

Singapore Insights from the Inside

Editor: David Fedo



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Contents

Foreword by Tommy Koh	6	Celebrating Diversity	
Preface by Jean Tan	9	Chris Davies	70
Introduction by David Fedo	10	Sunanda K Datta-Ray	74
Singapore: Heart and Soul		Alvin Amadeo Witirto	79
Clifford Wong	18	Moch N Kurniawan	83
Rhoda Myra Garces-Bacsal	22	Le Huu Huy	88
Richard Hartung	27	Christopher Brenton	92
Dave Chua	31	Zhou Ji	96
Ronald Stride	34	Business in the Lion City	
Gregory Bracken	38	Joergen Oerstroem Moeller	102
Onward Singapore!		Ori Sasson	106
Christine Edwards	44	Hiroshi Sogo	110
Ron Kaufman	48	Henning Focks	115
Shirley Ngo	51	From Desert to Oasis	
Kay Vasey	55	Judith Kamm	122
Jason Pomeroy	59	Marie Le Sourd	129
Fredrik Härén	64	Janek Schergen	133
		Vichaya Mukdamanee	137
		Amongst the Singaporeans	
		Grace Lee	142
		Paul Rae	145
		Ben Slater	149
		Edsel Tolentino	153

Foreword

Tommy Koh

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tommy Koh
Ambassador-At-Large
Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Preface

Jean Tan

What is Singapore?

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

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

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

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

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

Jean Tan

Executive Director

Singapore International Foundation

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

Introduction

David Fedo

Foreigners in Singapore

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

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

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

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

Singapore's Diversity and Character

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

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

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

Not Perfect, but with Many Virtues

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How Singaporeans View Foreigners

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

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

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

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

Acknowledgments

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

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

Happy reading!

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

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

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

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

Richard Hartung

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

Finding the Singapore Soul

Dave Chua

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

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

Measuring the Soul: Is it Possible?

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Poetry of Singapore

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dave Chua

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

Boiling Pot of Races

Sunanda K Datta-Ray

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

Hindi for Deep

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

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

"You're Indian," she said.

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

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

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

"But he is!" I exclaimed.

"He has asked for exemption from Tamil!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Races in Singapore

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

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

This flexibility disappeared when it came to race.

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

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

But who was listening?

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

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

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

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

Cross-cultural Phenomena

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

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

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

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

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

Singapore through the Lens of An Overseas Indonesian

Alvin Amadeo Witirto

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

The 'Little Red Dot' in a Nutshell

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

Sunanda K Datta-Ray

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

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

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

Paul Rae

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

Larger Than Life: Meetings with Remarkable People in Singapore

Ben Slater

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

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

The Artist

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

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

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

The Gangster

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

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

The Collector

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

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

The Director

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

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

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

Ben Slater

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Uncle Freddie

Edsel Tolentino

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

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

Beginnings

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

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