grotesque, like a "post-Chernobyl nightmare", Sa'at interprets the Merlion as a mythological prisoner, chained to the concrete jungle shores of a built city environment, constantly spewing water in order to ruffle its own reflection, wishing to reinvent itself. Sa'at's viewpoint is something of a sharp expression of distaste stemming from the same feelings as the disinterest Hayward observed in his research.

Of course, not everyone feels as strongly as Alfian. Comparing his response to some of my local Singaporean classmates at SMU, many opinions range across the spectrum from disinterest to tolerance to enthusiasm. For the most part, however, my local peers felt disinterest or ambivalence. Most perceived the Merlion as a fictional character designed to attract tourists, which in actuality

did not have deeply-rooted meanings or connections to Singaporean society. Others did not feel an emotional connection to the Merlion, perceiving it as a foreign design with inauthentic references to Singaporean culture. I was disappointed that many did not feel a strong sense of pride for their national symbol, in the way most Canadians feel about the beaver. Being a relatively young nation, it may take several more years for the Merlion to become embedded in Singaporean culture and society.

From an international point of view, the Merlion has won the hearts of many tourists and travellers who visit Singapore to experience its dynamism, which the Merlion embodies. Taking multiple photographs, marvelling at its size, observing the powerful jet of water spewing from its mouth, many tourists form their own assumptions of what the Merlion means to Singapore and how it represents the country's development into a prosperous nation. The Singaporean point of view, on the other hand, exemplifies disentrance and tolerance, which begs the spectator to question if the mythical Merlion was the right choice of national symbol to represent Singapore. Only time can tell how perceptions change, and whether the Merlion will truly become a part

of Singaporean society and culture.

Singapore, a Cosmopolis?

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Charlotte Lamboley

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Singapore is one of the rare countries that did not develop out of a common religious or historical background (as opposed to countries in Europe for instance) but out of economic, cultural, and strategic confluences.

Singapore is a society of immigrants, just like the United States of America or Australia. Thus, it is a real cosmopolitan city-state, or as the Greeks put it, a real cosmopolis: a multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-religious society that has become successful thanks to the policies implemented by the government and especially by the former and late Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. First, he made English the common working language to integrate Singapore's multi-racial society, as well as to foster trade with the West and boost Singapore's transition from the Third World to the First World in a single generation. This way, even though people might not have the same cultural background, they can still communicate with fellow citizens. At the same time, he also took a stand in favour of bilingualism at school. All students would be able to keep practicing their mother tongue and to preserve their cultural identity. In fact, Lee Kuan Yew made sure that despite its diversity, Singapore remained united so that Singaporeans would still have a feeling of citizenship.

Nevertheless, he did not fully achieve his goal. Nowadays, one can witness a lack of feeling of belonging in Singapore. As a consequence, while the United States keeps welcoming immigrants, Singapore has become less and less open to newcomers, and is consequently less and less attractive to foreigners. The resentment is such that many foreigners feel that London and New York are more cosmopolitan and welcoming than Singapore.

How can we explain this shift of politics in Singapore? Is it a short-term transformation or a long-term one? What could the consequences of such behaviour be?

Singapore fought for its independence and eventually prevailed 50 years ago. From then on, the country strove to become a First World city, a global city. It built upon its economic and strategic confluences, as well as its cultural landscape, made of so many distinct shades.

Arguably, its cultural diversity is partly what made Singapore such a cosmopolis. Singapore is a multi-cultural, multi-religious society, something Singaporean politicians never let you forget, and this diversity is one of its treasured strengths. In the vernacular that has recently fallen out of favour, Singapore is a 'melting-pot'; the recipe to "cook this pot of curry" (to quote one

of Singapore playwright Alfian Sa'at's plays) is 80 percent Chinese, 8 percent indigenous Malaysians, and 9 percent Indian minorities. What about the 3 per-cent left? They account for local people, whom SMU students call 'the others,' meaning a mix of all the other nationalities – mainly Europeans and Eurasians.

This means there is not only racial and religious diversity, but cultural diversity as well. For instance, Malay is the National language, English is the main working language, Mandarin and Tamil are the other official languages. I also noticed since I arrived in Singapore a month ago, what I would describe as landscape diversity. In Singapore it is possible to travel the world without crossing any borders whatsoever. One will find oneself in India while crossing Little India, Chinatown will offer all the riches of China, from food and music to temples, and walking on Orchard Boulevard provides an 80-minute tour around the world.

However, this rainbow society is not the only reason why Singapore became a cosmopolis. The fact that English is the working language helped Singapore welcome foreigners. As an exchange student, I found that being able to speak in English with anyone in the street is a tremendous asset. English as a mode of communication serves to remove borders, bridge gaps, and shorten distance between parties, and most importantly it helps me fight homesickness upon arrival. In some way, since people speak English around me, since everything is written in English, I did not feel as far away from home as I actually was. Experiencing this welcome and homely feeling was wholly exceptional, even though I arrived here with the full knowledge that everyone could speak English!

Moreover, to me, Singapore is a safe haven because no one will judge your accent. Indeed, English is not Singaporeans' mother tongue. As a matter of fact, I have heard some Singaporeans tell me they do not like their accent; this could be part of the reason why they won't belittle you because of yours. I think it is something a lot of foreigners are ashamed of and it may tip the scale in favour of Singapore when deciding where to migrate, or where to go for an exchange program. At least it was one of the advantages of Singapore for me.

Another reason for Singapore being a cosmopolis is the policies imple-mented by the government over the past 50 years. Indeed, Singapore would not have become a cosmopolis if the government had not taken advantage of the city-state's geographical location. The building of Changi Airport, the develop-ment of Singapore Harbour, and the steps taken to transform Singapore into a touristic place are among the many great decisions made by the government

that allowed Singapore to make its mark on the international stage.

Thanks in large part to these reforms, people from all over the world have actually heard about Singapore and have become more willing to live, or at least travel, here. Without this political will, it would not have mattered that citizens spoke English, or that Singapore was already a diverse society; the country would never have become a cosmopolis.

Finally, globalisation helped Singapore become a cosmopolis since it made travelling and moving around the world a lot easier. Thus, in less than 50 years, Singapore has become the shelter for people with diverse backgrounds. Transnationalism had touched the Singaporean society and boosted its economy and its clout on the international market, especially the financial market.

However, the diversity of Singapore also comes with drawbacks and flaws, and may hinder Singapore's bright future. The aforementioned transnationalism and globalisation can be double-edged, serving to shorten distances but also having the potential to weaken the links between the members of the same nation.

First, it can create or widen fissures within society. Some will paradoxically turn towards conservative ideologies, whereas others will decide to leave their homeland. Yet others will remain oblivious to the widening rift within their society. In fact, former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in 1999 provided two broad heads that Singaporeans can be grouped under, based on feeling of belonging to Singapore: heartlanders and cosmopolitans. The first, heartlanders, are those who feel they are part of Singapore and who see the city-state as their home. In general, they account for the conservative majority in Singapore who speak Singlish and make their living locally. The second, cosmopolitans are at the other end of the spectrum; they look at Singapore more as a hostel. They are the Singaporeans more likely to live and work abroad. As the latter group grows in size, there will be increasing difficulty building a nation where its nationals are not rooted to their 'home', but view it as a convenient 'hostel' from which they can venture abroad, even without a view of returning. Hence, we can see that the diversity and transnationalisation of Singapore, although boosting Singapore's economy and allowing the country to take its place on the international stage, has also weakened the State.

Remarkably enough, vocabulary and choice of words, such as 'only-in-Singapore' also translate into early signs of a division. For instance, I have noticed 'PR' is an expression often used by locals which means 'Permanent Residents'.

They are accepted, integrated into Singapore's society, and are far from being discriminated against, perhaps because everything is good for now and they only make up less than 10 percent of the total population. With globalisation and transnationalism come certain insecurities, and problems of self-identity, to a point where foreigners start to be seen as potential disruptors rather than contributors to the nation's cultural wealth. But the real problem behind this is not the fact that there are too many foreigners coming to Singapore, but the fact that the concept of citizenship remains ambiguous.

Having said that, why this sudden shift in behaviour among Singaporeans, why this sudden feeling of threat? Globalisation may be at fault. Globalisation and transnationalism can lead to a convergence of cultures, among other things. This can blur the lines between 'them' and 'us', causing insecurity and uncertainty that can lead some to seek out divergences that serve as markers of identity. But is it really the only reason? If so, why do migrants feel more welcome in the United States and London than in Singapore?

To me, Singaporeans people became scared. Let us not forget that Singapore's rise has been nothing short of incredible. In less than 50 years, Singapore went from a Third World city barely known outside Southeast Asia, to a First World city that many foreigners wish to visit, and even live in. If I had been born 50 years earlier, I don't think I would have chosen Singapore for my year abroad; in fact I am pretty sure I would have gone elsewhere. Why? Because I would not have known about this city-state, and even if I did, I would have seen it as a poor country, maybe even as an unsafe place. But here I am being grateful every single day that I have had the opportunity and good fortune to be here.

That being said, I still feel foreigners are not as welcome as I thought they were. Two reasons come to my mind. One is that the rate of immigration may be too high for the small state to handle, and can be a cause for concern for Singaporeans. In fact, Singapore's population has been growing at an annual rate of 2.3 percent for the last decade, despite its low fertility rate; most of this growth is due to immigration. Such figures would be challenging for any host country. Two, as mentioned earlier, Singapore suffers from an ill-defined national identity. There is a constant conversation on what it actually means to be a Singaporean, let alone what it means to be an immigrant seeking to be Singaporean. Hence, Singapore may not be the cosmopolis everybody thinks it is, and this does not bode well.

Singapore's future remains positive and its outlook optimistic in the short run. Nevertheless for its attractiveness to last, Singapore must find solutions to be relevant in the changing global environment while remaining true to its traditional cultures. Victor R. Ravage could not have better described this phenomenon in his article *Singapore's Global City Challenges: National Identity, Cosmopolitan Aspirations, Migrant Requirements***:**

> "Singapore's future as a modern city that is known to punch above its weight will not lie in increasing political myopia and cultural xenophobia. Singaporeans need to compete with foreigners and engage the larger international community in order to safeguard its global city status and its economic sustainability."

> (Singh & Victor, 2014)

However, is the desire to limit the number of foreigners and permanent residents to be indiscriminately frowned upon? As a French citizen, I feel that the main problem in France is that we are too eager to open our borders. It is kind and generous that France seeks to help anyone in need but France cannot welcome everyone. What is worse is that nowadays we are facing a problem of integration and national identity because core values are increasingly blurred.

It is true that with globalisation, countries should be more open-minded, but it does not mean welcoming every single person crossing into their borders. A country has to take care of its people first and then look beyond its borders. Singapore is wealthy but remains a small country with a relatively small consumption power. Though foreigners help in the latter, Singapore cannot afford too many residents. Its economy, infrastructure, and land space cannot sustain it. I feel that the Singapore government is being careful in this regard. It does not condemn migrations, but it does not praise it either. Still, I believe that Singapore must keep taking care of its foreigners. Without them its clout will shrink, and its economy will sink.

Singapore is not the cosmopolis it once was. Foreigners are still attracted to the city but they are not as welcome as they used to be. Indeed, Singaporeans lack a sense of belonging, and feel foreigners worsen the situation. Although, too many foreigners in such a small country can turn out to be a plague, one

must not forget that without foreigners Singapore would not have the influence it has on the international stage. There seems to be a burst of xenophobia in Singapore and if not handled wisely, it will work against the bright future of Singapore.

Don't Talk Cock: Defamation in Singapore

Michael LeGrand

Edwin Tan

"Isn't that the place where they sue bloggers if you criticise the government?" This was the first and most thought-provoking response that I received when I announced to my friends in Minneapolis that I had been accepted into the Singapore exchange programme. I had heard about the chewing gum ban and the caning of Michael Fay, but not bloggers being sued. Unfortunately, I did not get to explore the issue further before coming to Singapore, as the conversation with my friends soon degenerated into them jokingly scheming about how they were going to pose as me online and post controversial things to get me into trouble.

It was only after my arrival in Singapore that I learnt more about the defamation lawsuits by politicians, and the latest case about the Prime Minister suing a blogger named Roy Ngerng. This was all quite odd for me, as it is unheard of for politicians in the USA to take out defamation lawsuits against others. The current presidential primaries back home provide an interesting contrast to Singapore: despite the many barbed and sometimes false political advertising, a politician suing another for campaign ads does not occur.

Much ink has been spilt about the freedom of speech and expression in both the USA and Singapore. Suffice to say that it is common ground that societal and cultural differences play a significant role in the contrasting approaches that both countries have adopted towards freedom of speech, and in particular, defamation lawsuits by politicians against others. While it would be unwise to transplant one model of free speech into the other, this does not mean that there is no room for Singaporean politicians to change the way they use defamation lawsuits to increase effectiveness.

Simply put, more restraint should be exercised before defamation lawsuits are resorted to.

The official stance taken by both the Singaporean politicians and judiciary is that defamation lawsuits serve to protect the trust and confidence of the public in their leaders. This is not an unfair position to take. After all, particularly scandalous smears do affect the ability to lead and govern effectively, and there is a corresponding need to stop these smears when they get out of hand. However, defamation lawsuits do come at a cost. The chilling effect of such lawsuits cannot be discounted, and may contribute to self-censorship. Instead of protecting trust and confidence in public leaders, the defamation

lawsuits may provide the undesirable impression of public leaders 'bullying' others who have significantly less power and influence. These defamation lawsuits also feed and reinforce the stereotypes and caricatures of Singapore.

As such, defamation lawsuits should only be utilised as a weapon of last resort against the most disparaging of false allegations. It should be a final defence for one's reputation, instead of the first tool one reaches for.

The Roy Ngerng case is illustrative of how the defamation lawsuit is currently *not* the weapon of last resort. Yes, Roy Ngerng's post is indeed defamatory. However, was there a need to immediately resort to the lawyers and serve a letter of demand? Why not reach out to the offending author first? By attempting to first talk to the other party without threats of lawsuits and damages, it will help reduce the impression of high-handedness that defamation lawsuits tend to bring. This makes for good public relations too. Such an engagement, backed up with facts, will give the other party the chance to either correct or retract his or her statements. It may also provide the opportunity to persuade the other party and win over a new supporter.

It may be argued that such endeavours are a waste of a public office holder's valuable time and resources. However, defamation lawsuits are also a drain on time and resources. Lawsuits cost money. Time is also spent in consultation with the lawyers, and also in courtroom proceedings. Notably, Roy Ngerng spent about six hours cross-examining Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in court. Further, given that the allegations usually involve the politician's conduct in public office, there is no reason why a subordinate cannot be tasked to draft a letter or email to the author in question. The vast resources available to a public office holder, compared to a blogger like Ngerng, could be better used this way.

It cannot be denied that defamation lawsuits have the perverse effect of increasing the fame and publicity of the offending party in question, particularly if he or she is not a well-known person. In 2013, Roy Ngerng's blog averaged around 355 views per day. When his offending article was first published on 15 May 2014 he received 2,119 page views over the following four days. However, when news of the defamation lawsuit broke on 19 May 2014, the view count surged to 36,521 for a single day. On 20 May 2014, the number increased further to 39,636 page views . The massive increase in publicity minted a new celebrity in Roy Ngerng, and arguably fuelled his ill-fated bid for Parliament in 2015. It would have been difficult to see Roy Ngerng contesting had he not become

famous overnight due to the defamation lawsuit.

In its presentation at the United Nations Universal Periodic Review, the Singapore delegation stated that there is a great importance placed on the trust and credibility of public institutions and political leaders. Such trust was developed over the past 50 years, and the Singapore government does not want to see it debased. However, it is questionable whether the edifice of trust and credibility that has been built up can be so easily undermined by a part-time blogger. In the latest 2016 Trust Barometer developed by Edelman, a global public relations juggernaut, the Singaporean public was ranked amongst the top few in terms of the degree of trust in its governmental institutions. In the Roy Ngerng case, Justice Lee Seiu Kin noted that Roy Ngerng was "a defendant of modest standing" and did not have the credibility of a leading opposition politician or a traditional newspaper. There was "no evidence of his perceived credibility or the influence he actually wielded." As a result, Justice Lee granted a "substantial reduction" in damages "primarily in view of the comparatively low standing of the defendant". Against such low profile defendants, it would appear that the high trust and credibility reposed in the government would hardly be affected. Perhaps more trust ought to be placed in the Singaporean public in their ability to discern the truth from less-than-credible sources.

The proliferation of social media and online speech will only increase, and one suspects the veil of anonymity afforded by the internet will raise the likelihood of falsehoods and defamatory statements being made. The anonymity of the internet brings about its own challenges in terms of identifying the actual defamer. Rather than use the occasional defamation lawsuit to set an example, which seems untenable in the long run, the better way forward may just lie in more communication and engagement.

In terms of combatting falsehoods, inspiration can be drawn from the American non-partisan and non-profit website *www.factcheck.org*. This website "aims to reduce the level of deception and confusion in US politics" by monitoring the factual accuracy of what has been said. The Singaporean government can create its own version to proactively respond and answer to doubts, uncertainties, and falsehoods. This also has the effect of making the government appear more transparent and less distant, thus securing trust with the populace. It should be noted that the Singapore government currently has a version named *Factually*. Unfortunately, this initiative appears to have died down. After the first post in 2012, the latest post, as of this writing,

was 9 October 2015. Further, an informal poll of over 60 students showed that only three were aware of *Factually*. Evidently, more can be done to promote *Factually* and place it within the public consciousness.

Any website set up by the Singaporean government will naturally run into charges that it is skewed and unfair. A wholesale adoption of the American www. factcheck.org in Singapore is one possibility, although this faces the obvious issue of finding independent funding. The more sustainable long-run solution lies in having a largely well-educated population who are able to exercise critical judgment between the government's views and that of other sources. It is heartening to note that the latest upper secondary Social Studies syllabus has, as one of its considerations, the "need to grow an informed, concerned and participative citizenry" (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2016). However, in order to make informed decisions, more information is needed. Mr Ho Kwon Ping noted in his 2015 Institute of Policy Studies-Nathan Lecture that there is currently unequal access to information, and the government needs to provide more information. In the recent 2016 annual Institute of Policy Studies Singapore Perspectives conference, Minister of Finance Heng Swee Keat stated that the government will provide more data in coming years. Hopefully, the growing openness to sharing data will translate to sharing information with the public and civil society at large too.

Defamation lawsuits brought about by Singaporean politicians have become part of the reputation of the country. While they serve an important purpose, they should only be utilised as a last resort. Communication and engagement, coupled with an informed and participatory citizenry, may lead the way towards ending the use of defamation lawsuits. May the future render such remarks as "Isn't that the place where they sue bloggers if you criticise the government?" outdated and extinct.

Esplanade:
The Show Must Go On

Lin Junkang

"Esplanade is in the red, facing deficit for the first time", headlines splayed across *The Straits Times* on 12 November 2014. At a first glance, readers may be surprised. After all, The Esplanade has been Singapore's iconic performing arts theatre for the past decade and was expected to be a success since it commenced operations in the early 2000s. More importantly, would facing a deficit mean that The Esplanade was a failure? In seeking to answer this question, let us look at the beginning of The Esplanade, to understand why there was a need for it, and what its main objectives were envisioned to be.

THE BEGINNING

The pivotal event credited as a catalyst for the development of The Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay is the 1989 report by the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts. The report suggested various measures to transform Singapore into a culturally vibrant society. In the report, the advisory council also mentioned that although current performing arts venues at that point in time were heavily utilised, they were not of a satisfactory standard for hosting world-class performances due to specific technical deficiencies. Hence, there was a need for a pure performing arts centre, and it came to be known as The Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay.

A HEART-DRIVEN ORGANISATION

The Esplanade was created with primary objectives of (1) promoting performing arts to everybody, thereby increasing the quality of life of its participants and the community; and (2) improving Singapore's cultural vibrance. With these social objectives in mind, The Esplanade also gives back to the community through different avenues – it organises free performing arts events and provides development opportunities to members of the performing arts industry. These and other other community engagement activities form an important part of The Esplanade's activities all year round. The Esplanade is managed by The Esplanade Co Ltd, a not-for-profit organisation, a registered Charity and an Institution of a Public Character.

BALANCING THE BOOKS

To provide a balance between its operating objectives of social contribution and reasonable revenue generation, The Esplanade has to meet a Cost Recovery Rate (CRR) of 50 percent over the long term. The CRR is calculated by dividing the income received (excluding grant monies and government rental subvention) to its expenditure. Being able to meet this key performance indicator is a good sign that The Esplanade can be at least 50 percent self-sufficient while still attaining its primary social objectives as envisioned by the Advisory Council of 1989. It is heartening to know that since The Esplanade's opening in the early 2000s, it has indeed met its long term CRR target of 50 percent so far.

THE ESPLANADE: A SUCCESS STORY?

I would like to put forward the proposition that The Esplanade's success depends not on its ability to avoid deficits, but on the fulfilment of its social objectives. Even though having accounting surpluses may reduce its dependency on government grants, The Esplanade, as a not-for-profit organisation, first and foremost must achieve its main social objectives of promoting performing arts and improving Singapore's cultural vibrancy.

In line with this conception of success for The Esplanade, we will use data taken from the financial statements of The Esplanade, the Singapore Cultural Statistics, and findings from the 2013 National Population Survey on the Arts by the National Arts Council (NAC) to analyse the question of whether The Esplanade has been a success.

ATTENDANCE AT THE ESPLANADE

Attendance is a key figure in finding out if The Esplanade has been successful in promoting performing arts to potential audiences. Comparing the attendance

figures for ticketed and free activities over the Financial Year (FY) 2004 to FY 2015, ticketed attendance increased by 5 percent while attendance for free events increased by 163 percent.

While some may question the low ticketed attendance increase, it may not be that surprising given the calibre of competitors that have entered the industry. The rise of the Integrated Resorts, which have their own performing arts theatre and the Star Performing Arts Theatre signify the increasingly competitive landscape The Esplanade faces. There is a possibility that the increased competition from other performing arts venues has caused The Esplanade to lose popularity amongst some of its target audience.

On the other hand, the vast increase in non-ticketed attendance gives hope that The Esplanade, as a charity, is still a major player in the industry, pulling its own weight against its commercial competitors, while fulfilling its social objectives.

PERFORMING ARTS AT THE ESPLANADE

Performing arts activities are likewise equally important as they offers opportunities for performers and audiences alike to participate in arts, also making Singapore more vibrant.

Over the same period from FY04 to FY15, ticketed activities and free activities grew by 73 percent and 92 percent respectively, a good sign that The Esplanade is putting in effort to increase the vibrancy of Singapore, despite our earlier observation that the attendance for ticketed activities has seen sluggish growth. Taken together, these two data sets strongly support the conclusion that competition has become more intense, since although ticketed activities have increased, The Esplanade sometimes struggles to attract a proportionate increase in ticketed attendance.

Also noteworthy is this – ticketed activities are falling from a peak of 959 in FY11, and non-ticketed activities have also been on the decline since FY13. Organising so many activities on a large scale is no doubt an incredible feat, but The Esplanade has to ensure that the number of activities at least remains consistent or does not decrease too much from its peak. This will help to increase its legitimacy as a charity fulfilling social objectives and encourage further donations. In certain cases, a fall in activities may be justifiable if the

reduced quantity is replaced by increased quality of each activity, thereby increasing the quality of life for its participants. However, it may be difficult to objectively measure such an increase in 'quality' of events.

ENGAGEMENT OF ARTISTS

While attendance focuses on performing arts audiences, we also have to look at The Esplanade's efforts to engage artists, as these efforts will encourage the production of performing arts activities, thereby achieving The Esplanade's social objectives.

Over the period from FY 2004 to FY 2015, the number of artists (local and international) who took part in performing arts activities at The Esplanade decreased from 18,986 to 14,361, a 24 percent decrease. Furthermore, over the same period, the number of international artists who performed at The Esplanade decreased from 3,146 to 1,832 (42 percent). This data lends itself to the possibility that The Esplanade may not have been successful in making Singapore attractive to overseas arts participants.

ENGAGEMENT OF TOURISTS

A possible measure of whether The Esplanade met its objective to promote performing arts to the public is statistics showing its attractiveness to international tourist visits. Data reveals that from a peak of more than 1.8 million tourists who visited The Esplanade in 2004, figures have dropped to about 0.8 million international visitors in 2013 . This suggests that The Esplanade may not have been successful in promoting performing arts to foreign visitors.

A MAJOR ACTOR ON THE SINGAPORE STAGE

While The Esplanade has room to improve in engaging artists and tourists, I believe it is still an important contributor to the arts and cultural scene in Singapore, when comparing some of its figures against Singapore's Cultural Statistics on overall performing arts activities and attendance.

From 2004 to 2014, the non-ticketed activities at The Esplanade made up an average of 40 percent of all non-ticketed performing arts activities in Singapore. The Esplanade has matched Singapore's growth of non-ticketed performing arts activities over these years, with both growth rates largely similar at around 111 percent.

In the area of ticketed performing arts activities, activities at The Esplanade make up about 27 percent of all activities in Singapore over the same period. Also, the growth of ticketed performing arts activities at The Esplanade is vastly higher than that of Singapore in general, at 89 percent compared to Singapore's growth at 24 percent.

However, as mentioned previously, the number of performing arts activities in total held by The Esplanade has been on the decline in recent years. This may be an indication of The Esplanade reaching maximum operating capacity due to a combination of demand and supply factors. These may include physical space constraints and availability of other performing arts venues as credible alternatives. As the Singapore arts scene still has room to develop, it is possible that The Esplanade's quantitative contribution to the arts scene through number of performing arts activities may fall in the future. Therefore, it is crucial for The Esplanade to adapt to the ever-changing landscape and find other ways to contribute meaningfully to the arts scene in Singapore.

Comparing Esplanade's contribution to overall attendance for performing arts events in Singapore as a whole, the data similarly shows The Esplanade making a significant contribution to national figures.

For ticketed attendance, The Esplanade made up about an average of 30 percent of total ticketed attendance in Singapore for the period between 2004 and 2014. However, total ticketed attendance in Singapore is growing at a faster rate of 77 percent as compared to The Esplanade's 5 percent. Thus it is expected that The Esplanade's contribution in this area may fall as time passes.

For non-ticketed attendance, this area is where The Esplanade's contribution is the most significant. The Esplanade contributed an average of over 50 percent of total attendance for such activities in Singapore from the period of 2006 to 2014. In addition, attendance for non-ticketed activities at the Esplanade in 2013 contributed to 76 percent of the audience for non-ticketed performing arts activities in Singapore.

Turning to the latest National Survey on the Arts, we find it arguable that some of the positive findings can be attributed to The Esplanade's contribution

to the Singapore arts scene.

A key finding reflected a greater recognition towards the value of engaging in arts and cultural activities. Appreciation for the arts in general has increased and has been credited for helping its participants become more creative, have a higher quality of life and even giving them a more comprehensive understanding of others who have different backgrounds and cultures. The Esplanade could very well be cited as a contributory factor for the increased appreciation of the arts, as a substantial contributor to our country in terms of holding performing arts events and drawing audiences to these performing arts events held at The Esplanade.

The arts have also become more accessible to Singaporeans regardless of their income level. There was an increase in participation of arts events amongst people from lower income groups. The Esplanade could be a key contributing factor to this development as it has been offering a wide range of non-ticketed performing arts activities consistently since its incorporation.

ESPLANADE, AN ICON?

On the whole, I am convinced that The Esplanade has been generally success-ful in promoting performing arts in Singapore and contributing substantially to Singapore's vibrancy. However, as the competition amongst performing arts venues heat up, The Esplanade has to reassess its strategic positioning amidst an ever-changing competitive landscape. Areas The Esplanade can look into include higher artist engagement and continuing to remain attractive to

audiences regardless of their financial capability or nationality.

With the right effort and intention, I sincerely believe that The Esplanade can become a crown jewel in the performing arts sector, and an icon of enduring legacy on the global city stage.

On Local Fashion Brands

Emilyn Phang

Hollie Dawson

FASHIONISTAS OR FASHION FOLLOWERS?

F ashion in Singapore has always been a topic for debate not just among locals but also foreigners, whether they are currently residing here or are tourists passing through. Some blame the summer weather here for the casual shorts, singlets and flip-flops that are commonplace. Of course, while we see such dressing on a daily basis, there are also days that we dress to impress. This brings us to an interesting question: are Singaporeans fashionistas or fashion followers?

Writing in the Urban section of *The Straits Times*, Sue Evans, a senior catwalks editor of London-based trend forecaster WGSN, highlights that Singaporeans are more 'fashion followers' than 'fashionistas'. This mentality is evinced by Singaporeans choosing to spend thousands of dollars on internationally-branded bags over a unique bag from a local designer that costs only a few hundred dollars, despite the possibility of getting a higher value for every dollar spent. It would seem as if Singaporean consumers were followers, but yet the myriad of unique Singaporean design labels juxtaposes that proposition. At the risk of over-generalising, we wanted to give a tentative answer to that question.

In summary, we think local designers – an intrepid lot – are attempting to build localised brands of fashion, but prevailing industry conditions, such as competition with international brands, deter many from being seen or heard. Importantly, consumer receptiveness – most apparent among Singaporean customers – is lukewarm to local designs, preferring to stick with international trends, and therefore international brands. Therefore, the interplay between such market agents has certainly muted bolder voices amongst Singaporean designers, who understand the need to cater to worldwide trends to encourage demand. While the situation is improving, as a whole Singaporeans are more fashion followers than fashionistas.

DECONSTRUCTING THE SINGAPOREAN FASHION SCENE

If there was a dictator speaking on behalf of all Singaporeans, then the answer – whether fashionistas or fashion followers – would be forthcoming. However, fashion trends are not a product of consensus but rather written by the invisible hand of the market. It is these agents – consumers and designers – and their choices that define the Singaporean fashion scene. We will speak about these two groups in turn.

There has been a proliferation of Singaporean designers in recent decades – Love, Bonito; Raoul; and Charles & Keith, to name a few – whether for high-street or luxury markets. High-street clothing, or mass market clothing, refers to clothing that is designed for mass production and distribution. On the other hand, luxury clothing refers to clothing that has a price premium over that of high-street clothing, marketed under brands that are perceived to be more prestigious than high-street ones.

It is difficult to generalise what the Singapore brand of fashion is. James Fatt, in his article *Encouraging Fashion Entrepreneurs in Singapore* argued that "Singapore designers… have stronger visibility as a group rather than as individuals setting up on their own.". Yet, we think this may be a dated notion, with the Singaporean government investing more in the domestic fashion industry. These investments have culminated in events such as Economic Development Board's (EDB) fashion shows that give new and existing designers the opportunity to get the necessary media coverage they require to gain more recognition. Singaporean fashion is increasingly being defined by individual designers rather than just being 'from Singapore' – important for building a vibrant and diverse local fashion scene.

However, while Singapore is home to numerous retail brands, there is a severe lack of excitement among consumers – whether domestic or otherwise – over a 'Singapore design'. Part of the issue is a lack of brand visibility. Even as we wrote this essay, we asked ourselves how many local designers we could name off the top of our heads. The answer was unimpressive – relative to the international brands, the number of local designers we could name was almost insignificant. Yet for most fashion brands it is not just visibility that matters, but brand prestige too, especially for luxury brands. Even for visible Singaporean brands, building brand prestige among local consumers – an

important stepping stone into the wider global market – is a tough sell.

In order to categorise the Singaporean scene, it is important to understand what our definition of fashionista is: an industry can be considered as trendsetting if other designers imitate their paradigms. However, fashion, as with other creative arts, is syncretic: reinterpretation and refinement are the norm, and it is difficult to say with precision where peculiar trends originated from. To address this, we will use a looser sense of the word 'fashionista' and take company success also into account: in a highly competitive marketplace, a successful fashion company is also likely to be an influential (but not necessarily original) fashion brand.

Opinions are very subjective, but a workable methodology can be fashioned. Firstly, we will examine the state of the local industry, since the Singaporean market is a stepping stone for local designers into the global one; any Singaporean brands must have first started locally before venturing outwards. Secondly, we explain the dynamics of competition in the fashion industry and how it may deter more original designs; chiefly, consumer choice will be examined. Lastly, we briefly identify Singapore's comparative advantages in fashion design in relation to international ones – possible ways to become fashionistas in the future.

SINGAPOREAN SUCCESS STORIES

As with the rest of the world, the majority of the burgeoning Singaporean fashion scene comprises of high-street clothing lines. The archetypical brand tends to be managed by young entrepreneurs who started from sourcing clothing from overseas distributors, then taking the initiative to understand the market and creating their own design companies. Some examples include Love, Bonito, Tracyeinny and the Willow Label – three online clothing brands. Online shopping represents just one prong of their strategy; such entrepreneurs also seize the opportunity to expand to regional markets in Southeast Asia in order to capture a greater market share. These brands serve as guiding examples for a new generation of designers.

What, then, of luxury brands? Most of these, such as Ong Shunmugan, succeeded internationally before returning to home ground. This was not lost on Odile Benjamin, creative director of home-grown fashion and leather goods brand Raoul, who stated plainly that "it is a fact that only after people

in Singapore started seeing us in European stores that they actually started taking Raoul seriously." It would seem that unlike high-street fashion, of which brand prestige may not be a crucial factor, bespoke designers cannot hope to expand outwards from the domestic market and can only do the reverse. There is no sign that this state of affairs is changing any time soon.

Apart from these success stories, however, there is a dearth of commentary on Singaporean fashion brands that have failed; therefore, it is unclear if different factors affect Singaporean companies as opposed to international ones. Similarly, it is unclear whether there are fewer home-grown brands in Singapore relative to other countries. The only definitive conclusion that can be drawn is that there has been an exponential increase of successful companies in the last 30 years.

COMPETE ABROAD OR STRUGGLE AT HOME

Nevertheless, it is possible to identify globalist pressures that deter the growth of local brands. With Western designers setting up branches in Singapore, it is difficult for less-established local talent to compete on the same level. This is compounded by the increasing competition from Asian designers who are also making their mark on the Singapore fashion industry. One example is Uniqlo from Japan, which has opened its largest store in the region in Singapore.

Such competition is to be expected, with Singapore being seen as a 'regional fashion hub' in Southeast Asia: the massive range of high-end and high-street stores in Singapore can attest to that. Singapore's fashion week is the only event in Southeast Asia to showcase global industry icons alongside local and regional talent. The potential outreach of Singapore's Fashion Week was increased vastly by being streamed live so that anyone anywhere in the world could view the procession as if they were seated in the front row. Furthermore, domestic shoppers draw one of the highest incomes per capita in Asia; this means Singaporeans have the requisite purchasing power to buy luxury items. Finally, being one of the world's top tourist cities, the talent on display can reach a wide audience not just in Singapore, but from across the world.

However, the notoriously fickle-minded Singaporean – people who are "not the most loyal of consumers" (Ranasinghe, 2013) – is a big issue as brand prestige and visibility is hard to maintain amongst domestic shoppers. Even

Chanel, by all counts an internationally reputable brand, had to take bold steps to showcase its latest collection by setting up a glitzy pop-up store in Marina Bay Sands. The maintenance of Chanel's brand in Singapore is ever-constant, as seen by Chanel's efforts to expand their customer base by moving into designs that are associated with travelling, and starting boutiques across the island each carrying different selections of merchandise. New entrants therefore find it difficult to overcome these barriers to entry and to make their mark.

One key way of reducing these barriers is to provide "sufficient channels for young designers to display their designs"; yet, big retailers are unwilling to allow small local designers to utilise their storefronts, who are then faced with immediate issues of how to gain visibility in a saturated market. In such a cut-throat industry, an unsurprising phenomenon is the acquisition of local designs by bigger companies to stifle competition. New designers are snapped up by bigger ones and their products are marketed under the international brand. Smaller designers therefore do not have the chance to advertise their talent, especially if they do not have sufficient financial resources. Unfortunately, the maxim 'it is not what you know, but who you know' is taken to the extreme in the fashion world – connections with known designers, fashion journalists and influencers are paramount.

This is not to say that local designers have no home-ground advantage. The Singaporean Textile and Fashion Federation (TAFF) is playing a key role in developing local design talent, with a focus on designers who want to expand abroad. Developing communication, financial, and logistical infrastructure have been their most recent focus, but their operations are also broadening into the entrepreneural side of the industry. This seems to be led by the increasing numbers of Singaporeans becoming fashion conscious, pushing fashion designers to come up with new and edgy pieces, and setting up their own boutiques.

Ultimately, the biggest problem stems not from logistics, the lack of know-how, or brand awareness, but from domestic consumer appetites which remain skewed in favour of international brands. According to Nielsen, one-third of Singaporeans are partial to local new products, compared to 40 percent globally . This bias against 'made in Singapore' products is even more acute for burgeoning luxury brands, which must solve a paradox – to build brand prestige it must charge a premium over high-street clothing, but such a price premium is only justified if its prestige is recognised in the first place. In this

kind of market, it is no wonder why originality is discouraged: 61 percent of Singaporeans would rather wait for a proof-of-concept before trying novel products themselves.

However, Singaporean consumers are maturing quickly and are "mov[ing] away from just the logo", a sure sign for local designers of better days to come.

EXPLOITING DESIGN OPPORTUNITIES

Apart from changing consumer preferences, how else can Singaporean designers build a unique niche in the global fashion industry? Retaining the Singaporean component of any brand is difficult when we consider the high demand for vibrant and creative designers across the world; talented designers might decide to migrate and bring their companies along with them into other key markets such as Europe or America. Nevertheless, we think Singapore's locality provides at least two venues worthy of exploration – Muslim-catered fashion and online shopping.

The greater Southeast Asian market – at the doorsteps of Singapore – is radically different in its sensibilities from its Western counterparts. This difference is quite literally a superficial one: the large Muslim population in Indonesia and Malaysia has relatively more conservative preferences for clothing. There is certainly demand for such designs that are appropriate for Muslims, highlighted by Siti Aisyah, the mind behind rising fashion brand By Harmoni: "The modern Muslim woman is no longer limited to the plain shawl or *abaya*. She is seen layered in abstract shawls, *kaftans* and palazzo pants while living within the parameters of Islam".

Western designers have a poor grasp of such sensibilities, as exemplified by Pierre Berge's – co-founder of Yves Saint Laurent – statement that designers "should have nothing to do with Islamic fashion… [and should] not collaborate with this dictatorship which imposes this abominable thing by which we hide women and make them live a hidden life". Gross misunderstandings on the nature of beauty and self-expression aside, the refusal by Western designers to engage with the Muslim consumer also represents an opportunity to fill a niche for the fearless designer. Unlike Western designers, Singaporean designers are better positioned to respond to such shifts in the fashion industry

given Singapore's multicultural environment and geographical proximity in the Southeast Asian region.

An example of a brand that is tapping on growing Muslim customer base is Singaporean brand Sufyaa, a clothing label which caters to Muslim women. Sufyaa hit a $1 million turnover after only three years of its launch, and their designs have been shipped across borders to the UK, Australia, and Sweden, amongst others. The demand for such designs is set to grow, with a recent report from Thomson Reuters State of the Global Islamic Economy projecting Muslims spending US$327 billion on clothing by 2020.

Another opportunity is the advent of online shopping. In inter-connected Singapore today, such technologies have a disproportionate effect, contributing to vacancy rates among traditional brick-and-mortar retailers in Orchard Road soaring to a five-year high. One such platform is Singapore-based iFashion Group which offers "a range of B2B and mentorship services from logistics, warehousing, production and financial services to sales fulfilment," for new up-and-coming designers.. However, Singaporean designers must be conscious of their demographic appeal and use the appropriate platforms, whether they are targeting young consumers, who are more likely to shop online, or older shoppers who aren't as receptive. Furthermore, experts point to the limited impact of such technologies on luxury products. Ms Lynette Lee, CEO of TAFF, highlighted "a re-emergence of appreciation for craftsmanship and bespoke services" amongst some shoppers, an experience that cannot be replicated online.

WHITHER LOCAL BRANDS?

We return to the question: are Singaporeans fashionistas or fashion followers? On a balance, we venture a tentative answer that Singaporeans are more fashion followers than not. Singapore designers are a growing lot, but face many pressures – within, from domestic consumer preferences, and without, from international brands – that limit their originality in design. As put by Sabrina Goh, Singapore-based designer: "Singapore is small, but crowded with many brands. It is very hard to stand out and find loyal customers." Furthermore, domestic consumer preferences clearly show a preference towards proven or

certain concepts, and brands that are globally prestigious. While Singapore has been known for its food and unique 'language', there remains a shortfall in consumer confidence on local fashion designers and brands. It is difficult to argue to the contrary against such clear evidence.

Nevertheless, current efforts to promote design and artistic appreciation are a step in the right direction. However, we feel there is a need for more to be done to help local designers; perhaps we need to take a deeper look at

how local fashion brands are valued by Singapore customers. Surely, if foreigners can see the value and quality of a local brand, Singaporeans should be able to as well. Singapore needs to encourage and support its budding designers in order to break into this ever-competitive industry. Can we truly eradicate this issue and thereby become a better testing stage for our designers, both local and foreign? The jury's out on this one.

In Praise of Paris Fashion

Aude Bertrand

Charlotte Lamboley

When it comes to fashionable and stylish cities, Paris ranks at the top of the list. Indeed, Paris is known for being *très chic* mainly because of its numerous and famous designers such as Coco Chanel, Christian Dior, Yves Saint Laurent, and many more. Paris is a real-life catwalk. Anywhere in the city, you can catch a glimpse of fancy clothing on people strutting down the streets. The main reason for this is that Paris has a history as the city of fashion, the city where everything started, a couple of centuries ago. In Singapore and in Asia, it is not quite the same. Admittedly, Asia, and especially Japan, is the leader of the anti-fashion trend. And, Singapore is one of the most fashionable cities on earth. However, true Parisians will find themselves missing their everyday catwalk. Singapore is not an unfashionable city, far from it, but it lacks its own style, its own 'fanciness'. Asia's style feels quite bland. Nevertheless, it seems to be spreading all over the world, threatening the allegedly bright future of Parisian fashion.

When I first arrived in Singapore, I did not miss bread and cheese right away. What I missed the most, and what I am still missing today, is looking at people and simply enjoying the way they dress. It probably seems silly, but in Paris, one does not have to buy that many fashion magazines. Just walking in the streets and looking at people is enough to get inspired and to know about the new fashion trends. Admittedly, Singapore is the eighth most fashionable city in the world, but it is not the same. Why is that? Because, of course, Paris is one of the 'Big Four' fashion capitals of the world – the three others being New York, London and Milan. But to me, it is mainly because Paris fashion has this *je ne sais quoi* that gives it the edge over the other three fashion capitals.

Parisian air is filled with a fashion fragrance. First, the capital city stands out for its never-ending (and famous) shopping streets. Boulevard Haussmann, Avenue George V, and Rue Faubourg Saint Honoré are no secret among the fashion-forward. There is a real architecture of fashion in Paris. The streets are designed around fashion. Wherever one might wander, there will always be some kind of boutique. A real Parisian has her 'spot'. It can be the Marais for the hipster, Le Bon Marché for the most sophisticated, or the Citadium for the yuppie. Anyway, if one asks random Parisians on the streets where to

get the new hit bag, they will not only give you a whole list of boutiques but also precious tips about where to get the best price, where to get THE hit bag. Parisians may not be the friendliest people in the world, but when it comes to fashion, everything changes. That is the magic of Parisian fashion.

Another interesting fact about Parisian fashion is its history. Unlike New York, London or Milan, Paris has been fashionable for several centuries. Even Émile Zola, a famous French writer of the 20th century, dedicated a whole novel to Parisian style (entitled *Au Bonheur des Dames* or "Making Ladies' Happiness"). As such, Paris stands out even in a list of fashion capitals.

This historical trend continues to hold true and to be honed, with fashion-centric activities like the Parisian fashion week. This is the most hectic week of all, mainly because France, and Paris in particular, will forever be the instigators and trendsetters of *haute couture* with countless world-famous designers such as Christian Dior, Coco Chanel, Yves Saint Laurent, Pierre Balmain, etc. There is a real fashion culture in the City of Lights.

Museums are also committed to fashion. For instance, last summer, the Grand Palais hosted an exhibition highlighting Jean Paul Gaultier's greatest achievements, showing off his most beautiful creations. It exposed unprecedented creations from the designer's *haute couture* and ready-to-wear collections between 1970 and 2013. Sketches, archives, costumes, sneak peeks from movies, dance shows or TV shows could also be seen. Overall, this exhibition was a tribute to the French touch in fashion.

Last but not least, Paris is so trendy that any fashion addict works to imitate the Parisian style, so much so that a real market around Parisian style has developed. For example, Anne Berest, Audrey Diwan, Caroline de Maigret and Sophie Mas, four Parisian stylish women (and friends), explain what it really means to be a 'Parisienne' today, how they dress, entertain, have fun and attempt to behave themselves, in a hilarious book entitled *How to be Parisian Wherever You Are*. Indeed, French and Parisian brands have expanded all over the globe. So whether in New York, London, Rio, Sydney, Tokyo or Singapore, fashion addicts will be able to enjoy a shopping session in a Sandro, Dior or the Kooples shop.

However, though Parisian fashion can be found everywhere, it does not mean that people all over the globe dress in a Parisian way. Take the SMU campus for instance. According to Pan Wangping, an exchange student from Shanghai, "Simplicity is the best policy. Students of both sexes wear T-shirts,

jeans, and sneakers. Functional and comfortable, this outfit also keeps our legs warm during lessons in air-conditioned classrooms. Topped off with a hoodie or cardigan, we are good to go!" Hence, the key in SMU is not to be fashionable but to be comfortable and not freeze during classes. On the contrary, in my home school, the vast majority of the students think about how they dress every day. It is not because as a French or as a Parisian, it is a duty to dress well, but because students enjoy being fashionable, so much so that they have developed a student organisation around fashion called *Talons Aiguilles* ("High Heels"). It is one of the largest clubs in my school mainly due to its fashion week and its catwalk.

To sum up, fashion runs in the blood of Parisians. Paris is the city of lights, the city of love, the city of the Eiffel Tower, but above all Paris is the city of style.

Although Paris has been the city of glamour and fashion for several centuries now, Japan entered the competition and initiated in the 80s a new movement called 'the anti-fashion trend'. The famous and legendary Japanese designer Yohji Yamamoto devoted all his energy to this new definition of fashion and how to be trendy. The anti-fashion trend aimed at bringing a rebellious attitude towards Parisian fashion and more globally European fashion, overthrowing the rules of fashion. This new trend has really challenged the existing norms, mixing ideas and choosing freedom. Indeed, the Japanese style has no rules or boundaries. A striking example is Hara-Juku district representing the casual and 'anti-fashion style' in Tokyo. The creation of three main phenomena in the district is seen as a major movement and has attracted fashion leaders from all over the globe.

The first phenomenon, called *Takenoko-zoku*, was initiated by dancing groups wearing bright and colourful costumes, very different from typical fashion. This fresh and new trend allowed people to deviate from the social fashion standards and wear clothes with an obvious lack of taste.

The second one named *Gyaru* dominated the Japanese society in the 90s and was developed by a subgroup of teenage girls who played on the schoolgirl image wearing miniskirts, knee-high socks, loafer shoes with careful makeup, dyed brown hair and expensive brand-name bags or accessories, from the likes of Louis Vuitton and Coach. These girls loved to wear the school uniforms in a very uncommon way. Consequently, they inspired companies to begin mass-producing similar articles. They also helped shape cultural trends in Japan and convey trends such as the cellular phone industry.

The third anti-fashion trend, created between 1998 and 2000, called "Lolita or Gothic Lolita", represents one of the most well-known contemporary Japanese subcultures in the world. Like Gyaru, the Lolita style opposes social standards and imposed codes. However, Gothic Lolita stands against schools and is indifferent to all kinds of attention. What is more, unlike *Gyaru*, the Lolita lives peacefully and aloof, in its own dream world with a severe detachment from reality. This extremely infantile style was inspired first by the Western culture, such as the Rococo in France or the universe of *Alice in Wonderland*, and secondly by the Japanese culture that features *cosplay* and *manga*, while adding a gothic and punk touch.

These three anti-fashion trends have achieved a strong presence in foreign media and have turned the district of Hara-Juku in Tokyo into a one-of-a-kind touristic place. Furthermore, the movement has managed to influence Paris where, for example, many girls can be seen imitating Lolita and Gothic Lolita style in Japan Expo and Tokyo Crazy Kawaii.

There is no denying that the continuing success of designers such as Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo, and Yohji Yamamoto has compelled Paris and New York to recognise Tokyo as a place of design and creation in the fashion industry. In fact, Asia is not just reproducing designs conceived by the West but it is also facing its own aesthetic challenge.

This "uncool" movement started in Japan, and especially Tokyo, has become the new cool and has spread all over the world. It means that fashion today, ironically, is more anti-fashion than ever. As a Parisian, that is exactly what I experienced when I came to Singapore in December. For instance, every student at the university carries on a backpack while in Paris every girl chooses to wear a Longchamp, Michael Kors or Vanessa Bruno handbag. Moreover, I was really astonished when I realised that in Asia, Hello Kitty was not just for children, with the cat enjoyed by adults in all manner of fashion accessories including shoes, bags, wallet and mobile phone accessories. Also, in Singapore, the trendy look of the summer seems to be 'culottes' or 'mom jeans' with a high-waist and loose fit inspired from the 90s worn with platforms to appear taller. To me though, and to most of the Parisian women, it does not look glamourous at all.

If the anti-fashion trend is winning over Paris, New York and the world of fashion in general, does it mean that Paris is soon to be dethroned? Is a world without fashion possible? Nowadays, I feel like fashion is not the to-go trend.

More and more people feel like what is important is feeling comfortable in your body and in your clothes, rather than being stylish. This is echoed in the views of Pan Wangping, the exchange student from Shanghai who said that "simplicity is the best policy" and believes that the most important was for an outfit to be "functional and comfortable". How did we come to that? What changed over the years, apart from the birth of the anti-fashion movement?

First, our mindsets have changed. Society does not look at bodies and clothes the same way it used to. Of course, they still have an impact on how one sees oneself and each other. We cannot deny the fact that fashion, clothes, and body shapes matter. However, they are not as important as they used to be, thanks to new awareness campaigns. For instance, plus-size models are shattering the norms of modelling and changing the way we perceive fashion. There is no shame in having love handles anymore. This has even made its way into the *zeitgeist* with popstars like Beyoncé claiming through her hits *Flawless, I woke up like this* or even *Pretty hurts*, that everybody is beautiful in their own way, and that no one should be ashamed of who they are or what they look like. As long as you are comfortable with the way you look, with yourself, you are beautiful. Hence, fashion is not what makes people beautiful anymore. There are no rules, no boundaries as far as fashion is concerned. The only rule is to be true to oneself. So one must wonder if fashion is indeed dead.

Admittedly, there are still fashion weeks, and fashion magazines that claim to define the new trends. But nobody is really following them anymore, and in fact creators themselves, through their collections, are telling their customers and followers to experiment with the fashion rules, create their own, and discover their own style. When you look at the new Chanel collection, every outfit is so different from the previous one that one cannot find a pattern. It seems like there is no logical thread that unifies the designs. And that is what fashion is really about nowadays. It is a sort of mix-and-match trend. The new fashion is about doing whatever you feel like doing, wearing whatever makes you feel beautiful and comfortable when you look at yourself in the mirror in the morning. Thus, the anti-fashion movement seems, paradoxically, to have conquered the world of fashion itself, and consequently to have dethroned Paris. Maybe Parisian fashion today is more an art, a culture; and we can learn more about it through exhibitions, such as the aforementioned one on Jean-Paul Gaultier's journey.

However, it should be noted that Paris has been a leader in fashion for

several centuries whereas Asian fashion has just spawned, so it may just be a matter of beginner's luck. In fact, though Japan has influenced the way we look at fashion, the role of fashion in our everyday life, it has not dethroned Parisian style in any way. Indeed, Singapore, while fond of the Japanese fashion culture, is still influenced by Paris. Just walk down Orchard Road and you will be convinced. Hermès, Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Dior, are all standing there high and proud. Moreover, the most famous Singaporean brand, Charles and Keith, translates the ideals of Parisian *maroquinerie* (leather goods). Even the iconic Singapore girl is dressed in nothing other than the Balmain-designed *sarong kebaya*. Hence, the most nationalist brands in Singapore are still influenced by Parisian designers, Parisian trends. That is the reason why, I do not believe in the end of Parisian fashion. Paris is too critical to fashion to be dethroned. After all, Paris is the city where it all started, centuries ago.

Nevertheless, as globalisation is affecting the way we communicate, it is also affecting the way we dress. While in the past centuries, it was almost impossible to know how people in Asia were dressing while living in Paris, today just looking at your Snapchat history or Facebook feed can tell you what the new trends are all over the globe. In other words, what has really changed is not that the anti-fashion movement has reduced the clout of Parisian fashion, but that technologies and new ways of communication have allowed different fashion trends to overlap and collide. In the future, Paris will still be the go-to place when talking about fashion (or cuisine for that matter), but it will be influenced by foreign cultures, so that maybe Parisian fashion will just reflect a world fashion more than the French touch.

Fashion, just like anything else (economy, language, culture, etc.) cannot evade the phenomenon of globalisation. As borders become increasingly lower and barriers to foreign people and businesses more permeable, there is a tendency to be influenced by what is happening beyond them. As a result, inevitably, Paris no longer sits on the indisputable throne of fashion. Other trends and anti-trends have spread their wings globally, like the anti-fashion trend we largely discussed earlier. However, Parisian style still takes centre stage. Paradoxically, growing globalisation and inter-connection has given way to the resurgence of the sense of belonging, the need to remember one's roots. Therefore, Parisian style is switching gear – from ephemeral fashion it has become eternal tradition. No longer a trend, it has become an heirloom.

Singapore reflects this resurgence in its own way. Though Singaporean

people do not understand Parisian style, they still admire it and nourish its irrefutable influence. It was interesting coming to Singapore, and living in a place where fashion is not always in the air. It was a one-of-a-kind experience.

At first, it felt strange being part of a minority, the happy few who live for fashion, but in the end, it felt also quite liberating. It is fun sometimes to be the one standing out.

Standing Up for the Greybeards

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Darren Lim

Ella Lim

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FIFTY YEARS OF GREY

Singapore's Golden Jubilee was a joyous occasion to celebrate how far we have traversed as a nation-state in the past 50 years. Yet as Singapore looks toward the next half-century of its independence, challenges loom on the horizon. One such challenge is the rapid greying of our population. Longer life expectancies and a low birth rate have led to the likelihood that a significant portion of the population will be the elderly. The 2013 Population White Paper projects that 900,000 of the baby boomers born from 1947 to 1964 will be in their silver years by 2030. Put differently, almost one-fifth of its five million citizens will be elderly.

This essay focuses on the implications of ageist attitudes in a aging society and workforce. 'Ageism' is generally understood to be a concept that describes acts of discrimination on the sole basis of or significantly related to a person's age. Professor Bussarawan Puk, a professor in SMU's School of Social Sciences, whose many research interests include aging and the life course, threw some light on the concept. Professor Puk posits that at the basic level, it could be "human nature to discriminate" and "ageism is no exception". Consequently, it comes as no surprise that ageist attitudes are present in almost all societies.

A bleak picture is painted at this juncture – what we can do to prevent ageism in Singapore might be limited if we frame it as an inherently natural phenomenon. However, is ageism an insurmountable form of bias?

In this essay, we argue that while ageism is difficult to overcome, it can be done. This essay will proceed in two parts. Firstly, we explain why eradicating ageism is important: so as to maintain the principles of meritocracy and inclusivity in Singapore's society. Secondly, we engage in a comparative analysis of governmental policies and civil initiatives in the United Kingdom and Japan to propose a simple two-pronged approach towards combatting ageism: the

realignment of views through greater participation of the elderly, and the reinforcement of legal safeguards against ageist discrimination. Ultimately, we hope to derive learning points from their experiences and to create a list of suggestions that our nation could potentially adopt.

IRONING OUT AGEIST WRINKLES

In 2014, our local football league (the S-League) made a widely-panned decision to implement age restriction rules that prevented the clubs from employing more than five players over the age of 30. The 'oldies' from the affected age group were naturally incensed as their livelihoods were threatened by this very development. Fortunately for the affected athletes, the *brouhaha* and public backlash that ensued applied sufficient pressure on the top brass to scrap these proposed changes, albeit at the eleventh hour. This is a textbook case of ageism – the rule change, intentionally or unintentionally, discriminated on the basis of the athletes' ages. Although the affected footballers in this fiasco did not satisfy the looser sense of the word 'old', the footballers are seen to be 'old' as they were at the twilight of their sporting careers.

Despite such public condemnation, why does ageism have such an enduring presence in societies? There are various reasons. Professor Puk deftly suggests a psychological explanation – that it might be due to 'terror management'. According to Professor Puk, ageism may result from the tendency of the elderly to arouse thoughts of the inevitability of death or frailty. According to this theory of 'terror management', we put up defences in response to these surfacing thoughts by instinctively distancing ourselves from the elderly; these defences may often manifest as ageism. Another more practical reason prevalent amongst companies as offered by Mr Victor Mills, the head of the Singapore International Chamber of Commerce, was the unsubstantiated view that older job applicants were "stuck in their own ways" and "unwilling to adapt". These expectations that the older applicants embody such characteristics would inevitably facilitate the creation of self-fulfilling prophecies.

The uproar that followed the S-League rule changes was a welcome response. Ageist mindsets diametrically oppose the vaunted ideals that our society is premised on – that of meritocracy and inclusivity. These two fundamental reasons are why we should eradicate any vestiges of ageist attitudes

within our society.

First, subscribing to ageist policies inherently contradicts our position on meritocracy. Donald Low, a public intellectual in Singapore, has noted that meritocracy is a "core principle of governance" that guides planning and attitudes in Singapore. If we believe in a meritocracy that fiercely advocates equality of opportunity for all, then there is no rationale for ageist attitudes. This is especially so if it could be shown that people of advanced ages are able to do a reasonably competent job when compared to their younger counterparts, or even surpass them at their craft.

For example, Aleksandar Duric, one of our most celebrated local footballers, plied his trade in the S-league until the ripe age of 44; he defied expectations by having his most productive seasons after his athletic prime. The point that can be distilled is that age is not concomitant to a person's competence – Mr Duric's physical fitness, presumably, might not be on par with his younger peers; however, the intimate knowledge of tactical schemes, accrual of experience and finesse over his long career helped him overcome the obvious disadvantages imposed on him by Father Time.

Secondly, the need to be an inclusive society cannot be understated. In his 2014 President's Address, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong outlined the Government's vision of a "fair and inclusive society, where every citizen has a rightful place and the opportunity to fulfil his or her aspirations". A growing number of civil movements have geared us towards achieving this goal. However, unlike other movements advocating inclusion on all fronts, activism on ageism in Singapore only focuses myopically on employment practices. Throngs of local commentaries and political opinions focus solely on eliminating ageism at the workplace and the further integration of the older population into the workforce.

It bears reiterating that inclusiveness encompasses more than inclusion within the workforce; there is a need for social traction in dealing with the discrimination that happens beyond the workplace. Instances such as where the elderly is rejected from interest-free credit, car or travel insurance because of their age; or receiving lower quality service at restaurants because of organisational attitudes towards older people; or in healthcare resulting in complications in diagnosis and treatment. These scenarios are but just the tip of an iceberg.

The peculiar case of Peter Day is illustrative of the presence of the

pervasiveness of ageism. Mr Day, then 59, applied to his bank to extend the term of his mortgage. The British national wanted to lower his monthly repayments to help him pay for the wedding of his daughter. Surprisingly, the rejection from the bank came swiftly without an assessment of his healthy credit rating and strong financial standing to repay the loan; the bank had cursorily dismissed Mr Day's application based purely on the assumption that he was a credit risk because of his age. Fortunately, the public authorities subsequently overruled the bank's acts. This whole debacle provided an insight into the institutional and/or insidious forms of discrimination that happens on a daily basis.

REALIGNING AND REINFORCING ATTITUDES

Returning to our dialogue with Professor Puk, we posed one final parting question – is it possible to change ageist attitudes? Professor Puk, leaned back in her chair, deliberated for a moment before expressing an optimistic but cautious view:

> "A change cannot come overnight but the design of various social policies and legislation will incrementally shape mindsets."

To tackle ageism, there is an inevitable need for shifts in the ingrained perception of the elderly. To engender this change, we came up with a two-pronged approach – the 2Rs – that has been derived from the careful consideration of the strategies implemented in the UK and Japan.

First, we have to *realign* our views on ageing. To achieve this goal, a society needs to have increased civic and institutional participation in this battle against ageism.

Ibasho, a Japanese non-profit enterprise, is an extremely successful example of an organisation shining the spotlight on ageism. Instead of addressing the issue of ageism head-on, Ibasho creatively attempts to convert attitudes indirectly by showing how the elderly could make valuable contributions: only elders run the Ibasho cafés that act as headquarters for their disaster relief and other various social programmes. Ibasho adopts this creative approach to convert ageist attitudes by adhering to the ethos of seeing "elders as assets" and "as part of the solution".

The effect of this approach is two-fold. As previously mentioned, societal

perceptions of the elderly undergo incremental changes when we acknowledge their contributions. In addition, by entrusting the elderly with responsibilities, it empowers the elderly and leads to their own subconscious absorption of positive stereotypes about old age. Singapore, learning from Ibasho, could intensify its efforts by incorporating the elderly in meaningful social endeavours to realise and demonstrate their worth.

Secondly, we need to *reinforce* changing perceptions via the mandatory compliance of legislation. The difficulty, however, is that Singapore's current ageism laws are entirely deficient. The only identifiable form of legislation, the Retirement and Re-employment Act, is intended for a singular purpose – to provide employees with protection against age discrimination in the workplace. It does not have the breadth of reach compared to the statutory framework developed in the UK; for example, the Equality Act applies to ageism suffered whether as a consumer for goods and services or a patient in healthcare. We think the continued success of attitudinal and behavioural change significantly depends on a comprehensive legal framework; therefore, a revision of our ageism laws is warranted.

CHANGING MINDSETS

The world is in the middle of a rapid transition towards significantly older populations. An excerpt in the UN's 2013 World Population Ageing report encapsulates this point perfectly:

> "At the root of the process of [global] population ageing is the exceptionally rapid increase in the number of older persons, a consequence of the high birth rates of the early and middle portions of the twentieth century and the increasing proportions of people reaching old age."

In this rapidly aging world, we cannot condone ageist attitudes. We explained why such attitudes contradict the ideals of meritocracy and inclusivity in Singaporean society, and therefore must be eradicated. Furthermore, we think that this can be done on two fronts: by realigning social views through greater participation of the elderly in civil and institutional initiative, and the reinforcement of Singapore's currently deficient laws against ageist discrimination.

Nevertheless, we recognise that our recommendation cannot be the

silver bullet to ageist biases that have always existed in all societies. If Singapore is to truly become a tolerant and inclusive society for all, the change requires the participation of each and every citizen. And what better place to start than with the elders amongst us all – our grandfathers and grandmothers, our nation's pioneers, and the many others that form the bedrock upon which our society is founded.

Dogs for the Aged?

Lim Dao Qing

Mackenzie Schmidt

Many developed countries including Singapore are experiencing slow or declining population growth rates. Life expectancy in these countries is rising due to improvements in healthcare, more active lifestyles, better eating habits, and higher living standards and quality of life. This trend of people living longer coupled with declining birth rates means the proportion of elderly people in the population increases in relation to the young who must support the elderly.

In this essay, we propose a solution to some of the issues that can arise from this trend: dogs for the elderly. To do so, we look first at aging trends and the problems arising from an aging population. Next, we turn to how dogs can improve health and reduce stress among the elderly in Singapore.

ACHES AND PAINS

Japan provides us a peek into the future if current aging population trends continue. Bajekal (2015) notes that in 2014 the number of Japanese newborns fell to one million; less than the 1.3 million registered deaths. This means Japan's population is shrinking. The Japanese government projects that by 2060, two-fifths of Japan's population will be over the age of 65.

Japan sees an increased occurrence of physical, social and psychological issues as its population ages. Common physical health problems faced by the aged include the weakening of muscular strength, bone strength, and immunity functions. Most of these problems can be delayed through regular physical activities. More pressing health problems including high blood-pressure levels are prevalent among the Japanese elderly. Further, social issues such as loneliness resulting from isolation afflict many elderly people especially after a spouse dies and children move out to start their own families. In addition, psychological issues such as anxiety disorders affect 3.8 percent of the elderly population.

Countries facing these challenges are seeking and testing out solutions. But it is an uphill battle. Japan, where the elderly and pensioners make up 25 percent of the population, is stretched finding financial and human resources

to take care of its aging population. Japan's healthcare system is, for now, coping well in meeting the physical needs of its elderly population. Addressing the social and emotional needs of the elderly is a bigger challenge.

Singaporeans enjoy a high quality of life, thanks to decades of rapid growth and attention to a clean and safe environment. Longer lifespans and falling birth rates have led to an aging population. Technological breakthroughs in artificial intelligence have led to the development of robots that can not only serve and clean but also interact with the elderly. Their growing popularity in countries like Japan attests to their value for the elderly. Are robots the solution to the challenges the elderly face in Singapore or are there other more innovative, cost-effective solutions?

HOW DOGS CAN HELP

Introducing dogs to the elderly, especially to those still able and fit, could be one innovative low-cost solution. According to a special report by the Harvard Medical School, canine companionship can help improve the health of aging people. Dogs can prompt them to become more physically active. They need regular walks and their owners have to go outdoors and stay physically active. Dog ownership can relieve high blood pressure and reduce stress. Benefits do not flow one-way; petting a dog has a positive effect on the dog. A dog-owner relationship is a two-way street that improves the health conditions of both parties.

Besides keeping the elderly physically active, canines can increase social interaction among the elderly and help them to be more mindful. The practice of mindfulness – purposeful attention to the present moment – has generated much interest as it can reduce stress. Having a dog as a companion can help an elderly person to be more adept at this practice.

Dogs are known to be loyal and some breeds can cater to the owner's security and safety needs. They are unique companions performing functions that other small creatures such as rabbits or gerbils cannot. Cats may be a viable alternative but HDB flat dwellers are not legally allowed to keep them. Unless this rule changes, cats are not a practical alternative. Moreover, being

independent creatures, they cannot be companions in a way that only dogs can.

BARKING UP THE WRONG TREE?

Even though the benefits of dog ownership among the elderly are significant, Singapore's diverse demographics may inhibit the widespread adoption of our proposal. Singapore is a multi-ethnic nation with divergent perceptions of dogs. Chiefly, 14.7 percent of Singaporeans are Muslim. Many Islamic scholars consider the saliva of dogs to be unhygienic. Others, also citing the Koran, talk about Muslims who were protected by a dog when they sought shelter in a cave. The Koran also mentions dogs used for hunting, which some Muslims interpret to mean that they can keep dogs if the dogs are useful in hunting or guarding. The prevailing Islamic norm in Singapore, though, is to discourage contact with dogs so as to minimise contact with their saliva.

Chinese Singaporeans make up three-quarters of the Singaporean population. Many are not averse to keeping dogs as pets. Many view dogs as auspicious animals, good allies who understand and obey their masters. Still, it will be a challenge to make land-scarce Singapore a truly dog-friendly nation. The Housing and Development Board has guidelines on keeping pet dogs in government-subsidised flats with the aim of fostering considerate living among Singaporeans. Rules are strict, and each household is allowed to keep only one dog from a list of 62 approved breeds. The dog must be licensed by the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority (AVA) which requires dogs to be implanted with a microchip, sterilised, and insured. HDB rules also stipulate that dogs must not bark continuously and be a nuisance to neighbours.

In the final analysis, whether the elderly keep dogs will depend on their personal preferences or religious views. Education can help them to be more aware of the benefits of keeping a dog and so make a better choice on the breed that best fits their circumstances. Certain breeds are easier to take care of: French bull dogs, toy poodles and schipperkes are dogs that do not shed, are intelligent, and can be trained easily. Although HDB has strict guidelines on dogs in HDB homes, there are few restrictions on dogs in private homes.

STAY, SIT OR FETCH

We believe more can be done to create a friendlier environment for dog ownership among the elderly. Singapore can simplify the licensing process and subsidise fees for the elderly who want to own dogs. Capitalising on the increasingly-educated population, campaigns aimed at educating the population on the benefits of dogs for the elderly can be rolled out island-wide.

We believe our recommendations can be implemented in Singapore without disrupting life in the country's dense residential estates. In comparison with other pet-friendly nations, Singapore is well positioned and well-equipped with park spaces, veterinary clinics, and technologies to become a dog-friendly nation. Efforts should be made to monitor the effects of dog ownership on the aging population. This can allow for better assessment of which route, technology, or pets, or which combination of the two, will suit each country better, given its peculiarities.

Compared to robots of today, dogs are intelligent creatures that can bond with their owners. They can serve as supportive care-givers, providing benefits for elderly individuals who may suffer from high blood pressure or poor

mental health. As owners care for these creatures, dogs repay that favour in intangible but significant ways. Dogs, truly, are man's best friend.

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Editors

Pang Eng Fong, Professor (Practice),
Lee Kong Chian School of Business,
Singapore Management University (SMU)

Arnoud De Meyer,
Professor and President, SMU

Contributors

Alex Jacob Cherucheril
University of Minnesota

Ang Yu Ann
SMU School of Law (Year 2)

Aude Adeline Bertrand
NEOMA Business School, Reims

Charlotte Patricia Lamboley
EDHEC Business School

Foo Xian Fong
SMU School of Law (Year 4)

Hollie Emma Dawson
University of Manchester

In Jin Zaw

SMU School of Information Systems (Year 4)

Kate Anne Whyte
Ecole des Hautes Etudes Commerciales de Paris

Khew Pei Xuan
SMU School of Economics (Year 4)

Lee Yi Ling Samantha
SMU School of Accountancy (Year 4)

Lim Ann Yue Ella
SMU School of Accountancy (Year 4)

Lim Dao Qing
SMU School of Business (Year 4)

Lim Han Xun Timothy
SMU School of Law (Year 3)

Lim Wei Xiang Darren
SMU School of Law (Year 2)

Lim Ziwei
SMU School of Law (Year 4)

Lin Junkang
SMU School of Accountancy (Year 4)

Low Kai Loon
SMU School of Economics (Year 4)

Mackenzie Alexandra Schmidt
Richard Ivey School of Business

Markus Karl Adolf Rönnberg

Hanken School of Economics

Michael Don LeGrand
University of Minnesota

Mohammad Muzhaffar Bin Omar
SMU School of Law (Year 4)

Muhammed Ismail Bin K. O. Noordin
SMU School of Law (Year 4)

Phang Jiayi Emilyn
SMU School of Business (Year 4)

Raji Hemanth Kumar
SMU School of Information Systems (Year 2)

Rohith Misir
SMU School of Information Systems (Year 4)

Tan Hua Chong Edwin
SMU School of Law (Year 4)

Tan Tiong Hwee Benjamin
SMU School of Social Sciences (Year 3)

Wong Ee Vin
SMU School of Law (Year 4)

Xue Jiarong
Washington University in St. Louis