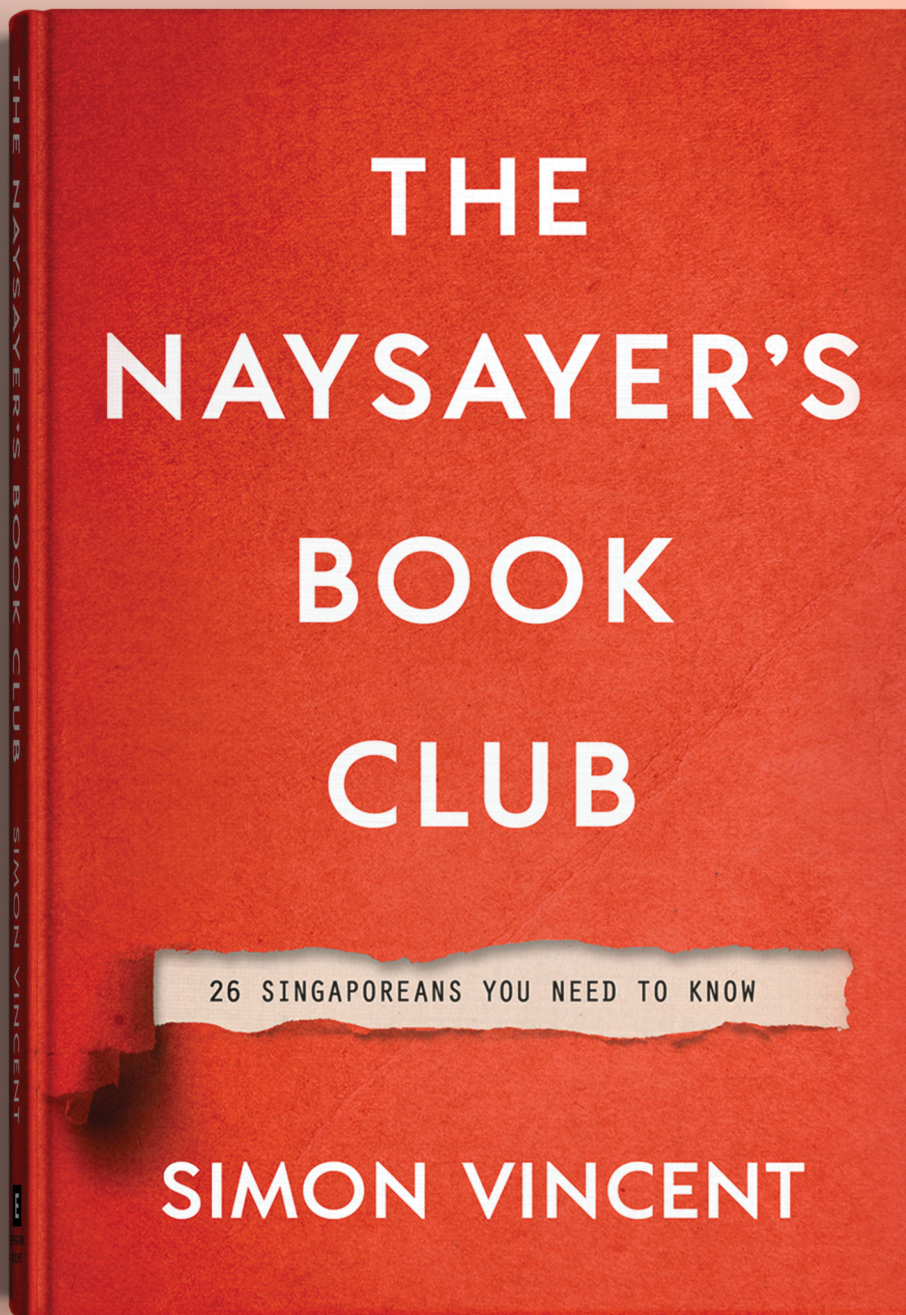


“ Right book, right time; read and be inspired by the naysayers in our midst as they battle against the odds. ”

—Ismail Kassim, political journalist and author of *No Hard Feelings*



“Simon captures the other ways of thinking in Singapore with these rich and colourful profiles, revealing to us a Singapore that could have been, or perhaps a Singapore that might someday be. *Naysayer’s* is a book about those who swim against the flow, but it isn’t about tiredness; it’s about hope.”

—Daniel Yap, publisher of *The Middle Ground*

“The 26 essays are inspiring accounts of the subjects: who they are, what they are, what they do, their exemplary efforts to speak up and their brushes with the law and the authorities in a society constrained by a matrix of repressive laws. Edifying and a must-read, especially for civil society activists.”

—Peter Low, human rights lawyer and founder of
Peter Low & Choo LLC

“In Singapore there is a fine line between co-option by the establishment and ostracism by society. These delightful vignettes are about the brave men and women who tread it—often at great personal cost—expanding our collective imagination in ways the elite never can. Instead of calling for more naysayers, Singapore would do well to listen to those it already has.”

—Sudhir Thomas Vadaketh, author of
Floating on a Malayan Breeze

“I was not disappointed in the depth and authenticity of the interviews... The chapters on Sonny Liew, the award-winning comic book maestro, and Thum Ping Tjin, the controversial historian who startles with his honest interpretation of history, will be among those I will turn to first.”

—Clement Mesenas, journalist and author of *Dissident Voices*
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“An inspiring collection of interviews with respected Singapore civil society activists. Not only do we hear how they came to be, why they do what they do, we take a peak into their bookshelves to understand the ideas that galvanised them. A book lover’s book!”

—Tan Pin Pin, director of *In Time to Come* and
To Singapore, with Love

“Right book, right time; read and be inspired by the naysayers in our midst as they battle against the odds.”

—Ismail Kassim, political journalist and author of
No Hard Feelings

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ARTWORK ON PAGES 152, 155, 158 BY DAN WONG. USED WITH PERMISSION.
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BOOK LAYOUT BY CHEE JIA YI

NATIONAL LIBRARY BOARD, SINGAPORE
CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Names:
Vincent, Simon.

Title:
The Naysayer's Book Club:
26 Singaporeans you need to know /
Simon Vincent.

Description:
Singapore: Epigram Books, [2018] |
Includes bibliographic references and index.

Identifiers:
OCN 1027796137 | 978-981-47-8584-6 (paperback) |
978-981-47-8585-3 (ebook)

Subjects:
LCSH: Singaporeans—Attitudes. |
Singapore—Politics and government—Public opinion. |
Civil society—Singapore—Public opinion.

Classification:
DDC 305.80095757—dc23

FIRST EDITION

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

THE NAYSAYER'S BOOK CLUB

26 SINGAPOREANS YOU NEED TO KNOW

SIMON VINCENT



EPIGRAM
SINGAPORE • LONDON

TABLE OF CONTENTS

An Invitation 1	The Resilient Poet TEO SOH LUNG 107	The Punk Rock Filmmaker MARTYN SEE 219	The Inconvenient Poster Boy SONNY LIEW 335
The ‘Maestro of Political Plays’ TAN TARN HOW 7	The Fighter for the Arts THIRUNALAN SASITHARAN 121	The Storytelling Activist JUNE CHUA 233	The Indefatigable Feminist MARGARET THOMAS 349
The ‘Mother of Civil Society’ CONSTANCE SINGAM 21	The Affable Anarchist JENNIFER TEO 135	The Rebel Incubator WILLIAM SW LIM 249	The ‘Blacklisted’ Historian THUM PING TJIN 363
The Contrarian Architect TAY KHENG SOON 33	The Cheeky Satirist DAN WONG 149	The Cause Lawyer M. RAVI 261	A Guide to Localisms 379
The Social Policy Wonk YEOH LAM KEONG 49	The Liberal’s Nightmare CHUA BENG HUAT 163	The Subversive Reenactor LOO ZIHAN 275	Selected Bibliography 380
The Émigré Academic CHERIAN GEORGE 63	The Indie Journalist KIRSTEN HAN 177	The Community Worker VANESSA HO 291	Acknowledgements 382
The Heritage Seeker CLAIRE LEOW 81	The Doughty Advocate FILZAH SUMARTONO 193	The Interfaith Champion MOHAMED IMRAN MOHAMED TAIB 305	About the Author 383
The Rising Lawyer REMY CHOO ZHENG XI 95	The Pioneer Blogger ALEX AU 207	The Fearless Artist SEELAN PALAY 319	Index 384

AN INVITATION

“

We need more naysayers...
We need to create new formulas, which you can't
until you attack and challenge every sacred cow.

”

—Kishore Mahbubani, former dean of the
Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy

On 24 February 2017, a panel of academics and former civil servants rallied around the call for more “naysayers” in Singapore. The next day, *The Straits Times* published its report, “Why Singapore needs more naysayers”, and fittingly enough, naysayers entered the fray.

None of them, at least those airing their views online, seemed to take issue with the validity of the need itself. The general point of contention was the glaring absence of discussion about political controls in Singapore. An alternative headline, picking up from where *The Straits Times* left off, could be “Why Singapore doesn’t have more naysayers” or “Why Singapore needs to listen more to its naysayers”.

By this time, I had been a third of the way through writing this book and had already heard the accounts of two interviewees paying the price for challenging the status quo. I had also heard from those who were unaffected by their dissenting ways. The terms of naysaying vary according to backgrounds and historical references.

It seemed to me that, however modestly, the stories in this book could answer the call of the panellists and the ensuing demand

for honest context. There are some clear markers in the politics of naysaying in Singapore: defamation suits by ruling party politicians, detention without trial and curbs on civil liberties. The countervailing force is the country's ongoing social and political liberalisation, which, however fraught with contradictions, has benefitted from naysayers and establishmentarians alike. Seeming to bridge the two camps, Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh said at the "naysayers" panel: "When we appoint people to boards, we can also appoint challengers who are subversive and who have alternative points of view."

Elsewhere on the same day, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was voicing his own support for alternative views: "If all you have are people who say 'three bags full, sir', then soon you start to believe them and that is disastrous. You need people who have their own views, whose views you respect, whom you can have a productive disagreement with, and work out ideas which you might not have come up with, or who improve on ideas you had." It is worth pointing out the context of the comment: he was speaking at Camp Sequoia, an annual technology summit organised by venture capital firm Sequoia Capital India.

In his remarks, the prime minister had used many examples—the banking industry, tax collection, telecommunications, privatisation and information technology—that were in keeping with the innovation theme of the event and Singapore's reputed economic verve and technocratic governance. Only the topic of the elected presidency, with its latest iteration reserved for minorities, seemed to break the mould.

Even the exhortation for naysayers by the panellists could be seen as somewhat conservative, given that civil servants were often the explicitly-stated targets. Professor David Chan, in reference to the civil servants among the 350 audience members, said: "You talk so much to me but when the minister is present, in front of him, you're absolutely silent."

This book is aimed at reflecting the spectrum of naysaying and, through the variegated anecdotes, connecting the political, the social, the cultural, the economic and the personal. The naysayers here include architects, academics, journalists, artists and activists. The faces are young and old. And the voices, radical and temperate.

The 26 Singaporeans in this book were chosen because they have made inroads in their respective fields by subverting convention. They have been bold in speaking out and, thus, have pushed new points of discussion into the public sphere. They are rebels with a cause, publicly-engaged thinkers and alternative dreamers. They are naysayers in the productive sense heralded on 24 February.

Incidentally, Prime Minister Lee had revealed at Camp Sequoia that, during interviews for potential officeholders and members of parliament, he asks them "what they read" to "get some sense of what their interests are". The interviews in this book, though obviously not for any jobs, deal with reading as well. Indexed throughout the 26 profiles are the naysayers' favourite books, thinkers and writers.

I sought to interview each person against the backdrop of his or her respective bookcase. Where circumstances did not permit the use of this metaphorical device, the interviewee and I opted for another arrangement. The prevailing motif was to put, front and centre, the interviewee's life of ideas and imagination. After the interview, I asked him or her to send via email a definitive list of ten favourite books.

Sometimes, the reflections on books segued into personal anecdotes. The lawyer Remy Choo Zheng Xi, for instance, spoke of his special copy of *Make It Right for Singapore: Speeches in Parliament, 1997–1999*, by the late dissident and politician JB Jeyaretnam. Choo's mother initialled it herself, alongside an autograph by the author, as a way of supporting his interest in politics and, concurrently, looking out for him.

At other times, these reflections offered a glimpse into professional preoccupations and ways of thinking. The architect Tay Kheng Soon, for example, revealed that the books on his shelf are organised according to the Nine-Square Matrix, a theory of knowledge he created to represent different fields of inquiry.

There was always room, though, for plain whim and fancy—the journalist Kirsten Han's confession as a book hoarder, the academic Cherian George's childhood collection of World War II books and the video-game art books Dan Wong traced over as a teenager before becoming an illustrator in his own right.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, not all the naysayers agreed with the blueprint of this book. Some did not find it relevant or meaningful to provide a list

of ten of their favourite books. The sociologist Chua Beng Huat said that he had no such books and that an academic should read a book “with an appreciation of its abstraction, not of its substance”. A book of naysayers is perhaps best when a little rough around the edges.

For their catalogue of influences, the naysayers would cite not only books but fellow trailblazers. Some of these were people whom I had hoped to interview but could not, such as the poet Alfian Sa'at, the playwright Haresh Sharma and the sociopolitical commentator Andrew Loh. No doubt, there are other names I have missed. It is hoped, though, that through the accounts given by the naysayers within these pages about others, this book reflects the nation's cultural richness.

Why feature 26 of them?

I had wanted to interview as many naysayers as I could within a year and a half. I passed 25, and with a relatively diverse and representative slate of interviewees, decided a conventional number—a multiple of five or ten—was not necessary in a book of nonconformists.

It was in the later half of 2017, during the final third of writing this book, that naysaying was imbued with a certain urgency.

The prime minister was embroiled in a widely-publicised spat with his two younger siblings, Lee Hsien Yang and Lee Wei Ling. They alleged that the elder Lee had misused his position in public office to circumvent the wishes of their late father, Lee Kuan Yew. The prime minister was also accused of having political ambitions for his son Li Hongyi. After many Facebook projectiles by his siblings and Lee Hsien Loong's putting himself up for questioning in parliament, the Lees finally agreed to reparate in private.

Professor Kishore Mahbubani, one of the panellists calling for more naysayers, was caught in his own public fracas. The former diplomat's article in *The Straits Times*, “Qatar: Big lessons from a small country”, drew the ire of Ambassador-at-Large Bilahari Kausikan. He chastised Mahbubani for arguments he characterised as prescribing grovelling and subordination in Singapore's international relations. Minister for Home Affairs and Law K. Shanmugam, agreeing with Bilahari, said the late Mr Lee “never advocated cravenness, or thinking small”.

The Straits Times' Opinion editor Chua Mui Hoong linked these two

splits among establishment figures with the ongoing discourse about the post-LKY era. She said his death in 2015 “gave momentum” to the age of contestation, which could be traced to 2011, when the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) suffered a historic drop of votes (though its vote share of 60.1 per cent would improve to 69.86 per cent by the 2015 election). “With the exit of the ‘referee’ of public discourse, so to speak, other members of the Establishment felt freer to offer alternatives to the Singapore way,” she wrote.

If this is truly the age of contestation, with alternative ideas on demand for Singapore's staying power, the stakes could very well be high. This book can be read as one forum to thrash out such ideas.

In that spirit, I would like to welcome you to The Naysayer's Book Club.

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VISIT WWW.NAYSAYERS.SG.

THE 'MAESTRO OF POLITICAL PLAYS'



TAN TARN HOW

‘READING IS A DANGEROUS THING’

A year before the inaugural National Reading Day kicked off, Tan Tarn How had called for “a campaign for A Reading Nation and a National Reading Week”. “Reading children are flourishing children and will probably become flourishing adults,” he wrote in *The Straits Times*.

In 2016, the National Library Board started just that: a National Reading Movement.

Tan declines to take any possible credit, saying the government never

lets policy researchers know if their work has influenced its decisions.

Besides, the senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) is not particularly impressed by the effort, seeing it as part of a drive to increase productivity. If the government were truly interested in reading minds, he thinks, it would not be so invested in censorship. It is a telling stance from a man who has spent much of his career, which extends beyond academia to playwriting and journalism, probing the boundaries of what can and cannot be said in Singapore.

He is typically sedate, even when delivering trenchant lines like: “Reading is a dangerous thing. Reading makes you an independent, brave and courageous person who will do the right thing. So I don’t

think they (the government) are fully committed. They’re not fully committed to the arts as well, except as an economic activity.”

His critique is often delivered with hard-nosed surety.

Tan’s policy work on reading is part of his espousal for a “flourishing life”, a term for his vision of a new, holistic education system. In place of instrumental and economic norms of education, he wants to introduce learning for the purpose of self-discovery and self-mastery. Instead of a narrow emphasis on mathematics and science for the sake of securing well-paying jobs, he would like the humanities and the arts to be given greater due.

His current research might seem prosaic, though, considering that he made his name with politically-provocative columns and plays. Yet, there is a through line that ties everything together: an investment in the social and cultural life of Singapore and an enduring interrogation of authoritarian dictates.

Tan also unravels the behind-the-scenes intrigue of staging his acclaimed and contentious play *Fear of Writing* and, for the first time, gives an account of the purported political circumstances that led to his exit as a journalist from *The Straits Times*.

THE CHILD LIBRARIAN

Tan is sitting by his desk at IPS. Except for a picture of a black-and-white tree, offset by colourful birds perched on its branches, the office is unostentatious (since this interview, Tan has become an adjunct senior research fellow and works from home). You get the sense that this is a utilitarian space, with bags, boxes and styrofoam padding taking up half of the bookshelf at one end of the room. While there are not many books of personal import here, Tan makes up for this by giving a rich account of his memories growing up with books.

“We came from a very poor kampong. My mother was illiterate, my sister went to secondary school. My foster sister was a Chinese teacher, but we were not a books family. We’re not intellectual. And the fact that I started reading really opened up the world for me. You know that there are other universes out there.”

In the then Kembangan Integrated Primary School, Tan was appointed librarian for the cupboards that housed a small book collection

FAVOURITE BOOKS

A History of Amnesia

Alfian Sa’at

Collected Works, Volumes 1-4

Harold Pinter

Turtle Diary

Russell Hoban

A Certain Exposure

Jolene Tan

Beyond the Blue Gate:

Recollections of a Political Prisoner

Teo Soh Lung

What We Talk About When We Talk About Love

Raymond Carver

Diary of a Mad Old Man

Junichiro Tanizaki

Half a Life

VS Naipaul

The True Story of Ah Q

Lu Xun

House of the Sleeping Beauties

Yasunari Kawabata

and was nominated to represent his school in a reading competition. He remembers fondly the assigned books: *The Borrowers*, *Little House on the Prairie* and *The Water Babies*. In his fifties now, Tan is working on his own children's books (*Sengkang Snoopers: The Mystery of the Hermit's Hut* was released in 2017 under the pseudonym Peter Tan). This new literary enterprise, it seems, is not out of character for him.

"I read almost everything," he says, namechecking genres (history, geography, archaeology and science fiction) and writers (Jack London, Gerald Durrell and John Wyndham). Then, as if to underline this breadth of interest, he adds, "Sometimes I read mathematical puzzles." The two authors he is most enamoured by and considers his literary heroes are VS Naipaul and Raymond Carver. He describes them with poetic detail.

"Whether you look at his fiction or non-fiction", Naipaul has "this very searing honesty" that eschews "conventional wisdom" and "old pieties", says Tan. "You find that almost every page, you are learning something new. It's a discovery, it's a revelation. So I've read all his books, some many times."

Carver "is a minimalist", he continues. "What is not said is as important, if not more important, than what is said."

Carver's world is full of "people who are caught in a critical moment—who feel that something is coming but they don't know what it is and it passes them by—or people caught in that moment where they know they have to say something, but they can't". Then, under his breath, as if narrating a story of his own, Tan adds, "So life in a way slips by them."

THE FIFTH WALL

Tan's own fictional domain is of words for the stage. He laughs when he is asked about the synopsis on the published script of *Fear of Writing*: he is described as the "maestro of political plays".

"You know la, how booksellers sell books."

Outside the genre he is reputed for, Tan has also written *Machine*, a play on the sexual relationships between men and women. He would like to write more in the future, including a detective novella. The next play he has in mind, he says unequivocally, "will not be political".

This is not all that surprising, considering that his 2011 play *Fear of Writing* rose out of despair over the very point of political theatre.

"I've said this before in interviews, your political works get appropriated

by the audience and neutralised—neutered and depoliticised." The audience of the stage might see a play "as a provocation, but that's it", he says. "So I felt that they come in, they watch it, they might say it's good, or it's very brave, then they go have their char kway teow at Newton (Food Centre) and then the next day they go back to work. It doesn't change them."

To circumvent this, Tan created a meta-play, in which the audience is made complicit in a grim and canny exploration of censorship. At the start, the director tells the audience that the script has been sent to the Media Development Authority (MDA) (now the Info-Communications Media Development Authority) for vetting, but no one has responded.

Then the producer announces that the play is cancelled, but the team has come up with a workaround: "We refund you the ticket price, plus booking fee. There will be no show. But we are holding a private party. Invitation only."

To convince theatre-goers of the validity of the illusion, actors hidden in the audience ask questions to further the plot. That's Act 1.

Act 2 is a series of fragments featuring Singaporeans talking about their acceptance of or their compromise with an economically flourishing but politically restrictive country. The defamation suits that the opposition politician Chee Soon Juan has faced over the years for challenging the People's Action Party act as a framing narrative. A writer, an allusion to Tan himself, also struggles with writing a play about Chee.

Breaking the fourth wall, in these postmodern times, may not be particularly revolutionary. In *Fear of Writing*, though, it comes as an essential engagement with Singapore's sociopolitical reality. Act 3 involves an MDA official not only raiding the premises, but also addressing the audience and taking their questions. She never makes it clear if they are in trouble or not and is terrifying precisely because of that.

While elaborating on the ruse of *Fear of Writing*, Tan wistfully notes that the character Eric, a man who buys Chee's books, undergoes something "similar to what happens to Raymond Carver's characters". Eric is on the verge of "having an epiphany" on "the political situation in Singapore", but the moment passes.

Tan forms a door with his left hand. "A play is, you come in and real life is outside." His right hand forms another partition. "Theatre inside. And the fifth wall is the door of that theatre. Now the problem is, people come

from outside, they go in, they see that there's a door—conceptually. Then what happens inside and outside is not connected.

“So all the stuff you write about oppression and all that, they think it only happens in theatre. Then they go out. Nothing what, right? So I want to break the fifth wall. So I wrote it in a way that they suddenly think that real life comes to the theatre.”

While his other plays took “six months, a year, sometimes two years” to conceptualise, *Fear of Writing* took close to eight years, because of Tan's disillusionment with theatre. “It's a political play. I felt, ‘What's the point, right? Actually, theatre does nothing. It's no use.’”

Fear of Writing was not his first attempt at breaking the complacency of audience members. His 1994 farce *Undercover*, which references the arrest of theatre practitioners during the 1987 Marxist conspiracy, has a play within a play, too. “Same thing. That's why. My despair was because, after writing so many political plays, things haven't changed.”

POLITICAL THEATRE OFFSTAGE

One connivance on Tan's part was to send MDA only Act 2 of *Fear of Writing* for vetting. It was passed for staging. After audience members bought the gag and posted on Facebook that the play was raided by MDA, the actual government body called the theatre company TheatreWorks the next day.

“Then we explained that, ‘Oh, we made the changes last minute’. Then they wanted to see the play, but in the end they didn't come. I guess because they must have found what it (the play) was, and if they had come, they would have to shut it down. Few months later, they called TheatreWorks and grilled them and made them write a statement about what happened.” Tan was not at that meeting.

It is an almost comical turn of events. Does Tan get any satisfaction from pranking the authorities?

“No, not satisfaction because...” He trails off, a dour expression forming on his face. “I feel a bit sad that we had to do it this way. This system requires it.” Then, almost lackadaisically, he adds, “Anyway, I don't think *Fear of Writing* worked.”

“It worked for about ten, fifteen minutes, perhaps half an hour, perhaps the duration of the play,” says Tan. “But in the end, ‘curtains’, ‘lights out’,

and people say, ‘Ah, it's entertainment after all’. They don't have time to really think about why they are scared.” He did not find any “spontaneous acts of citizenship” as he had hoped. People were “just frightened” and mostly passive.

He had a debate with Ong Keng Sen, the director of the play, on the appropriate level of provocation. “Should we not tell them for one week that this is all a setup?... What's your duty and responsibility towards an audience? I struggled with that ethical question.”

Tan's first engagement with the politics of writing political plays was in the early 1990s, when he was working on *The Lady of Soul and Her Ultimate 'S' Machine*, a satire in which a civil servant is tasked with searching for a country's soul, under the auspice of a bureaucratic and authoritarian government that is looking to ease up a bit, at least for appearance's sake. The country is not mentioned, but is obviously Singapore.

A mama-san, a communist and a fighter for the arts vie for the best representation of Singapore's soul. The satire's bawdy elements, including a blow-up sex doll, prod at the veneer of modern Singapore and the cost of single-minded economic advancement.

On that sparse bookshelf of his is a torn white package holding Tan's self-published copies of *Lady of Soul*, which includes the *Diary of Censorship* about how the play was passed. These pocket-sized books are somewhat rare, given that they cannot be bought any more and can only be borrowed from the National Library. Tan gives them out every now and then to visitors of his office.

An appreciation of the play's political context is incomplete without a study of the diary. It contains as much drama as the play, revealing that during a reading in January 1992, Tan's wife noticed a man sitting “grimly through a third of it” and she was afraid he was from the Internal Security Department. Tan wrote in his diary that he “was prepared not to be afraid, but could not help feeling a knot of fear for a while during the interval”.

In October 1992, after *Lady of Soul* was sent for review, the Public Entertainment Licensing Unit objected to material in 36 of the 67 pages. Tan's back-and-forth with the authorities seemed a confirmation of the bureaucratic hurdles outlined in the play. Surprisingly, it was passed with no cuts in December and fully staged in 1993, thanks to the revised guidelines of the newly formed Censorship Review Committee.

One witty musing from the diary stands out: “At home, thought that the play could be caught in a paradox: if they let it through without any censorship at all, then the premise of the play would be wrong, so making reasons for staging it become less intellectually compelling; if they don’t, then the premise would be proven, which makes it even more important to have it staged uncensored.”

That passage would later appear as dialogue in his next play, *Undercover*, but more significantly, as this interview reveals, it would encapsulate his journalistic endeavours, too. It is almost a distillation of his career’s *raison d’être*.

RANKLING SENIOR POLITICIANS

From 1987 to 1996, Tan worked in *The Straits Times* as a political reporter, op-ed writer, deputy editor for the arts and foreign correspondent in Hong Kong and Beijing.

“What happened was that when I wrote columns, a lot of my columns were not published—in the earlier part, 1988, ’89, ’90, ’91.” Offhand, he adds, “I didn’t keep them but I suppose I should have kept them. In fact, my first column was not published.”

That column was about Tan’s reasons for leaving teaching. “(Then Editor) Cheong Yip Seng said, ‘You left the teaching service. You were unhappy, right? So you can’t be objective.’ So it (the column) was killed.”

Switching between his artistic and journalistic impulses, Tan left *The Straits Times* to be head scriptwriter for television drama in Mediacorp before returning to the paper in 1999. Between then and 2005, he was the science and technology editor, political correspondent and deputy news editor. The behind-the-scenes action was just as intriguing as that of his plays.

In Cheong’s tell-all *OB Markers: My Straits Times Story*, notable for being the first detailed exposé of the government’s intervention in the media landscape, the editor said that Tan “wrote well, and wore his liberal instincts on his sleeve.

“He made it to middle management in the newsroom but grew increasingly uncomfortable operating in the Singapore media environment. His columns rankled senior politicians, and while we did not stop them, we paid them more than normal attention. I was glad he continued to write after he left us, not for newspapers or journals, but plays that made the stage.”

Tan gives an account of just how the politicians stepped in. During his second stint in *The Straits Times*, columns that he thought “would never see the light of day” were published.

“There was a lot of oversight and all that but I never had to change my bottom line. So I wrote about why you should repeal the ISA (Internal Security Act), whether the government should be the one deciding the national interest, whether there is a link between Islamic extremism and the condition of Malays in general.”

THE RECURRING PARADOX

Then the old paradox kicked in. “So I thought, ‘Wow, if I keep on complaining about censorship, it’s the same thing about the play, right? If the play is staged, then what is said in the play about oppression is not true what. If I’m complaining about censorship in some of my columns and they are still being published, then, you know, what I am saying is not true.’”

In November 2003, after a number of articles Tan thought “would never be published” went to print, he says, he was called up by his editor, Han Fook Kwang. He says Han informed him that a minister had met Alan Chan, who was then the chief executive of the newspaper’s parent company Singapore Press Holdings (SPH). The minister apparently produced a file of Tan’s writings to show that the journalist had “an agenda”.

The paradox has a life of its own, it seems.

There is a suspenseful pause. The tale is building up to his exit from *The Straits Times*. “So I guess it’s a warning, right? We had three choices. The editor (Han) said we can ignore it. That will be suicide.”

The other option would be to shift Tan internally to another post. “Then that would be like utter surrender,” he says. “The third option is: ‘We keep you here, but you lie low for a while.’ We chose the third option.” This meant Tan would not write too many commentaries.

He went on to cover parliamentary proceedings and wrote for a segment called *From the Gallery*, which included commentary.

In April 2004, Tan says, he was called to Han’s office again and was told that the minister had complained—again. “That time I had already told people, ‘Maybe I should move to news desk.’”

Another pause. An exasperated laugh escapes before he continues the story.

“Fook Kwang called me. ‘Eh, they complain fourth time already. So I hear you don’t mind going to news desk, right? Then you go to news desk.’”

According to Tan, he had not heard of the second and third complaints by the time he was informed of the fourth.

“Then I was deputy editor for news desk. They put me in charge of the property beat and the consumer beat. So I was just totally discouraged.”

Reflecting on the incident, Han, now editor-at-large for *The Straits Times*, said that he could not remember “sitting down” with Tan and “telling him that the minister had complained” and that “a minister had a file on him”. He could not remember, either, the three options laid out for Tan, citing “so many issues and so many people” he had to deal with as editor. He did not dispute, though, that some of Tan’s writings caused concern among members of the government and that he probably raised this to Tan. He added that Tan was “certainly not the first person in *The Straits Times* in which such feedback was directed” and that the government was more “sensitive about some issues” more than a decade ago.

The political editor then, Zuraidah Ibrahim, who Tan says was also present at the meetings, did not reply to email requests for comment. Chan could not be reached for comment either.

NEWS FROM A DIFFERENT ANGLE

A few months after Tan joined the news desk, Arun Mahizhnan, special research adviser at IPS, asked him if he would like to join the institute on an adjunct basis. Tan at first declined, saying he was too busy with his plays and his work in *The Straits Times*. Eventually, though, in 2005, he joined the research institution full time.

Tan is particularly lively when he speaks of his journalism days. There is a nostalgic glow on his face. “I love the excitement, you know... The excitement of stuff happening, of history happening right before your eyes, and of course, the excitement of deadlines, and also about hearing stuff that other people don’t know.”

Even though he is not covering the news any more, Tan is writing about the news and contributing articles to media outlets. As part of his work in IPS, he has written extensively on the role of the media. He was one of the co-editors of *Battle for Hearts and Minds: New Media and Elections in Singapore*, on the use of old and new media during the 2011 general election.

He characterises the now-defunct news site *The Middle Ground* as being the “closest to *The Straits Times*”, *Mothership* as being “slightly to the left” and *The Online Citizen* (TOC) as being “on the other end of the left”. While these sites have filled a void left by the mainstream media, he thinks more can be done.

Tan would like to see a “progressive, liberal, news-oriented” site like *The Online Citizen* but on a “much bigger and professional scale”, resembling *Malaysiakini* from across the causeway. In Singapore, the print media is dominated by SPH, which also publishes newspapers like *The Business Times*. In October 2017, Mediastory, which was the only other player in print, shifted its newspaper *Today* to the online realm.

Given his liberal bent and advocacy for greater freedom of expression, why doesn’t Tan start up this site?

“I am not an organiser,” he says. “I find it very hard to stay with one project that requires so much attention. So I know my limitations. But it would be great if somebody started one. It’s about time.”

If it is not clear already, Tan likes to push boundaries. “I think one of the things somebody should do is to get a group of people together and apply for a newspaper licence to test the government.”

Under the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act (NPPA), a newspaper has to apply for a licence, which must be renewed annually. It can be revoked at any time by the government. The newspaper can be published only by a public company and no individual can control 12 per cent or more of a newspaper company without the government’s approval. Directors are required to be Singapore citizens.

Tan is not lost on the slim possibility of a newspaper taking off or even flourishing. “Sometimes they (the government) can do stuff even if you are playing by the rules. They can make your life difficult. They launch an investigation against you, and then you are tied up by all these legal worries. And if you are a small team, you really can’t afford that.” Case in point: in 2015, the government tried to invoke the Protection from Harassment Act to get the largely volunteer-run sociopolitical site *The Online Citizen* to take down a doctor’s statement against the Ministry of Defence. The High Court ruled, however, that the government had no case. The verdict was later upheld in the Court of Appeal (see Remy Choo Zheng Xi, page 98). The legal battle—and fees—stretched for two years.

Barring logistical issues and his own apprehensions about starting a news site, who would be on his dream team? Tan looks pleasantly surprised by the question, leaning back on his chair with a relaxed smile. The hypothetical newsroom is made up of former *Straits Times* journalists: Zuraidah Ibrahim, Cherian George, Ken Kwek, Peh Shing Huei, Clarissa Oon, Lynn Lee, Richard Lim and Leslie Fong.

Why them?

"I respect their writing," he answers. "I respect their values and also their bravery. These are courageous people."

When asked why he does what he does, he says "there's a combination of things". One of which is reading because, as he says, it helps you empathise with others. "If you read wide enough, you start having a sense of justice and injustice." It also helped that he grew up poor because he knows "what's it like to be an underdog".

ENVISIONING A NEW PEDAGOGY

On the desk before him is a small, haphazardly-arranged pile of books he uses for policy research on inculcating a flourishing life in schools. At the top of the stack, standing out for its resonance with Tan's own agenda, is Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (a book also mentioned by other naysayers, see Constance Singam, page 23; Kirsten Han, page 179; and Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, page 312).

Tan reveals that he had first read the Marxist class analysis on education in 1984, when he was training to be a teacher at the Institute of



Education (now the National Institute of Education). He was reminded of the book and recently "decided to borrow it and reread it".

"In Singapore, we have the first half, which is to understand how to read, right? But we are not given the ability, the insight into or the ability to arrive at insights about..." He pauses and decides to go about his explanation another way.

He makes a ball with one hand. "This is the world, right?" His other hand revolves around the makeshift world.

"Is it problematic? What is the structure, right? What are the things that oppress you? What are the things that ought to be changed?" Freire's work, exploring these questions, is about "empowerment in the deeper sense", Tan says.

"We are very good at answering questions. We always win competitions but we are very bad at asking questions. And we are very bad at asking meta-questions, you know, questions about, 'Why should we ask these questions', 'Why should we answer this?' So questions about questions. Questions about answers. That's the highest form of thinking, right?"

Tan has written of "a rather radical" method to improve the education system: introduce reading as a compulsory and examinable subject. He thinks there is no other way to inculcate the habit in a nation where even adults hardly read. Only 44 per cent of Singaporeans read one or more literary books in a year, according to a 2015 survey by the National Arts Council.

For all his exposition on the virtues of reading, Tan admits that readers and "people who care about things" are "lonely people". A friend of his confided that her daughter is "very interested in policy and social issues" and Tan, rather forthrightly, said that "she will probably lead a very lonely existence".

If people are ignorant and happy, though, what's the problem?

"No, no, no," he says, before quoting Confucius. "No matter how busy you may think you are, you must find time for reading, or surrender yourself to self-chosen ignorance."

He has used the quote before: in urging the nation to emphasise reading instead of private tuition, which is known as a shadow education and has become an inexorable part of many students' lives.

"You can be happy and ignorant or you can be knowledgeable—you can know and be unhappy," adds Tan. "Would I want to be ignorant

and happy? No, I don't think so, because then that's not life. There's something essential about existence you must grapple with."

PRESCRIPTION: RED PILL

It is a hard discipline that Tan outlines. He believes you should seek knowledge, even if it makes you miserable. "I think the pursuit of happiness is overrated. That's why I say 'flourishing'. You can say Hitler is extremely happy what. The serial murderer is happy. The psychopath is happy."

To illustrate his point, Tan turns to a science-fiction movie. "A lot of good people are unhappy, human beings whom you respect, right? Because they are concerned about the state of the world. So I'd rather be that than a happy psychopath. So I will take the red pill, you know." The red pill is a reference to *The Matrix*, in which human beings live in a machine simulation and the protagonist Neo is offered a choice to experience true reality:

You take the blue pill, the story ends. You wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes. Remember: all I'm offering is the truth. Nothing more.

As though confirming the weight of his conviction to himself, Tan tersely adds, "Ya. Red. Danger."

Perhaps a stoic disposition is what it takes to do what Tan does. Reforming a country's obsession with tuition and changing the instrumental values inculcated over decades within the education system—he clearly has his work cut out for him.

"You have to face life. You have to live."

FURTHER READING

Fear of Writing, Tan Tarn How

Six Plays, Tan Tarn How

Battle for Hearts and Minds: New Media and Elections in Singapore,
edited by Tan Tarn How, Arun Mahizhnan and Ang Peng Hwa

Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Paulo Freire

THE 'MOTHER OF CIVIL SOCIETY'



CONSTANCE SINGAM

‘THERE IS NO ESCAPE INTO A DIFFERENT WAY OF THINKING’

Looking unencumbered by watchful eyes, the nude woman in the lithograph is in an elegant reverie. Her beauty lies in the understated strokes of the late artist Louis Kahan. Her significance, on the other hand, lies in the rich memories of Constance Singam.

In 1984, Singam was a widow in her forties, striking out on her own and studying literature in Melbourne. She had longed to find an image of a confident woman in the city’s many art galleries. It was Kahan’s woman—with her face turned away and, fittingly or not, her back on display—that finally satisfied Singam.

This is but one story in Singam’s lively journey of personal discovery and public activism. She herself is a picture of confidence. Having published a familial food memoir around her eightieth birthday in 2016, she is content to take each day as it comes.

That does not mean an end to her commitment to social justice, though. The “mother of civil society”, as she has been dubbed, is a regular panellist in forums, sharing her experience of negotiating the politically-sensitive boundaries of the past with a younger generation of activists. She has an abiding love for her country and it is from this place, it seems, that her critique of authoritarian rule and the state of multiculturalism emanates.

Singam is visibly relaxed, an easy smile punctuating her words, as we

settle on the couch in her living room. She says she is relieved to have more time to herself after stepping down in 2016 from her leading role in the Singapore Advocacy Awards (SAA). Since its inception in 2014, the awards have recognised civil society members whose contributions might otherwise be overlooked. (Disclosure: I worked for the SAA for a few months in 2015.)

Her work organising the awards can be read as a continuation of a story told in her previous book, *Where I Was: A Memoir from the Margins*. Published in 2013, it recalls the events that propelled Singam to become a member and three-time president of the pioneering women’s rights group Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE).

Before her food memoir—*Never Leave Home Without Your Chilli Sauce*, a microcosm of Singapore’s culinary heritage—she might not have been known by the public as a cook, but that role has often been played alongside her activism. Over the years, she has hosted numerous dinner parties for activists, and in doing so, built common ground for future collaborations among them.

Her unassuming air may be partly why she is known as a unifying figure in civil society. The sun-dappled living room seems to emphasise her joie de vivre. The floral sofa, and the traditional pots and vases accentuate an old-world comfiness. Flanking her is a bookshelf that she has lugged from home to home.

WAYS OF SEEING

“You wanted to ask me about books,” she volunteers. “One of the first books that I came across, which really blew my mind, was *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Have you ever heard of that?”

She is the second person to mention Paulo Freire’s radical book on education. (See Tan Tarn How, page 18; Kirsten Han, page 179; and Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, page 312.)

“It’s (about) the whole way we see things and how we have constructed our education can condition the way we think. And how education can transform people. And I really was just so excited by that,” she says.

“Another book was John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*,” she continues, going on to correct this reporter, who asked, rather prosaically, “if it’s the one about art criticism”.

FAVOURITE BOOKS*

Chasing the Monsoon
Alexander Frater

Pride and Prejudice
Jane Austen

Ways of Seeing
John Berger

Waiting for the Barbarians
JM Coetzee

Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery
Jeanette Winterson

Pedagogy of the Oppressed
Paulo Freire

Even the Stars Look Lonesome
Maya Angelou

A Room of One’s Own
Virginia Woolf

The Genesee Diary
Henri JM Nouwen

The Cloister Walk
Kathleen Norris

* A random selection of books I remember and have enjoyed. —CS

“Yes, but he was also looking at the way you perceive a woman’s body... The way of seeing is imposed on us... You need to challenge that.”

Confirming her love for cultural theory, she references a third book that has made an impact: Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, which famously broke down how the West viewed the East with a patronising eye.

INTERSECTIONAL CULTURE

Given her reading list, it is no surprise that multiculturalism has been an enduring preoccupation of hers. It is the theme of her book club (since discontinued), Mind Your (Inter)Culture. She has hosted a discussion of Mohamed Latiff Mohamed’s book *Confrontation*, with the interfaith activist Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib as a guest. The novel is about a boy, Adi, who grows up during an uncertain period leading up to Singapore’s merger with Malaya. Previously discussed were books of similarly diverse cultural values, such as Isa Kamari’s *The Tower*, You Jin’s *Death by Perfume* and Latha’s *The Goddess in the Living Room*.

“Most of my family now live in Australia, and they only see themselves as Australians,” she says, a little piqued. “Not Australian-Indians and Australian-Singaporeans. It’s the same thing in Canada, the same thing in America. Here we are forced to say we are Singaporean-Indians or Indian-Singaporeans.”

Singam is not a fan of that hyphenated identity attached to Singaporeans. “Since I am resistant to it, I only know the Singapore part of it. So long as you do that, you see yourself as different from each other. You are following the British way of dividing and ruling.”

The hyphenation follows from the state’s CMIO rubric, which streamlines ethnicities into the four overarching categories of Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others. When a bilingual policy was widely introduced in 1966, English was made the first language and each of the races was assigned a specific mother tongue.

Chinese people had to learn Mandarin, Malays had to learn the Malay language and Indians had to learn Tamil. The government promoted the policy as a cultural ballast—a means for Singaporeans to retain their Asian-ness in a globalised world. The flipside has been, ironically, the marginalisation of some cultures.

Chinese dialects like Teochew, Hokkien and Cantonese have fallen

by the wayside because of the prioritisation of Mandarin. For non-Tamil Indians, they were at a disadvantage because they were not culturally attuned to Tamil. It was only in 1989 that the bilingual policy was revised to allow Indian students to choose among Bengali, Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarati and Urdu. As for the notorious “Other” category, Eurasians and Peranakans were lumped wholesale into it.

Singam’s family is Indian and of Malayalee descent, and she says the language policy was a trigger for her sisters to emigrate.

NO ESCAPE

The government’s tendrils can be so long and deep that “everything is in your face”, Singam says of the People’s Action Party (PAP). If you live in a bigger country like Malaysia or Australia, “you can always withdraw and have your own community”, she continues, her voice gaining an alarmist note.

“But here, politics and the PAP and the government are in your face all the time. There is no escape. There is no escape into a different way of thinking, into a different way of living,” she says, pointing out that a large segment of the population depends on the government for jobs. “That’s why people feel so claustrophobic. It’s not just the little island. It’s also the little minds and one way of thinking, and that is very worrying.

“That’s why civil society activists do what they do. Everybody is doing their own thing but ultimately it’s to change the value system. And civil society is one place where we don’t think of each other as anything but Singaporean. We don’t think of ourselves as Indian or Chinese or Malay. We only think of the issues and the values. We don’t even think about what our background is, whether it’s education or financial resources or age. That’s why I’m still around—active.”

Singam is working with Margaret Thomas (see page 349) on a book of essays by the winners of the SAA. This project would evolve, though. In November 2017, *The Art of Advocacy in Singapore* was published and included essays from other notable activists, too.

What of the results of the 2015 general election, though? If Singaporeans feel so claustrophobic, why did they vote so strongly in favour of the PAP?

“They’re all like what I was before I started reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,” she quips, “comfortable in there.”

Then turning her gaze inwards, she recalls the infamous slur American presidential candidate Hillary Clinton used against the supporters of her opponent Donald Trump in 2016. Singam lightly chastises herself for her comment. "It's like Hillary Clinton saying 'basket of deplorables'. I'm saying the same thing and (in the same) kind of language."

WHO HAS TIME FOR ACTIVISM?

The discussion about liberal elitism and smugness is something that has cropped up not just in the United States, but also Singapore. What does she make of it?

"You know, there is always a criticism—and in a way, it happens all the time—that we are middle class, English educated, liberal, elitist. Well, I'm not elitist, I live in an HDB flat," she says. Singam is quite aware, though, of the disjunction between activists and the wider population. It just so happens that activists are "the group of people who have the time and the inclination" to challenge societal norms, she says.

"The rest of the population, the rest of the country, the rest of the citizens, they're so busy, making a living...and raising their families. And in Singapore, life is hard, you know. People work very long hours... That doesn't give you time for anything else, doesn't give you time for a better quality of life."

Statistics suggest she is right. Workers clocked an average of 2,371.2 hours in 2015, according to a Ministry of Manpower survey. That's working about 14 weeks non-stop. Even Japan and South Korea, known for their workaholic cultures, tallied 1,719 hours and 2,113 hours, respectively.

Beyond getting involved in politics or civil society, Singaporeans do not even have enough time for their families, says Singam. "And that, I think is sad."

HOME

Given the difficulties she highlights, why has she not left Singapore to live in another country?

"Why should I give it up to the Chinese? Tell me. I am here. I have equal rights to everybody," she says waggishly, lunging forward in mock outrage. Then, disarmingly, she turns staid. "If I had children I would have. My sisters left because they had children and they were worried

about their future."

In *Where I Was*, Singam gives a forthright account of the adversities she faced as a single woman in Singapore. In late 1984, she had returned from her studies in Melbourne "to a society of couples", she writes.

"I remember at one function I was seated among widows. The hostess explained to me, without any irony, that she and her husband did not know what to do with their widowed friends. I had been a person in Melbourne and would be one, as I was soon to discover, in AWARE as well."

It would take a while, though, before she found her voice in the women's rights organisation. She had not gone to AWARE's launch event in March 1986, despite receiving an invitation, because she was uncomfortable "attending a function with a room full of strangers". She found her feet in AWARE after she attended one of its monthly forums at the Queenstown Library and answered its call for volunteers for a committee on violence against women.

She writes, in *Where I Was*, that she had kept quiet when she first met the committee, intimidated by "too many articulate women with strong minds, opinions and determination".

When the Stop Violence Against Women campaign began, Singam was assigned to speak at a forum at the Marine Parade Library. Nobody had come, and the librarian on duty had to convince "lingering visitors" to go for the talk.

As AWARE gained prominence, Singam's stature within and outside the group rose. At the first annual general meeting (AGM) in 1986, she ran for the position of committee member, but was defeated. At the next AGM, though, she was persuaded by members Kanwaljit Soin, Lena Lim and Hedwig Anuar to run for president, and she succeeded.

This led her to write numerous press letters and give talks to raise awareness of the discrimination against women and to mobilise support for AWARE. She played a pioneering role in efforts to end violence against women, bringing to the discussion table other social service groups, the Singapore Police Force and the National Crime Prevention Board. Other issues she championed include the removal of the one-third quota on women entering medical school.

She served as the president from 1987 to 1989. She served another two terms, from 1994 to 1996, and 2007 to 2009. Since its formation in

the '80s and Singam's part in that evolution, AWARE has become one of Singapore's most established civil society organisations.

BREAKING THE FEAR BARRIER

Singam says most activists had initially worked in isolation from one another because of the fear stoked by 1963's Operation Coldstore, in which more than a hundred people were arrested and accused of being communists and leftists. Also leaving a chilling effect was 1987's Operation Spectrum, in which 22 Catholic Church workers, activists and theatre practitioners were arrested and accused of being part of an alleged "Marxist conspiracy".

In 1998, discussions at Singam's house started a process of remediating that fear. "There was no relationship or interaction between different organisations and individuals who were active. So the objective of TWC, which started at this table," she says, pointing to the dining table across us, "was to get people connected so we are not suspicious of each other."

TWC, The Working Committee, was an informal organisation formed by Singam and the fellow activists Leon Perera (now the Workers' Party's non-constituency member of parliament), Yap Ching Wi and James Gomez. As more discussions were organised, other activists like Alvin Tan, of The Necessary Stage, and Tan Chong Kee, founder of the now-defunct news site *Sintercom*, joined the fold.

The work in TWC culminated in October 1999 with a conference on civil society. A book on TWC's synergising efforts, *Building Social Space in Singapore: The Working Committee's Initiative in Civil Society Activism*, was published in 2002. Singam says the one-year TWC programme "was very good" and succeeded in bringing a number of activists together for the first time.

A WEIGHTY TITLE

"So those were..." she murmurs, lost in her thoughts. She does not finish the sentence, changing to a reminiscent track.

"I have had an enjoyable life, you know. I meet very interesting people, and people of all ages. That has been very energising for me. I suppose, because I come from a family of nine and I'm the eldest, I like to bring people together and make sure that they get to know each other and get along well."

Breaking the solemn silence with a hearty laugh, she says, "Maybe

that's what I have extended to civil society."

Civil society's DNA seems to be entwined with Singam's name. In 2002, together with Thomas and other members of AWARE, she launched TWC2. This time, the group's catalyst was news of an Indonesian maid's abuse by her employer. After a round of discussions, the group registered and renamed itself Transient Workers Count Too. It is still active and at the forefront of the migrant rights movement (see Alex Au, page 207).

In recognition of Singam's extensive commitment to civil society, Alvin Tan called her the "mother of civil society". That moniker, which first appeared as a blurb on *Where I Was*, has since taken a life of its own and accompanied multiple articles about her.

What does she make of the title?

"I told Alvin, 'Alvin, why did you do that to me? It's become a responsibility.'" She laughs. Then, she corrects herself. "Actually, I said it's become a burden."

Seeming to come to terms with what it entails, she says, "Actually, I suppose it is a responsibility."

In good humour, she suggests the title has picked up because of "the fact that I feed people". Once again, she turns reminiscent. "Over thirty years, thousands of lives I have come in contact with. I've been lucky. I've had a rich life."

NATIONALISM AND FOOD

A love for Singapore, in all its complexity, seems to be what has spurred Singam on. In *Never Leave Home Without Your Chilli Sauce*, she evokes the liveliness of Little India, celebrates the multitude of festivals and shares the varied recipes she has picked up over the years. The point of all that exposition is to celebrate Singapore and its communal food experiences.

Are Singaporeans really attuned to food culture or are they more interested in just eating?

"That's why, in my speech, at the launch of the book (at the 2016 Singapore Writers Festival), I had a quiz," she says. "I asked different questions about food, and I said, 'You lot eat, but you don't know what you are eating.' They don't know what goes inside the food. They don't have that."

Then she expresses some reservations. "I don't know whether you can draw such a stark line between food culture and food. I don't know

whether you can, but that's the only thing we have all in common, you know, the passion for food.

"I remember having this discussion with a foreigner. He said, 'Well, Singaporeans have a lot more than just the food going for them.' We have to think of what that is."

Her list of Singaporean items starts off in jest.

"We have the one-party system," she says, her face all mischievous. "We are multicultural in spite of the government's resistance to the idea. They say we are multiracial."

She recommends reading the final chapter of her food memoir. "I am saying that we have been multicultural for a very long time." She makes her case by linking Singapore's current cultural diversity to early historical accounts by visitors like John Cameron. He had written in 1865, using terms for Chinese and Indians now considered derogatory, that "there is probably no city in the world with such a motley crowd of itinerant vendors of wares, fruits, cakes, vegetables. There are Malays, generally with fruits, Chinamen with a mixture of all sorts, and Klings with cakes and different kinds of nuts".

MEN AND FEMINISM

So far, Singam has exuded an impenetrable calmness in tackling whatever topic is raised. It is only when she is asked about AWARE's 2016 decision to give men a bigger say in the organisation that she turns cautious—for a moment, at least.

After a robust debate by more than sixty members at its extraordinary general meeting (EGM), AWARE voted in changes to its constitution. Male members, who make up 7 per cent of the organisation, unlike before, can vote at its general meetings. However, their votes are subject to a cap so they cannot count for more than 25 per cent of the votes on a resolution.

"Well, I voted in favour. In fact I was the first to start changes in constitution in 2007 (and) 2008, when I was president," she says. "Of course, we got defeated at the AGM to allow men as members—equal members. My point is that..."

She interrupts herself to clarify that she is "now speaking as a civil society activist", and not as an AWARE member.

"I feel that AWARE...is the most respected civil society organisation and

is in the position of taking a leadership position in civil society. And they have acquired, over thirty years, practical skills in advocacy and organisation.

"My point is also to involve men in that process...because you can't keep speaking up for women's issues unless you change the men as well—unless you change the whole of society. You have to educate and that involves men, and men are resistant to becoming members of AWARE."

She adds that, nevertheless, there are "a number of good-hearted men" who "will still work with AWARE, whether they are members or not".

Singam says the only change that has taken place is "one of principle" and "not one of reality", because she does not envision men "rushing in to become members of AWARE" because of the amendment to the constitution. The fact that male votes can count for only 25 per cent also means that it is "not a very radical change".

A proposal to allow male members to take up roles on the board of AWARE was not successful, garnering only 58 per cent of the votes, short of the two-thirds majority required under the constitution. Some women seem apprehensive to the changes over fears of a potential diminution of their safe space. Singam is aware of the competing viewpoints.

"One of the things feminism did was to create that safe space so women can come and talk about issues without the presence of men, and that was what we used to call the conscientisation process—empowering women...in a community which believes in women's equality and women's empowerment. You can't do that in an environment which is patriarchal.

"That's one point. Another point is, women who have been abused and live in abused relationships need that safe space for them to recover, which is why...AWARE is an important space for that."

Singam believes, though, that you can "still create that kind of space" while having "different parts of AWARE".

CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

Perhaps it is not too surprising that AWARE has taken a cautious approach when it comes to change. In 2009, the secular women's group went through its toughest and most publicised trial. In what would be known as the AWARE saga, the group was taken over by a group of Christian women. Singam was serving her last term as president then.

During an AGM, the Christian fundamentalists had come without

warning and outnumbered the AWARE members. Taking issue with what they called AWARE's homosexual agenda in running sex-education courses in schools, they voted themselves into the group and ousted almost everyone else. Later, the original AWARE members tabled a no-confidence motion and forced an EGM. The usurpers lost the vote and resigned. Singam and company regained AWARE.

Within the organisation itself, there has also been discontent over the years. As detailed in *Where I Was*, in the '90s, some members had wanted AWARE to declare itself a feminist organisation. At an EGM, this proposal was rejected, leading to the exit of these women. In those more politically restrictive times, calling yourself an activist or a feminist was a daunting proposition. Attitudes have evolved, though, and "people are more open in becoming engaged with AWARE", says Singam.

Nevertheless, the fight for women's rights carries on, she adds. "Men are not going to just give up their rights. They live in a very privileged world."

It is still too early to tell whether men will eventually be given a bigger space in AWARE, and more important perhaps, whether they will occupy that space.

Whatever permutation the Singaporean women's rights movement takes, Singam's mark on it seems as indelible as those lines in the lithograph she bought all those years ago in Melbourne.

FURTHER READING

Where I Was: A Memoir from the Margins, Constance Singam

Never Leave Home Without Your Chilli Sauce, Constance Singam

The Art of Advocacy in Singapore, edited by Constance Singam and Margaret Thomas

Building Social Space in Singapore:

The Working Committee's Initiative in Civil Society Activism,
edited by Constance Singam, Tan Chong Kee, Tisa Ng and Leon Perera

The AWARE Saga: Civil Society and Public Morality in Singapore,
edited by Terence Chong

THE CONTRARIAN ARCHITECT



TAY KHENG SOON

‘WE HAVE TO TURN SINGAPOREANS SMART’

It is one of the first things you notice upon entering Tay Kheng Soon's home. The concave bookcase appears to narrow the dimensions of the living room. Yet, far more imposing than its size and breadth is the method by which the renowned architect has ordered the shelf's occupants.

FAVOURITE BOOKS

Capital in the Twenty-First Century
Thomas Piketty

For Reasons of State
Noam Chomsky

India: A Million Mutinies Now
V S Naipaul

A History of Civilizations
Fernand Braudel

Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire
Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt

Freefall: America, Free Markets, and the Sinking of the World Economy
Joseph Stiglitz

Life of Pi
Yann Martel

Living in a Time of Deception
Poh Soo Kai

The New Confessions of an Economic Hit Man
John Perkins

Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance
Barack Obama

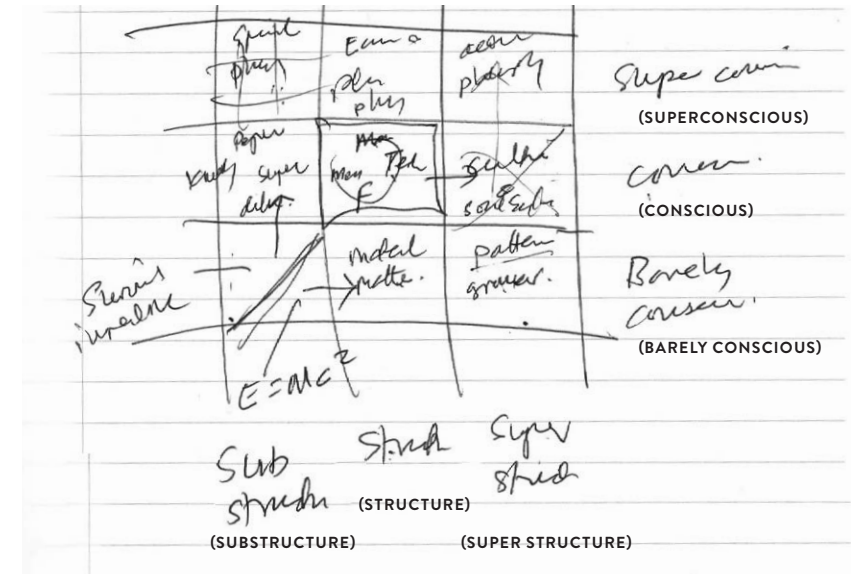
Pointing from left to right, he says the bookshelf's three columns represent Substructure, Structure and Superstructure.

“Substructure is, more or less, spiritual and philosophical categories. Psychological categories, also. So there's a whole bunch of stuff on neuroscience, whole bunch of stuff on philosophy. The centre part is Structure, so it's economics, politics, social relations, production relations and the philosophy of economics, let's say. Superstructure is cultural things, right? (They) have to do with expressions of structures.

“Then the top horizontal band is Superconscious. The middle section is Conscious. Then right at the bottom—it's a bit messed up—but right at the bottom is Barely Conscious.” Each of these bands is made up of two shelves and represents the level of intellectual inquiry.

It has been barely five minutes into the interview and Tay is laying out his perplexing mindscape.

The books are arranged according to what he calls the Nine-Square Matrix: “There are nine squares, right? Three vertical ones and three horizontal ones. So three to (multiplied by) three is nine. This is my theory of knowledge. Theory of knowledge is epistemology.”



He adds, “You don't have to write all this. This is very abstruse.”

Then he breaks into his characteristic laughter. It is sonorous and mischievous.

Tay, now in his mid-seventies, is an adjunct professor in the National University of Singapore's Department of Architecture and the founder and principal partner of Akitek Tenggara. As is quite evident, he is fixated on relational knowledge and has made a name for himself by deviating from mere blueprints to consider the social, political and cultural dimensions of urban development. In fact, that is what makes him one of Singapore's oldest and most consistent naysayers.

“The world is very complex. I want to know what is the minimum number of social states, states of consciousness, let's say. So there are nine squares, right. So nine factorial produces 362,880 permutations. So that's the minimum number of states of mind. Then within each of the

nine categories, there are also nine categories, therefore it's 362,880 to the power of 362,880.

"So that is the extent of complexity. And anybody who thinks reality is simple is an idiot. Anybody who thinks he can encompass that number of complex categories is also an idiot."

He laughs again.

In the top-left segment, where Substructure meets Superconscious, sit *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris and *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* by Louis Fischer. In the centre segment, where Structure meets Conscious, are *Why Nations Fail* by Daron Acemoglu and *Mao: The Unknown Story* by Jon Halliday and Jung Chang. The books are not always in the correct sections, though, notes Tay. This touch of randomness is consonant with his mode of discourse. Just when you think you know where Tay is going with one of his ideas, he takes a left turn.

LEFT BRAIN VERSUS RIGHT BRAIN

Tay is sitting by the dining table, across the hefty bookshelf. Behind him are pictures of his family, illuminated by the morning light—a warm halo offsetting his glazed look as he goes through his lattice-like arguments.

For the past ten years, he has been studying neuroscience rigorously. He gives a long-winded lesson on the 100 billion neurons in the brain and on synaptic density being the extent of an individual's knowledge. He is building up to a point about Singapore society.

He recounts an experiment by the neuroscientist Allan Snyder, who asked students to draw a horse before and after their left brains were subjected to magnetic pulses. Snyder's work aimed to show how the left-brain is typically associated with language and reason, while the right brain is typically associated with visuospatial and artistic ability.

"You try and draw a horse. Quite difficult, right? So they just drew stick horses. Four stick legs and so on. He put the magnet on the left side of the brain and switched it on. After a few minutes, the left brain got inhibited. That meant it temporarily did not function. Under the condition of left brain inhibition, the person could draw a beautiful horse. Why? Because the left brain is not interfering with the right brain."

This has societal implications for Singapore, which emphasises book learning, he says. "We think and we process information by reason. So

this is a left-brain-preferred society... When the intuitive impulses are inhibited, creativity will go down, naturally."

"So you take a guy like Zai Kuning, an artist. He writes a lot on Facebook. Quite often he responds to my posts. His English is very fractured because he is right-brain-preferred... And thank goodness for that. Otherwise, he will be a fake artist.

"He's a real artist because he is almost totally intuitive, and you can sense the emotional anguish and his emotional anger when he makes comments, because his senses are insulted by the regulation that they're put under. So in a highly regulated society like Singapore, that's what we are trapped in. We don't like intuitive people because they are unpredictable."

As speculative as such psychologising can seem, it is probably this concern for the mental and emotional bearing of Singaporeans in the places they inhabit that puts this protean thinker on the cutting edge.

THE FUTURE OF SINGAPORE

Somewhere between 1964 and 1965, Tay and other architects and urban planners formed the Singapore Planning and Urban Research Group (SPUR), a think tank that disputed the government's vision of development. It was worried, for instance, about the dangers of alienated living and was critical of the state's zoning policies. It advocated design that took community interaction into account. In his 1967 paper "Environment and Nation Building", Tay wrote:

We should not build at so low a density that we have to sprawl over the island. Neither should we be so panic-stricken and build at excessively high-densities thereby forcing us to jump up the scale of sophistication in order to create communities in high-rise housing. We should build compact high density; medium-rise housing in which it is possible to create viable communities.

While SPUR's proposals were not always implemented, it was successful in convincing the government that the international airport should be at Changi instead of Paya Lebar, where residents would be affected by noise pollution. After a short but lively existence, SPUR disbanded around 1974.

In 2015, Tay and the other SPUR architects William SW Lim (see page 249) and Koh Seow Chuan reunited for a panel discussion at the NUS Museum. They said the government had believed they had links with Communists and once thought they were a front for the United States Central Intelligence Agency.

More than fifty years later, Tay, still keeping his contrarian wits about him, has set up a new, SPUR-like group called The Future of Singapore (FOSG). It is a ground-up alternative to the government's Committee on the Future Economy.

Tay has ambitious plans for FOSG, linking with a variety of thinkers for dialogue on the long-term sustainability of Singapore. The group was active throughout 2017, discussing topics ranging from public finance to the media. The dialogue participants were just as colourful, featuring naysayers and even an ex-People's Action Party (PAP) Member of Parliament Inderjit Singh.

TOWARDS A NEW ARCHITECTURE

The long view seems to be Tay's preferred way of looking at the world. What kind of architects do we need today?

The answer comes with a dollop of contempt. "Certainly not the ones we have now. We don't need those guys any more. They are obsolete. We need a new kind, what I call a spatial designer, who operates on all scales. From the..." He pauses because he needs to frame his discussion in broader terms. Tay does this not to go off on a tangent but to be exhaustively—and sometimes exhaustingly—thorough.

"Okay, we have to talk about scales. When you design a mobile phone, in the shape of whatever it is, this is pico scale. When you design the interior of this flat, it's nanoscale. When you design this building, it's microscale. When you design this whole estate...it's mesoscale. When you design the whole island and you design the whole world, it's macroscale. Beyond that is cosmic scale, which is outside the universe.

"To understand scale is important, because then you don't exaggerate the importance of your work, or the importance of your worth. Because our worth is measured by our work. We are what we do. So, of course, architects think that, you know, if you design a great building, it's like a major contribution. It's not."

You can almost taste the bile in his denigration. "It's just one bloody f***ing building."

Cue the laughter.

"So the ego is overinflated, unnecessarily. But designing a community, I think, is more important. Because that means how you can bring people together... Talking about that, I want to show you something."

At his desk, scattered notes and stationery are lit by an overhanging lamp. On his laptop, a few mouse swipes and clicks later, pavements, fauna and what seem like portable booths come to life. The 3D landscape on the screen is of a "central nervous system" in the Bukit Batok constituency where Tay lives. He had moved from his landed house to this HDB flat to take care of his frail mother, who had lived in the block just across his. She passed away two years ago.

As people go about their daily routines, "they come across new people, new ideas and new experiences", he explains, "and therefore the environment becomes, in effect, a tutorial about life". The central nervous system is a food street that will be on a 330-metre stretch of land near the Bukit Batok MRT station. The building blocks will be shipping containers, each measuring 6 metres long by 2.4 metres wide. This mode of development has caught on in recent years and is sometimes known as *cargotecture*, a portmanteau of "cargo" and "architecture".

"This is how it works. (There are) umbrellas for where you sit. You can have one stall or two stalls (in a container) depending on the kind of food. There are fifty stalls altogether. We preserve all the trees." Pointing to one of the roofs, he says that a vegetable garden can be added for elderly people to nurse.

"This is the footpath on the side of the road," he continues. "It's elevated. It's about eight-feet high. This is the toilet. Two containers make one toilet. This is the existing pavilion which we will use for meetings and stuff like that. So the food street is not just for food. It's a new kind of community centre."

Given Singaporeans' love of food, a communal space built around that premise seems apropos. Tay's enthusiasm is palpable. "Design is not just about physical design, it's also about, 'How does it work?', 'Why are we doing it?'—all these questions," he says.

"So the Nine-Square Matrix—the complexity—comes in, you know.

The reason why I want to do this is because of the nervous system, right? More than that, it is to drive the rentals down, because all our hawkers are dying. They are working eighteen-hour days, sixteen-hour days because they have to pay the bloody f***ing rent. Six thousand a month. How to tahan? I worked it out here—one thousand (dollars) a month.”

Tay came to this number after factoring in the price of a container, at \$3,000, and the ease with which it can be transported to the location. As he is wont, he references his multifaceted approach to urban design, adding, “These ideas occur not out of vacuum. It occurs out of an understanding of the complexity of human life. Nine-Square Matrix, right? 362,880 permutations, minimum.”

After the PAP candidate Murali Pillai won in the 2016 Bukit Batok by-election, he has convened a task force, which includes Tay, to look into the project. Part of the task force’s job is to collect responses from the ground and encourage people to participate. “We have to turn Singaporeans smart. So that we change Singapore. The top-down model of the PAP and the opposition, and all that, is obsolete. To me, they are irrelevant.”

At best, politicians are our jaga pintu, or watchmen, says Tay. He is not particularly enamoured by them, although he did speak at a Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) forum on 16 July 2016. Posting on Facebook, he said he had agreed to speak, despite his “abhorrence of party politics”, for the sake of advancing “the cause of enlightenment”. Titled “Who’s Stealing My Lunch—Keep Calm and Get Organised”, the forum was on the PAP’s model of free trade.

During the event, Tay shared that his brother, the late Senior Minister of State for Education Dr Tay Eng Soon, had said that then President Tony Tan Keng Yam, a former cabinet and education minister, did not support increased funding for polytechnics and Institutes of Technical Education. Later (on 3 August), Tan refuted the claim, saying he was hurt by the allegation. Tay still stands by his story.

Once the food street is established, Tay continues, existing food courts and coffee shops will lower their prices because customers will be drawn to the more vibrant street. The poetic image he paints is thus: “It’s such a wonderful experience, right, eating outside with the trees? You hear the birds and children playing. Old people in the corner. Cobbler there. Haircut under the tree. All these things happening.”

Tay has an innovative pricing mechanism to match his design.

“The base rent is one thousand (dollars), okay? So if you are a young guy wanting to start a hawker business, you can start. One thousand a month is okay. Then as you succeed, the rent goes up. So there is a formula. There is a curve. The more you succeed, the more you pay. But when you really succeed, then you can keep all the profit because there is a top limit to the rent. We want to encourage you to really succeed.

“As the old hawkers die out—because they are old and they are tired like hell, working eighteen-hour days—we will have a renewal of the food culture in Singapore.”

Tay has gone through all the scales, at least for the food street, and the end goal is rather optimistic for someone who has faced a number of impediments in the past.

MISSION STATEMENT

In 1988, Tay’s firm Akitek Tenggara won a competition for the redevelopment of Kandang Kerbau Hospital, now known as KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital. Despite the win, the jury’s verdict was overturned and the commission was taken over by the Public Works Department (PWD).

Tay had appealed to the then Minister for National Development S Dhanabalan, who intervened and helped arrange a compromise. Akitek Tenggara did the design work, while the hospital consultants McConnell Smith and Johnson of Australia, along with the PWD as principal consultants, handled contract administration.

He has a motto for the way he approaches his work: “You must cultivate the pessimism of your intellect. That means you see things in all its horror, okay? Understanding reality fully. But you must follow with the optimism of your will.

“Pessimism of the intellect is not enough. It must be followed by the optimism of will. That means, despite what I think I know, which is the world is terrible, I say, ‘F*** it, I’m going to do it.’”

This mission statement is apt given his tendency to follow an irreverent comment with a call to action. He is using Facebook as a tool for outreach and transparency, posting updates about the food street and other projects. “So any f***ing bureaucrat who tries to block it, his

face will be put on Facebook, and all you guys can go there and whack him. And he damn well come up with a good reason why he objects.” Tay sounds that yawping laughter one can anticipate with enough time talking to him.

“We learn from each other in that way. Be open. This is not like a closed shop (where) we hide behind one corner... The world has changed. The Internet is there to educate the public, you see. In a more important sense, (it is) not just (about) knowledge but courage. We learn not to fear because we take courage in reason.”

The food street project exemplifies one of Tay's architectural themes: mixed-use development. To see this fleshed out, you can visit People's Park Complex and Golden Mile Complex, which combine residences, shops and offices. He designed the iconic buildings with other architects in Design Partnership (see William SW Lim, page 256). He laments that they have been painted over, having originally envisioned them as exposed concrete, in keeping with Brutalist architecture.

On his computer, there are also ideas that have never been realised or even publicised. A captivating one is called The Forest Cathedral. The luminous, bejeweled buildings in the sketch can be built in any nature reserve or jungle, he says. It looks otherworldly and futuristic.

Is Tay crafting utopias?

“No, I'm crafting entopias. Utopia is no place. Entopia is possible place.”

There is a restlessness about Tay's intellectual pursuits. “There are forty thousand slides here of my work.” He sighs at the immensity of it all. “Let me show you something else.”

RUBANISATION NOW

He pulls up a photo of a recent meeting with the Chief Minister of Selangor Dato' Seri Mohamed Azmin Ali. They were discussing the economic, food, human and energy security of Selangor. What Tay wants to introduce in Selangor is his pet topic for the past ten years—Rubanisation. The term he coined is a combination of the words “rural” and “urbanisation”. The rural areas and the city areas, he contends, have to be considered as one space in developmental programmes.

The need for this he ascribes to Thomas Piketty's economics magnum opus *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* and the work of Yanis Varoufakis.

Capital, incidentally, sits where Superstructure meets Conscious. It should actually be at the intersection between Structure and Conscious, Tay says later.

Pointing to the slides he presented at Selangor, he gives a detailed breakdown of his Rubanisation project. “Piketty says that the global economy has stagnated because the rich are too rich and the rest not rich enough. And this guy, Yanis, one of the top economists of the world, formerly the Greek minister of finance, says there is a mountain of debt, but there is also a mountain of surplus to recycle. So how do you restart the world economy? This is macroscale thinking, right?”

“It's to help the four billion poor people in the world get richer. Once they get richer, they will be able to buy their fans, furniture, fridges, washing machines, which will then stimulate the manufacturing industry, which is now stagnating because of overcapacity. (There are) not enough buyers. The global economy has stagnated because global corporate capitalism has sawn off the branch it is sitting on. It has made the people poor... So the rich now have to help the poor get richer, not because they love the poor, but because they need them. Simple as that.”

Singapore, he says, is in a good position to steer Rubanisation, since the city is an offshore banking sector. By offering a negative interest rate, a local Ruban bank can attract investment from the rich. By allying with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the New Development Bank and by using their global networks, money from the Ruban bank can be funnelled into selected villages all over Asia.

“That means we build irrigation systems. We build electrical systems. We build water supply. Better schools. Better hospitals. Improve the agricultural practices (and) the food processing industries... All this means that the poor people in Sumatra and Kalimantan will get richer, so they will stop burning the forest. There's no use beating them on the head to say, ‘Don't burn the forest’, when they have no bloody jobs... And when they are rich, they will buy our products.”

REINVIGORATING CIVIL SOCIETY

After his lengthy exposition, Tay facetiously asks if the interview is done. Not quite, as the conversation turns to his thoughts on civil society. He

was the founding chairman of the renowned arts space The Substation, which is reputed for bringing together art and activism (see Thirunalan Sasitharan, page 121).

“You cannot have civil society without independent means of income. If you’ve got no money, you cannot sustain yourself... If you are working for the government, you cannot be in civil society. If you are working for the university, there are limits to what you can say. You cannot be too outspoken. You get sacked or your promotion will be affected. In other words, the vigour of civil society is predicated on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). If you don’t have a vigorous small and medium-sized enterprise environment, then you have a very weak civil society. Simple as that.

“No money, no talk. People want to fantasise. Come on. Get down. Get real.”

He is the entopian architect, after all. So what is his workable vision for civil society?

He starts with a bounce in his speech. “Ah, so how do you invigorate civil society? Then you go into this whole discussion—” He stops, realising the nodus of what he has in store. “Oh my god. All right, I will go into it. You are getting an education, you know,” he says.

“I did a design and research project with my students...last semester, on ‘How do we change the mindset of Singaporeans?’ So we came up with this formulation: If you want to change mindset, you’ve got to change education.”

Tay says the government’s current efforts at changing the school system at all levels will only bear fruit in twenty years’ time, at best. “Where would you put your effort to have maximum return on your investment of time and money? At the university level,” he says.

Together with his students, he has come up with a plan to redesign the NUS campus. Currently only 10 per cent of students use the hostels because the rental is costly at \$500 a month. His plan would reduce this to \$200 a month. Needless to say, there are multiple dimensions to this.

The solution begins, once again, with containers. “One container is twenty feet long by eight feet wide, right? Divide it into two. Each student will have ten feet by eight feet, which is small, but we can design it very well. The bed flips up, the table comes out, all kinds of things. Then

there are four strategies. Number one: All live in.” This would increase interaction among all of the students.

“Number two: no more lectures. Everything is online. All lectures are online, but (they are) followed up by heavy tutorials, where the real learning takes place. It’s peer learning... Now, because we have 100,000 students living in, we need breakfast, lunch, dinner, supper. So we calculated the total floor area required. Enormous. It’s ten kilometres long. The campus itself is only two kilometres long... So the food outlet becomes the tutorial space... Then, of course, there are exams. You really have to look at the online material because you have to answer questions.”

The third strategy directly ties into the invigoration of civil society. Tay proposes that space in the university can be offered at low rent to small and medium-sized enterprises, which include advocacy groups. “We worked out how much. One dollar per square foot. Nowhere else in Singapore, you can get.” This arrangement comes with the obligation that the SMEs tutor and mentor the students. “So our students become not only book smart but life smart.”

“And the fourth: transportation. The campus itself must be completely car-free. All bicycles. That means elevated bicycle tracks... When we did a calculation, every part of the campus is reachable within five minutes, which means that the interfaculty interaction will be enhanced.”

Tay and his students presented their proposal to the NUS authorities, including Provost Tan Eng Chye. Thereafter a report was sent to the Acting Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills) Ong Ye Kung (since promoted to full minister). Tay met him to flesh out the details of the project. “He agreed. Amazing, right? Now I’ve got two projects working with PAP, you know.” This playful comment seems to be an ironic admission of his anti-establishment proclivities.

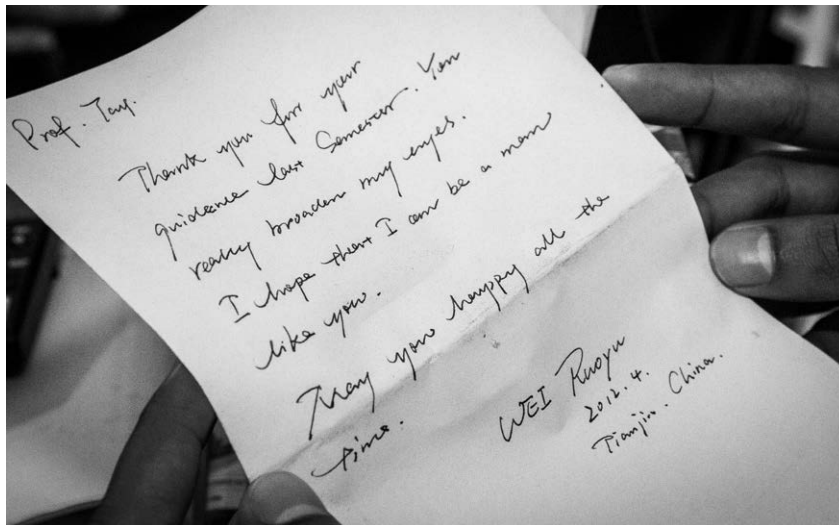
Tay says Minister Ong liked his idea because it could bring about change within five to six years. Tay links his project to Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam’s comment in 2015 that Singapore’s future will depend on “creating value here”.

The proposal will help change the “apex”, as Tay describes the university. The food street will tackle the “base” and function as “the university of the

people". Tay hopes to turn the sports field in NUS into a "covered stadium" that serves the western part of Singapore. "University becomes not just a place for the students. It becomes the centre for the whole district."

TEACHER TAY

He beams with pride when his Rubanisation presentation comes to a slide showing his students. The mouse clicking and scrolling stop. "These are my students," he says, proffering a piece of paper from a stack bound by a clip.



Prof. Tay,

Thank you for your guidance last semester.
You really broaden my eyes.
I hope that I can be a man like you.
May you happy all the time.

Wei Ruoyu
2012.4.
Tianjin, China.

"That's why I teach," says Tay. He has been doing so for thirty years.

The political exile Tan Wah Piow was one of his students. Tay remembers the alleged leader of the 1987 Marxist conspiracy as "a joker".

"He was working together with a number of students on a study of Chinatown. He cannot draw, you know. He submitted a black sheet of paper titled *View Up the Staircase*." The joke, in case you don't get it, is that the view in question would be dark.

THE OPTIMISM OF WILL

After going through more slides on his Rubanisation project and photographs of him explaining it in the international arena, he talks about a project that he is particularly enthused about but that he thinks has a faint chance of being implemented.

It is an urban coldwater fish farm. "We can grow salmon in Singapore," he matter-of-factly says. He wants to locate the farm in Kranji, but says it is a long shot. "I set up a meeting with Beh Swan Gin, chairman of EDB (Economic Development Board). He was very reluctant. I said, 'Never mind, I don't expect a decision from you, I just want to have a chat with you.'"

Tay has spoken to an investor friend who has the necessary technology for the farm and who is thinking of setting it up in Batam. "But my heart says, 'I want to do in Singapore.' But I know the odds."

He says the reluctance of the government boils down to a lack of courage. "The first question they ask you, 'Has it been done before? Hasn't been done—cannot be done. Do it somewhere else, then we do.'"

To drive home his frustration, Tay uses a famous Hokkien admonishment for pusillanimity. "Bo lampa la, eh. This country is a dead duck, man. No balls."

Doesn't the approval of his NUS campus project show more daring on the part of the government? "Ah, yes, but I haven't finished the story," he says.

"So the minister sends the message down. Implement, right? I had a meeting. Everybody said, 'Agree, let's do.' Then nothing happened, you know." After a few months, Tay spoke to an employee with the Ministry of Education who is part of the project. He told Tay there was "no budget" to do it.

"So I said to him, 'Is it okay with you if I write a letter to the minister to ask about the budget and cc you?' He was so happy because he's afraid

to talk to the minister, you see... So I sent a letter to the minister. The minister replied, 'You go and find the money.'

Tay is now in the process of seeking funding. He has some strategies that he says he cannot discuss. "People pushing the buck around" is a "sickening" problem he has encountered in the past.

"Every time it's like that. I never give up. The optimism of the will." That optimism would pay off. Since this interview, Tay has publicly announced that the project is slated to be implemented in 2018, made it known that the government is "not monolithic" and given credit to the minister for being "decisive".

It is past 2pm by the time the conversation with Tay ends. He asks me to accompany him for lunch at the nearby coffeeshop. We talk a little more about some of the topics we have already gone through.

It is small talk, really. Nevertheless, this reporter is mentally exhausted. Our half-day of conversation has taken a toll. He, on the other hand, seems indefatigable.

You would expect that from someone who has fished from his labyrinthine mind a perplexing epistemology called the Nine-Square Matrix.

FURTHER READING

Line, Edge & Shade: The Search for a Design Language in Tropical Asia:
Tay Kheng Soon & Akitek Tenggara, Robert Powell

THE SOCIAL POLICY WONK



YEHO LAM KEONG

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For sharing their time, I am grateful to the naysayers featured in this book. Many of them gave access to their private spaces so that I can peruse and plunder their bookshelves for insights. Often, this literary excavation revealed not only their professional aspirations but their little idiosyncrasies—neither of which I take for granted.

This is my first book and I could not have asked for a more supportive publisher than Edmund Wee. His derring-do approach to the printed word gave me confidence when I needed it. I could also turn to editor Eldes Tran, who considerably improved the text in this book with her many suggestions and surgical skill with Microsoft Word’s “Track Changes” function.

Where my words fell short in capturing this peculiar book club, Foo Chuan Wei’s photographs filled in. I am indebted to him for doggedly seeing this project through from beginning to end. He is an invaluable colleague and friend.

The first person who had heard of my foolhardy bid to write this book was my partner, Gayathrii. Her enthusiasm never wavered from that moment I spoke to her on the phone to the completion of the manuscript.

While working on it, I turned my home’s dining table into an unassailable office. I thank my mother, brother and sister for their forbearance with the eye roll and their enduring support.

Lastly, I need to give special mention to the naysayer I’ve known the longest—my father, Paul Vincent. His always critical (and, it must be said, sometimes searing) commentary on the news of the day has been a perennial feature of the Vincent household. It was only fitting then that he was a writing kaki for this book. Whenever I left my makeshift office for lunch, it was with him. At the nearby coffeeshop, he would tell me of stories I had missed. Then I would return home, ready to type again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Simon Vincent is a multimedia journalist in Singapore who covered the 2015 general election, among other news, for *Six-Six News* and is currently a freelance writer. His work has also appeared in *The Middle Ground*, *Yahoo! News* and other media. A graduate of the National University of Singapore, he has also dipped his toes in civil society, with Maruah and the Singapore Advocacy Awards. During National Service, he picked up a habit of reading and has since amassed a collection of a few hundred books.

INDEX

- 1987: *Singapore's Marxist Conspiracy 30 Years On* (book), 120
- 1987: *Untracing the Conspiracy* (movie), 110, 120, 224
- Akitek Tenggara, 35, 41
- Alfian Sa'at, 4, 136, 194, 199, 229, 251, 308
- All Things Bukit Brown, 82, 84–86, 90, 92–93, 252
- anarchism, 139–140
- Anglo–Chinese School, 52, 100, 371
- Anuar, Hedwig, 27, 356, 357
- Arotçarena, Guillaume, 110, 112–113, 120
- Art of Advocacy in Singapore, The*, 25, 32, 362
- Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye, The*, 96, 105, 178, 250, 336–339, 344–347, 374
- arts funding, 127–129, 144, 278, 336, 338–340, 374
- assembly, freedom of, 101, 120, 178, 184–185, 240–241, 326–327, 329, 334
- Au, Alex, 29, 78, 207–217
- Austen, Jane, 22, 178, 350
- Australia, 22, 24, 27, 51
- authoritarianism, 57–58, 61–62, 214–215, 230–231, 348
- AWARE, 23, 27, 30–32, 132, 141, 194–197, 201, 203–204, 247, 252, 350, 361–362; saga of (2009), 31–32, 104, 196
- Barthes, Roland, 136, 320, 323
- Berger, John, 22, 23, 136
- Buddhism, 53, 54, 222–223, 232
- Bukit Brown Cemetery, 82–86, 92, 252
- Business Times, The*, 87, 354–355, 362
- calibrated coercion, theory of, 70–71, 75
- Camus, Albert, 292, 323
- Canada, 50, 51, 175
- Caro, Robert, 96, 106, 364
- Carver, Raymond, 8, 10
- censorship, 8, 11–14, 15, 76, 129–130, 220–221, 283, 287, 327. *See also* self-censorship
- Chan, David, 2, 169
- Chee Soon Juan, 11, 71, 109, 174, 184, 220, 221, 228, 232, 300, 303, 326, 328–329
- Cheng, Vincent, 114, 331
- Cheong Yip Seng, 14, 73
- Chia Thye Poh, 320–322, 330–331, 333, 346
- Chiam See Tong, 104
- China, 57, 84
- “Chinese privilege”, 309–310
- Chong, Terence, 32, 85, 133, 252
- Choo, Remy Zheng Xi, 3, 17, 95–106, 108, 216
- Chua Beng Huat, 4, 163–176, 250, 253
- Chua, June, 233–248
- circumcision, female. *See* sunat perempuan
- CMIO race categories, 24, 317, 379
- Committee on Future Economy, 38, 60
- contempt of court: case of, 56, 78, 210–211, 216; statute of, 56, 185–186
- Cultural Medallion, 125, 127, 281
- Dalai Lama, 136, 220
- death penalty, 56, 178, 180–184, 213, 264, 272–273, 298
- defamation, case of, 2, 11, 71, 100, 220, 228
- democracy, 51–52, 58, 66, 100, 214
- Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, 108, 122, 220, 262
- education, 9, 18–19, 23, 44, 46–47, 50, 59, 74–75, 77, 151–152, 175–176, 196, 317
- elderly, 39, 53, 55, 166, 359–361
- elected presidency, 2, 262–263, 365, 369
- Facebook, 37, 41–42, 103, 108, 184, 226, 264, 328
- feminism, 27, 30–32, 195–198, 213, 304, 351–352, 357
- Filzah Sumartono, 193–205
- Freedom from the Press*, 64, 71, 79, 116
- Freire, Paulo. *See Pedagogy of the Oppressed*
- Function 8, 105, 117, 120, 223
- Gaiman, Neil, 292, 341, 345
- García Márquez, Gabriel, 122, 136
- gay rights, 128, 210–211, 235, 242–243, 278, 282–287. *See also* LGBT issues
- general election: of 2011, 5, 16, 55, 109, 173, 344, 368; of 2015, 5, 25, 55, 173, 303
- George, Cherian, 3, 18, 63–79, 116, 211, 226, 311, 374
- Germany, 59, 60, 146
- GIC, 50
- Goh Chok Tong, 69, 220–221
- Goh Keng Swee, 161, 165
- Good Citizen, A, 151–153, 157, 160–161
- Han Fook Kwang, 15–16
- Han, Kirsten, 3, 18, 23, 103, 177–191, 264, 341, 365
- HDB, 55, 159, 165, 167, 170, 369, 379
- Herbert, Frank, 150, 320
- Higashino, Keigo, 96, 105–106, 194
- Ho, Vanessa, 244, 291–304
- Hong Lim Park. *See* Speakers' Corner
- India, 65, 66, 273
- Indonesia, 65, 86, 253, 311, 314, 340, 367, 368
- Internal Security Act (ISA), 15, 70–71, 105, 113, 116–118, 123–124, 320–321, 379
- Ishiguro, Kazuo, 96, 136
- Islam, 194, 195–197, 201–202, 253, 311, 313–315
- Japan, 26; invasion of Singapore by, 89–90
- Jeyaretnam, JB, 3, 100, 106, 228, 353
- journalism, 8, 14–18, 68–70, 87–88, 101–105, 179, 189–190, 209, 352–355, 365–367; activism and, 185. *See also* newspapers
- Koh, Tommy, 2, 255
- Kok Heng Leun, 144, 186
- Korea: South, 26, 61; North, 230–231
- Kuo Pao Kun, 123–124, 125–127, 133, 258, 339
- Lee Hsien Loong, 2, 3, 4, 71, 116, 171, 198, 227–228, 244, 250, 271, 365, 371
- Lee Kuan Yew, 4, 59, 69, 73, 100, 109, 111, 113, 155, 161, 220, 226, 227, 229, 234, 327, 347, 351, 353–355, 356, 374
- Leow, Claire, 81–94, 252
- LGBT issues, 196, 210–211, 236–248, 282–283, 286–287. *See also* gay rights, transgender rights
- Liew, Sonny, 96, 178, 190, 250, 335–348, 365, 374
- Lim, Benjamin, 103, 189, 216
- Lim Chin Siong, 161, 220, 228, 303, 347, 375
- Lim, William SW, 38, 42, 94, 249–259
- Loh, Andrew, 4, 101
- Loo Zihan, 275–289
- Low, Donald, 54
- Low, Peter, 96
- Mahbubani, Kishore, 1, 4, 250, 253
- Malaysia, 86–87, 313–314, 340, 343
- Mandela, Nelson, 93–94, 331
- “Marxist conspiracy” (1987), 104, 109–110, 112–115, 124, 300, 328–329, 331, 338, 369
- Media Development Authority (MDA), 11, 99, 223, 281, 371
- Mediacorp, 14, 17
- Middle Ground, The*, 17, 101
- migrant workers' rights, 29, 120, 144, 185, 208, 215–216, 295, 300, 358–359
- migration, 26, 158, 232, 343
- Ministry of Communications and Information, 69, 210
- Ministry of Defence (Mindef), 17, 68–69, 97–98
- Ministry of Manpower (MOM), 26, 72, 189, 215, 326
- Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, 18, 23, 24, 305–318
- Mothership*, 17, 102
- MRT, 87, 120, 129, 159, 160, 255–256, 379
- Naipaul, VS, 10, 34
- Nanyang Technological University (NTU), 64–65, 70, 71–75, 78, 154, 282
- National Arts Council, 127, 128–129, 278, 281, 283, 336–340, 374
- National Day, 93, 131, 161, 250, 354–355, 356
- National Service (NS), 68–69, 150–151, 350–351, 359–360
- National University of Singapore (NUS), 35, 44–45, 100–101, 126, 164, 270, 356, 367
- Necessary Stage, The, 28, 128, 144, 251
- New Naratif*, 190, 341, 365–367, 370, 377
- New Paper, The*, 68, 301, 343
- New Zealand, 51, 117, 181
- newspapers, 67–68, 169, 352–355; Newspaper and Printing Presses Act, 17, 272
- Ng, Josef, 278–282, 285, 288
- Nine-Square Matrix, 3, 34–36, 39–40, 48
- nostalgia, 91–92, 101, 170–171, 234
- OB markers, 196, 297, 306, 379
- OB Markers* (book), 14, 73, 353
- Once a Jolly Hangman*, 56, 110, 111, 329–330
- Ong Ye Kung, 45, 60, 337
- Online Citizen, The* (TOC), 17, 97–98, 101–105, 181, 189, 209, 263, 266–268, 375
- Operation Coldstore (1963), 28, 118, 190, 228, 346–347, 364, 365, 372, 373–374, 379
- Operation Spectrum (1987), 28, 109–110, 112–117, 124, 300, 331, 338–339, 347, 369, 379
- Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 18, 20, 22, 23, 25, 179, 292, 306, 312
- People Like Us, 132, 210
- People's Action Party (PAP), 5, 25, 51, 55, 56–57, 58, 70, 141, 155, 173, 227–228, 327, 351, 356; uniform of, 64
- Pink Dot, 196, 238, 240–243, 286–287, 379
- poetry, 87, 119
- Post-Museum, 110, 136, 140–141, 143–145, 146–147, 299
- poverty, 53, 54–55, 104, 164–166, 253
- press, freedom of the, 73, 75, 179, 189

- race issues, 24, 196, 231, 308–310, 317
 Ravi, M., 97, 182, 183, 261–274
Real Singapore, The, 99
 religious issues, 31–32, 66, 104, 142, 194–197, 243, 253, 308–309, 311–318

 Said, Edward, 24, 306, 364
 Said Zahari, 224, 228, 232, 327
 Sasitharan, Thirunalan, 44, 121–133, 142, 258
 Scandinavia, 51–52, 58, 166
 science fiction, 155–156, 212
 Section 377A, 210, 240, 299, 379
 See, Martyn, 216, 219–232, 327
 Seelan Palay, 267, 319–334
 self-censorship, 61, 186, 221
 Seow, Francis, 114, 117, 220, 262, 272
 sex workers' rights, 239, 246, 293–297, 301–303
 Shadrake, Alan. *See Once a Jolly Hangman*
 Shakespeare, William, 122, 298–299, 304
 Shanmugam, K., 4, 103, 186, 240, 241
 Sharma, Haresh, 4
 Singam, Constance, 18, 21–32, 104, 196, 215, 356, 358, 362, 375
 Singapore Advocacy Awards, 23, 76, 92, 105, 178, 246
 Singapore Democratic Party, 40, 71, 108–109, 184, 220, 326
 Singapore flag, 160, 216
Singapore Monitor, The, 350, 352–353
 Singapore Planning and Urban Research Group (SPUR), 37–38, 255
 Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), 15, 99, 353–354
 Singapore Really Really Free Market (SRRFM), 136–139
 Singaporean identity, 24, 161, 171–172, 258, 285, 346
 Soin, Kanwaljit, 27, 352, 356–357, 362
 Soo, Jason, 110, 120, 224
 Speakers' Corner, 100, 106, 240, 298, 322, 333–334, 379
 speech, freedom of, 66, 76, 186, 226
Straits Times, The, 1, 9, 14–17, 69–70, 73–74, 101, 126, 141, 167, 169, 209, 302, 352–353
 Substation, The, 44, 126, 131–132, 143–144, 251, 279
 sunat perempuan, 195, 199–204
 Sungei Road market, 147–148

 Tan, Alvin, 28, 29, 129, 144
 Tan, Jolene, 8, 194

 Tan Pin Pin, 110, 223, 224, 371
 Tan Tarn How, 7–20, 23, 129
 Tan, Tony, 40
 Tay Kheng Soon, 3, 33–48, 255–257
 Teo, Jennifer, 110, 135–148, 299
 Teo Soh Lung, 107–120, 184, 188, 300, 339, 369
 Tharman Shanmugaratnam, 52–53, 59, 60, 116, 166, 337
 theatre, 10–14, 123–124, 251
Thirukkural, 125, 270, 274
 Thomas, Margaret, 25, 29, 215, 349–362
 Thum Ping Tjin, 190, 341, 363–378
 Thuraisingam, Eugene, 97, 264
Today, 17, 209, 301–302, 360
 transgender rights, 128, 234–248, 295, 302
 Trump, Donald, 26, 51, 56, 57, 58, 66, 191, 209, 368
 tudung issue, 197–198
 TWC (The Working Committee), 28, 356
 TWC2 (Transient Workers Count Too), 29, 208, 300, 350, 358–359

 United Kingdom, 51, 57, 146, 179, 298, 343, 365
 United States, 26, 51, 56, 57, 58, 65, 129, 209, 336, 343, 367, 368
 utopia, 42, 140, 146, 350
 urban planning, 37–43, 44–45

 Wham, Jolovan, 120, 184–185
 Wild Rice, 128, 251
 women's rights. *See* feminism
 Wong, Dan, 3, 149–161
 Woon Tien Wei, 136, 143, 145–146, 299
 Workers' Party, 101, 168, 173, 186, 271, 343
 World War II, 54, 68, 89, 93, 147

 Xu, Terry, 103–104, 267

Yawning Bread, 209
 Yee, Amos, 228–229
 Yeoh Lam Keong, 49–62, 254
 Yong Vui Kong, 181–183, 273

 Zai Kuning, 37, 251, 281
 Zuraidah, Ibrahim, 16, 18, 72

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