

After the Inquiry

“A gripping novel, both a thriller and an examination into the dark soul of Singaporean bureaucracy. Written in the form of a series of reports, it demonstrates how cool, surgical language can rationalise even the most violent prejudices. A chilling and unforgettable portrait of a functionary who has found all the ways to checkmate his own conscience.”

—**Alfian Sa’at**

Resident Playwright of Wild Rice

Author of *Corridor* and *Malay Sketches*

“*After the Inquiry* is a riveting novel that casually exposes the pitfalls of our iron-clad officialdom. Through her incisive, witty prose, Jolene Tan presents a protagonist who is so comfortably entrenched in our systems that he doesn’t know where they end and where he begins. Part mystery, part character study, this novel reminds us of the shadow narratives that run parallel to the ones we are told about Singapore society’s fine-tuned machinery.”

—**Balli Kaur Jaswal**

Author of *Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows*

“*After the Inquiry* lays bare the human cost of Singapore’s much-vaunted stability, and asks who must be thrown overboard in order for the boat not to be rocked. Using the format of a government inquiry into a violent incident, Jolene Tan carries out her own investigation into the machinations of state apparatus, and presents her findings without comment—the results speak for themselves. A masterpiece of meticulous construction, with a central character whose voice is all the more chilling for its banality.”

—**Jeremy Tiang**

Winner of the Singapore Literature Prize 2018 (Fiction)
for *State of Emergency*

“Chilling in his reptilian intelligence, Jolene Tan’s protagonist brings to mind Ishiguro’s butler and Adiga’s “white tiger”. *After the Inquiry* is an incisive portrayal of hierarchy, (a)morality, and authoritarianism.”

—**Jing-Jing Lee**

Author of *How We Disappeared*

“Exceptional... an unsettling insight into bureaucratic cruelty, and the best thing I’ve read from Singapore for years and years.”

—**Peter Guest**

Acting Business Editor, *WIRED*

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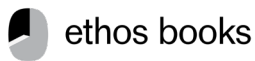
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After the Inquiry

Jolene Tan



*For Ian and Kirsten—
lighting candles, and cursing darkness*

“We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.”

—Anonymous US government official

“‘Everything is PR’ has become the favourite phrase... I try to protest—but they just smile and pity me. To believe in something and stand by it in this world is derided, the ability to be a shape-shifter celebrated. Vladimir Nabokov once described a species of butterfly that at an early stage in its development had to learn how to change colours to hide from predators. The butterfly’s predators had long died off, but still it changed its colours from the sheer pleasure of transformation... now there is no need to constantly change their colours, but they continue to do so out of a sort of dark joy, conformism raised to the level of aesthetic act.”

—Peter Pomerantsev

“Once we see, we cannot, must not, unsee.”

—Teo You Yenn

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Contents

This report is arranged into eight sections.

1. Overview
2. The first interview
3. The second interview
4. The third interview
5. The fourth interview
6. The fifth interview
7. The review of evidence
8. Conclusion

Overview

TO BEGIN, LET ME be clear about my purpose in filing this report. I start every document by laying out my objective in black and white, to avoid the sorts of difficulties I've seen entangle my colleagues.¹ Too often they set off with plenty of vim but little direction, soon becoming lost in the wild lalang of extraneous matters. In the end a bloated work product appears, difficult to read and twice the necessary length.

It's usually newbies who make this sort of error, and most sharpen up quickly after a gentle steer. The service is very choosy, as you know: "Russell Group or Ivy League?" covers many, a good chunk come under "both",² and even our local graduates, like Nithya, are solid. With this uniformly high calibre, even the greenest learn fast—as they should, considering the stakes. We're not knickknack-sellers governed only by profit, we're guardians of the public trust.

It's trickier when a higher-up makes a mistake. Despite our

1 Kindly do not read too much into the word "colleagues". I do not imply more than ordinary failings in any agency, department, Ministry, civic group, grassroots association or commercial counterpart. After over twenty years in service, I must be entitled to offer general observations, without being misused for facile point-scoring against specific persons.

2 E.g. myself.

standards, this happens from time to time, even at the highest levels.³ Assisting a superior in these situations can be delicate; it requires some finesse. Since I've achieved a modicum of seniority myself—and I state this baldly because it's well for me to be aware of it, false modesty does no good here—it's only responsible to avoid putting my juniors in the difficult position of needing to correct me.

Consequently, first of all, I shall state a goal. Just one, offering the discipline of a single, undiluted focus: a laserlike master logic to eliminate untidy judgment calls, those sticky gaps into which human error can creep. Happily, the present assignment may be straightforwardly summarised; and so:

Here I present a complete and accurate account of the events leading to the injury and subsequent hospitalisation of Sergeant Mohammed Hafiz bin Mohamad Zaini of the Singapore Police Force. My report is based on inquiries conducted with the principal parties connected to those events, where those parties are available, in accordance with the directions I received from the Deputy Secretary. This information will, I hope, equip the Ministry with a sound factual basis for assessing and responding to the incident.

Now, I'm not a cop. This isn't a police or disciplinary inquiry.

³ In fact, the highest levels are unexpectedly vulnerable. The government is not the unitary beast popularly imagined. Civil servants, such as I, are professional specialists; and while the political masters, the Ministers, are sometimes drawn from among us—fished from a well-stocked pool—the processes which elevate them can be unreliable. Nevertheless, technically speaking, Ministers are our ultimate superiors.

To put it crudely, such heads as are to roll have already rolled. I'm simply establishing what happened, for the benefit of the Ministry's understanding and perhaps future action. I belabour this because it can be confusing; indeed Nithya was confused when I briefed her, several weeks ago, in a small meeting room at our offices.

"It says here, there's already been an internal process?"

"Yes," I said. "By the police themselves. It's the SOP, if there's any unauthorised discharge of firearms, on top of the initial team inquiry, Internal Affairs gets involved."

She looked at her laptop again. "And they've taken disciplinary measures against the more junior sergeant who was there. The NSF, Lee Zhenliang."

"That's right.⁴ But no criminal charges. That struck me as unusual at first. Officers can only shoot in highly restricted circumstances. They have to assess the danger, whether a criminal has the ability and the opportunity to cause serious harm or death. It's normally a sure thing: if those conditions aren't met and a firearm goes off, the officer will get charged."

"Even if it's an accident?"

"What's an accident, when it comes to a gun? A gun isn't an

⁴ Frankly, it seems a bit pointless to take punitive measures against Sergeant Mohammed Hafiz, however richly he may deserve them, since he remains in a coma of uncertain future duration. Even if he should return to consciousness, doctors anticipate significant impairment, affecting his day-to-day functioning. On those grounds alone, to say nothing of his conduct, he would likely be demoted or discharged in any event.

animal, it doesn't run off by itself, or change with the weather. It's a mechanical tool, with clear procedures for maintenance and handling. A so-called accident raises the logical inference that those procedures were not followed; it demonstrates a lack of proper care. In fact, in one case where an officer was grappling with a suspect, and the suspect took the gun off him and fired it, they both got charged."

Nithya looked as if she had something to say here, but she took some time to word it. To her credit, she led not with a kneejerk emotional reaction, but a request for more information. "Was the officer following procedure in that case?"

"I know it seems unfair to punish someone who obeyed protocol. But the rule serves a larger purpose. Police take weapons safety very seriously. If you put the power of life and death in an officer's hands, it's only right to keep their minds focused on it. So we don't have a choice; the approach has to be strict."

I watched her mull this over. Nithya was more than six months in the post at this point; she'd shown herself more than capable, in a technical sense. She was smart and reliable, and she dug deep into assignments. Wrote clearly, presented well, had a good manner: energetic but not overbearing, with a tidy and tasteful appearance. It's awkward for an older man to advise female colleagues on such matters, so it's a relief for me when that isn't necessary.

Still, she was young, and not even the most decorated scholar arrives on day one in full possession of good judgment on matters of state. Between academic training, however sophisticated, and the daily realities of governance, lies a gap

which experience alone cannot bridge. Experience, you see, is only raw material; it can be refined into all the wrong lessons. A budding public servant needs, above all, *guidance*. The cultural wisdom bequeathed by our forebears, guarded through our careers, and passed to our successors, flowing through the veins and nerves of the service. Guidance gives experience value, by helping the young to properly *interpret* what they encounter and assess how to *respond*.

Every junior officer needs this, so don't misunderstand me when I say that I was evaluating Nithya carefully. I don't mean to cast aspersions on her; there's nothing damning or shameful in having more to learn. Danger only arises when some defect of temperament, some knotty irregularity lodged in the psyche, resists or even perverts education. But serious instances of this aren't common,⁵ and I was very far from suspecting anything of the kind here.

She was staring at the screen, clearly absorbed in thought, so I prompted her. "Any questions?"

"Yes," she said slowly. "I mean, I completely agree with the general principle of being strict. But in hostile encounters, like

5 Indeed they're so rare that you know their names already. That ex-President's Scholar who has stood for election in a dozen cranky guises. That self-styled public intellectual who tumbled into demagoguery and in the end had to apologise for her big mouth and go packing to a Taiwanese university. Those characters are exceptional in getting far enough to do real, if limited, damage. Most people with issues are checked much earlier in their careers, if not stopped at the door.

the case you described—the officer didn't exactly volunteer to hand the weapon over. His life was at risk, he would surely already have tried his hardest to keep the suspect from grabbing it. How would any punishment, any incentive, change his approach, or the outcome?"

"Perhaps it didn't affect that exact situation," I said. "But our job is about systems. We're focused not on the outcome in this or that individual case, but the overall outcomes in all cases."

The next point was important—I've had to make it to young colleagues many times—and I made sure I had her full attention as I went on.

"The service is a skewed slice of human nature, honest and competent. But it's naïve to design systems assuming that everyone is like that. Say we make a new excuse for hostile encounters; this applies not just to Nithya Rajan, Policy Analyst with first class honours, but every Tan Ah Kow, every NSF who slacks off. And why not slack off? If something goes wrong, just invoke the excuse and get away with it. Think of the staff time it would tie up to check every claim.

Genuine cases are maybe one in a million, but the lowered standards—from people exploiting loopholes, abusing our good intentions—aren't felt just in one freak event. Sloppiness infects every moment of every day.

You may feel for that one unlucky officer—okay. Civil servants forgo big private sector salaries because we have hearts. But to sway with every sob story on the margins is self-indulgence. Every system has trade-offs; we make rational decisions and stick to them. That's what it means to *take responsibility*."

Nithya considered this quietly. I didn't expect her to burst

into enthusiastic agreement right away. The odds were good that I'd have to say this to her again, in another way, on another day; and that was fine. These things take time.

After a while, she asked, "And Lee Zhenliang? You said it was unusual... why aren't there charges against him, then?"

"You can read the details later. But the gist is, his part in this was so small, and so entirely passive, that there's no risk of setting a precedent of any kind. It seems quite clear, he was just of the wrong rank in the wrong place at the wrong time. His only fault was not being any braver."

I didn't tell Nithya that the assignment had surprised me, too, when the Deputy Secretary handed it to me. Naturally I was already aware of the principal dimensions of the case, thanks to the Ministry's media monitoring operations. The skeletal tabloid coverage drew only muted interest from the public: data indicated low to moderate traffic for the articles in question. A few sketchy online forums did pause their ungrammatical reviews of prostitutes to chortle at the drama and the lunacy, and to devise one or two half-hearted memes. But they never really took off; and, praise the gods, the case went wholly unmolested by "alternative news sites" and "civil society", those muckraking clowns with their Manichean delusions. So I'd put it out of mind until the DS summoned me to her office.

"All seems about right," I said. "You get stupid people like this sometimes. It can't be helped. I'm just glad that nobody's tried to blow it up. Fortunately, it seems likely to pass peacefully under all radars."

"Perhaps," said the DS, Christine Fang, but she said it with a strong air of deliberate reserve, telegraphing that she didn't

fully agree. I'd worked with her long enough to know this could mean anything—or indeed nothing. She might have material knowledge, withheld for reasons good or bad;⁶ or it might be smoke and mirrors, she might just be trying for a distant tone to signal professional neutrality, while coming across, instead, as supercilious. The fact that she is so maladroit lends credence to rumours that she owes her position to her husband, likely the next Perm Sec at *his* Ministry. Now, insecurity over this perception might be the root of her incompetent posturing—that might make an interesting vicious cycle, if one were analysing a fictional character, perhaps—but for practical purposes, suffice it to say she is less impressive than her position and her relative youth suggest.

And if she had a task for me, I would insist on being properly equipped for it. In the first place, I had to know all there was to know. After all, it's usually the gnarly cases that come to me, the ones needing a surgical touch. Christine would probably rather chew off her own limbs without anaesthetic than admit it out loud, but she knows that I'm good at my job. So why waste me on something that looked so cut and dried?

“Why are we re-opening this, Christine? Do you have doubts about the decision?”

“It's not a—don't call it a re-opening. Think of it more as an audit. Everything is usually in order, but regular external checks promote the integrity of the process.”

⁶ Precious little comes above my security clearance, so—more likely bad.

“Are there grounds for concern?”

“Nothing particular has come to my attention. But the consequences of the case were serious enough... you understand, we want our position to be absolutely rock solid, no stone unturned, no surprises, if for some reason there are queries.” She paused. “You’re the last person to need reminding, that sometimes questions are asked, which... well, formal investigations focus on very precisely defined issues of lawfulness and disciplinary standards, and that doesn’t always cover every base.”

A tendentious way of indicating PR angles. I bit back my annoyance. All this crabwise dancing, and we were back to my very first question. “So *are* you expecting it to blow up? Everything’s been quiet, not a peep of trouble, and looks to stay that way. Come on, Christine, can you just square with me? What am I looking for?”

She didn’t quite sigh. “The facts, Teck. You’re looking for the facts. I’m counting on you for that; and so is Derek.”

Interest from the SMS?⁷ Now, this was something. “You mean—you mean, he—”

“I *mean* that he takes the thoroughness of our procedures and our duties to the welfare of our officers very seriously.”

Something clicked in my memory. “Wait, West Coast NPC is in Commonwealth Land Division. That’s Benedict Yeo. Is he involved?”

“The facts,” the DS repeated. “Stay on the facts.” She tapped the file on the table. In it sat a report which, I had to admit, (1)

7 Senior Minister of State, a sub-Cabinet position, not quite a full Minister.

was very comprehensive and (2) went nowhere near Benedict Yeo, Assistant Commissioner of Police, commander of the Division, and, as it happened, the semi-famous eldest son of the Deputy Prime Minister. It was a useful reminder not to get carried away. Perhaps Christine's irksome mannerisms simply were what they were, and meant nothing more.

Fine, we'd do things her way. I picked up the file without further comment.

The DS sat back and eyed me for a bit. "I'm glad you're on the team, Teck. What we need most of all is a safe pair of hands, and I have every faith that you'll provide just that." Her smile was broad and perfectly insincere.