

# **GOD***BSMACKED*

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*Godsmacked*  
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# GODSMACKED

Teng Jee Hum



“How was school today?  
Did they teach you how to believe,  
or did they teach you how to think?”

— Nathra Nader, to his son Ralph

In memory of my late father, Teng Eng Yong,  
and my late mother, Wang Moon.

To my wife, June, and our children,  
Yen Hui, Yen Lin, Kuan Ping, and Kuan Yung.

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The title *Godsmacked* is derived from the word “gobsmacked”.

**gobsmacked**  
[/gobsmakt/]

*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*

(adj.) British informal

Utterly astonished; astounded:

“the locals were gobsmacked when us lot trooped in”

Origin

1980s: from gob3 + smack1, with reference to being shocked by a blow to the mouth, or to clapping a hand to one's mouth in astonishment.



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1965

2015

## *Godsmacked:* Artist Statement

To be Singaporean is to be gobsmacked! There is no precedent. Whether you are Chinese, Indian, Malay or Eurasian, with your own entrenched cultural tradition, nothing would have prepared you for the singular phenomenon that has happened in the last half century, as has happened to me!

I was born in the 1950s in Singapore. Very early on, I experienced three nationality changes. I was firstly a colonised British subject, then a citizen of a merged Malaysia, and finally a citizen of a newly independent Singapore. I served variable stints of time in three uniformed services: briefly in the police uniform of the Special Constabulary (National Service), in the Singapore Armed Forces army uniform during full-time national service, and finally in the grey uniform of the Civil Defence Force. I learned English, Mandarin and a little Bahasa Melayu from school, and inherited a smattering of southern Chinese dialects from the home and neighbourhood. My ancestors were Chinese farmers (and imperial scholar-wannabes) from time immemorial, but I managed to attend a local Singapore university, and was then drawn into work in finance and banking, investing and managing others' wealth in abstract post-modernist instruments such as currencies, equities, fixed income and derivatives. Growing up, changes were unprecedented and life improved constantly, materially. Once, in the 1970s, it was deemed to be getting crowded on this little island for its limited resources. Now we are told there's not enough of us to produce GDP. The cleanliness of the air I breathe, the kind of water I drink and wash in,

my modes of getting around, the thoughts I think, and many of my other daily habits and actions (well, mostly reactions)—have all been specially moulded, fashioned, conditioned, calibrated and recalibrated... as part of an obtuse grand scheme of things. As it dawns on me, I realise I am a product of another's deliberations. This is who I am—a Singaporean.

One's cultural mores, world-view and attitude towards life are, I suppose, normally inherited from eons of social evolution, but here I seem to have mine downloaded from a central intelligence. Countless campaigns upon public campaigns over decades wrought changes to my mindset and reset my social behaviour. Singapore became an efficient economic machine, world beater and number one in many spheres and measures, foremost of which is per capita GNP. Such an achievement justifies recognition as to how Singaporeans collectively come by it—and we are in unanimous agreement that there is one single factor that outweighs all others combined. This one thing is Leadership, or shall we say, the leader—functionally also “founding father”, programmer, mega thinker and strategist, also a social engineer, hero, and creator. This book of art and critical essays addresses my fixation with him, his thinking and his methods, paying recognition to that one great source of influence that made me what I am. For love it or hate it—his way has become the only way that I have lived, and viewed the world, for over fifty years.

When I was born, this land was known as the British Straits Settlements. The clerk at the Registry of Births and Deaths took it as routine authorisation

to transcribe, upon the sound of my Chinese name uttered by my grandfather in Hainanese dialect from the original 3 written Chinese characters, into an English name made with letters of the alphabet. And this made-up name, Teng Jee Hum, is that which I have been known by and lived with ever since. Sometime in the 1970s, in this current period of the Republic of Singapore, citizens of Chinese descent are also registered at birth additionally with the hanyu pinyin (romanised Chinese) version of their names. In this Artbook, I am Teng Jee Hum, and also Ding YiFan. Both of these English versions are however still not my original chosen name, which is the complex form of three Chinese characters chosen by my paternal grandfather at my birth: 丁義範. It takes into account the family name, the generational name of my clan, and lastly my own individual name, with the last character thoughtfully chosen to blend together with the first two, for their sounds, meanings and pen-strokes to hopefully create a harmonious relationship with the cosmos for this newly-born individual. Such rich historical and cultural nuances are substantially lost in the registered English name.

As a young boy, I grew up the eldest of three brothers, my mother a housewife and my father a seaman, who came home on average only about two weeks a year. I remember spending a lot of my pocket money on comics and laboriously copying and drawing over and over again all the superheroes from both Marvel and DC Inc., as well as from Chinese comics, such as *The Water Margin* and *Romance of The Three Kingdoms*. My mother and grandmother often brought me to the Kuan Yin

temple where they prayed, and in primary school I would win book prizes for Catechism studies as well. I suppose those superheroes and icons in my youth were my role models to fill in the gap of an absentee father figure. My father retired from sailing at 60 and lived with us until his passing at age 84 in 2010. Looking back, the artworks featured in this book started around that time, without any conscious intention on my part as to the reason why I felt compelled to paint them. Looking back now on the evolving collection, it is a searching for identity, discovering the root influences of how I come to be this way. In doing so, I cannot avoid the Singapore Story, and the one person who has probably done the most for me, and to me.

Teng Jee Hum (Ding YiFan)

October 2014

P.S. On 23 March 2015, Singaporeans witnessed the end of an era with the passing of the first Prime Minister of the Republic of Singapore. The humongous outpouring of emotions revealed to me that I am not alone, that to be “Godsmacked” is to be Singaporean!

April 2015



*Half-Mast* (2015)