

“If you live in Singapore, you know it is a place with more layers and complexities than meets the eye. Yet, it is not always possible to grasp what lies beneath the glossy stories of economic success, social harmony and political stability. Kirsten Han’s book—part reflexive memoir, part incisive reporting—is an informative, nuanced, and deeply humane series of essays that helps us better understand and appreciate the contradictions, tensions and power plays that are integral to the Singapore story. Read it to learn new things, read it to feel big emotions, read it to expand your thinking on the realities and possibilities of home.”

—**Teo You Yenn**

Sociologist and Author of *This is What Inequality Looks Like*

“The space Kirsten Han occupies in Singapore can be a lonely one—there is little reward for the journalism and activism she has dedicated herself to. This honest, personal and well-articulated account of pivotal moments in Han’s journey as an activist, overlapping with Singapore’s history, brings us into Han’s world in a way that is illuminating, thought-provoking and sometimes frightening. It is testament to a different Singapore that exists beyond the government-sanctioned tropes. Few have experienced the Singapore Han has—from the trolls to the police investigations to the government pressure—because few have fought for a better Singapore like she has. Yet Han is filled with optimism, hopeful that there can be a better version of the country she loves. *The Singapore I Recognise* is essential reading for every Singaporean, and anyone who wants to better understand why activists continue to fight against all odds.”

—**Shibani Mahtani**

International Investigative Correspondent, *The Washington Post*

“*The Singapore I Recognise* is the culmination of Kirsten Han’s work in journalism and activism spaces, where she has been a much-needed voice. In challenging the dominant narrative, she stakes a strong claim for alternative views to exist, proposing a more expansive vision of what this country could be. A powerful compilation of historical and recent events which serves as a reminder that change is possible, but must be fought for.”

—**Jeremy Tiang**

Author of *State of Emergency*

“Over the decades, Singapore’s increasingly liberal appearance as a glittering global city has been matched by ever more sophisticated modes of social and political control by the ruling party elite, whose legitimacy rests on widespread acceptance of its version of the national narrative. Activists, artists and academics who have dared openly to imagine different Singapores have had to pay the price. One such person is Kirsten Han. In this important book, Kirsten provides an illuminating account of her own formation, struggles and aspirations as an independent journalist, a human rights activist, and a political critic in a Singapore that she loves enough to put her own body on the line.”

—**Professor Kenneth Paul Tan**

Talent100 Professor of Politics, Film, and Cultural Studies,
Hong Kong Baptist University
Author of *Singapore: Identity, Brand, Power*

“When Kirsten Han sees something, she says something, especially when that something is an injustice that afflicts the weak in Singapore’s extremely privileged society. This book encapsulates the values she has fearlessly espoused for years, and for which she continues to pay a personal price. Unable to counter her arguments on the merits, the establishment has subjected her to smears and harassment. One day, her conscientious contributions will be lauded. Until then, Kirsten Han is the eye that too few in Singapore recognise. The country is blinder for it.”

—**Cherian George**

Author of *Air-Conditioned Nation Revisited*

To you, reading this...
You have more power than you know

The Singapore I Recognise: Essays on home, community and hope
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ISBN 978-981-18-3012-9 (paperback)

ISBN 978-981-18-6030-0 (ebook)

Published under the imprint Ethos Books

by Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd

#06-131 Midview City

28 Sin Ming Lane

Singapore 573972

www.ethosbooks.com.sg

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Cover design by Currency Design

Layout and design by Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd

Printed by Times Printers Pte Ltd, Singapore

1 2 3 4 5 6 27 26 25 24 23

First published under this imprint in 2023

Typefaces: Linux Libertine, Articulat CF

Material: 70gsm Enso Lux

National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name(s): Han, Kirsten.

Title: The Singapore I recognise : essays on home, community and hope / essays by
Kirsten Han.

Description: Singapore : Ethos Books, 2023.

Identifier(s): ISBN 978-981-18-3012-9 (paperback)

Subject(s): LCSH: Singapore--Politics and government. | Singapore--Social conditions.

Classification: DDC 959.57--dc23

The Singapore I Recognise

Essays on home, community and hope

Kirsten Han



ethos books

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This book contains descriptions of physical violence, mentions of incarceration and themes related to the death penalty, as well as references to arrests and interrogation. We recognise that the ways in which readers might respond to and deal with these issues may vary, as our relationships to these topics are unique. If you find yourself feeling overwhelmed, personally affected or unable to engage with this content at present, feel free to put this book down and talk to someone about how you feel, or consult the resources printed at the back.

Introduction: Claiming Recognition

“I CANNOT RECOGNISE the country Ms Han describes.”

This was how Ashok Kumar Mirpuri, Singapore’s ambassador to the United States, concluded his letter to *The New York Times* in 2018, rebutting an opinion piece I’d written for the paper.¹ My essay had described how Singapore and then-US president Donald Trump were drawing inspiration from one another when it came to capital punishment and the weaponisation of the discourse around ‘fake news’.²

The ambassador wrote, “Kirsten Han’s article paints Singapore as an authoritarian paradise, where critics of the government are squelched and drug traffickers are hanged.” Contrary to my claims, he argued, Singapore is a place where “we debate issues vigorously, online and off.”

Of all his counter points, the ambassador’s closing sentence stuck with me the most. I suspect that, as the ambassador of a country whose government is highly protective of its international image, he had to say something like that. But it’s also possible that His Excellency was entirely in earnest. Perhaps, as he wrote, the Singapore that he recognises is very different from mine.

Do you see what I see?

Every National Day we sing about “one nation, one people, one Singapore”. But the more I have explored, learnt, reported and written about Singapore over the last 13 years and counting, the more I have discovered—and continue to discover—that there are many, many

Singapores: a Singapore for the rich, a Singapore for the poor, a Singapore for citizens, a Singapore for migrant workers, a Singapore for the Chinese, a Singapore for ethnic minorities, a Singapore for the powerful, a Singapore for those who dissent. These Singapores are layered upon one another, creating sets and subsets of experiences that overlap and diverge.

Although life and politics aren't neat, people often think in binaries, pointing to competitive liberal democracies as models of 'freedom' while imagining authoritarianism in the form of totalitarian police states. Singapore confuses and confounds this. We have elements of both, and whether one perceives the country as free and democratic, or suffocating and authoritarian, can vary greatly depending on one's positionality.

Let me be upfront about where I'm coming from. I'm a Singaporean, an independent journalist and an activist. As such, I occupy a highly unusual position. Unlike local mainstream media journalists, I don't have to deal with editors who gatekeep for the ruling elite. Unlike foreign correspondents writing for international publications who rely on the authorities to renew their work visas, I have Singaporean citizenship and can't be chucked out of the country—not directly, anyway. My journalism and writing give me the opportunity to interview people from different walks of life and take a step back to ponder the larger picture of politics, democracy and society. As an activist, I'm immersed in civil society work—particularly around the issues of capital punishment, criminal punishment and civil and political rights—and I'm privy to the organising, advocacy and risk-taking that goes on within a relatively small circle of fellow Singaporeans. I hear gripes, gossip and musings from both activists and journalists, two groups of people who experience Singapore rather differently from the average person on the street.

Since I became involved in Singapore civil society in 2010, I've covered three general elections and borne witness to multiple death row cases, some of which ended with lives saved, although most did not. I've covered protests—or what passes for protests in Singapore—

and waited outside police stations to keep track of investigations into alleged offences committed by activists, ranging from contempt of court to what the state defines as ‘illegal assemblies’. I have been questioned by the police three times for investigations under the Public Order Act: I was given a stern warning for one, they decided not to take further action against me for the other, and as of June 2023, I’m still waiting for the conclusion of the third. I’ve also been issued a warning by the Attorney-General’s Chambers, via the Singapore Police Force, for alleged contempt of court, over an old Facebook post that I’d written five months prior. I challenged this warning in court but lost and ended up paying the Attorney-General’s Chambers S\$8,000 in legal costs.

Among the cases that I’ve written about—in features or commentaries for media outlets, reports for NGOs or in my own newsletter, *We, The Citizens*—are investigations into or charges against activists such as Jolovan Wham, who attracted police attention for offences as mundane as posing for a photo while holding up a piece of cardboard with a smiley-face drawn on it and went to prison for organising a forum where a foreigner participated via Skype. Another case was the jailing of Seelan Palay, who was arrested for a performance art piece where he walked to Parliament House with a mirror and stood outside it in silence. Then there were the police searches of the homes of activists Teo Soh Lung and Roy Ngerng, simply because they had published Facebook posts on the eve of Polling Day (when election campaigning is prohibited) and were accused of violating Cooling-Off Day rules. I’ve also reported on migrant labour issues and the suppression of workers’ rights, most recently during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 when thousands of male migrant workers were quarantined in stuffy dormitories for months on end.³

In other words, I’ve seen quite a lot of the stuff that gets cut out of government-sponsored public relations campaigns. The sorts of things that members of the establishment would declare they cannot recognise as Singapore.

Political freedom and the right to define Singapore

What does it mean to “recognise” a country? Whose recognition is deemed legitimate, and whose isn’t? Whose experience gets to define what Singapore is or isn’t?

What we see or know about Singapore is coloured by where we’ve come from and where we stand. For some people, the system in this city-state works a charm; for others, it’s a highly stressful nightmare. Many of us inhabit a middle space, where we enjoy the creature comforts of a modern city while also worrying about keeping up with the rat race and not putting a foot wrong in a society that loathes failure and punishes dissent.

To a fresh, casual observer, Singapore—with its advanced technology and gleaming skyline, its highly educated populace and widespread connectivity—doesn’t look at all like an authoritarian state. Unlike other countries, including some very close by, Singaporean activists don’t have to worry about being physically assaulted, kidnapped or assassinated. Some journalists have attracted the wrath of the state, but we aren’t arbitrarily arrested or jailed for our work. We don’t have people disappearing because of their political views or activities, or hear of bodies of exiled dissidents being found in foreign countries. Our online discourse is often rife with disagreement, strong language and, of course, irreverent memes.

Yet the lack of bodies on the streets or reporters thrown in prison doesn’t equate to freedom or democracy. Singapore is a country where a culture of fear has been normalised; the 2018 Reuters Institute Digital News Report found that 63 percent of Singaporean respondents reported being “concerned that openly expressing their political views online could get them into trouble with the authorities.”⁴ Politics has, for a long time, been viewed as ‘risky’ or ‘dangerous’. When we describe spaces in Singapore—from classrooms and workplaces, to the civil service and statutory boards, indeed any networks where one’s social capital depends on establishment connections or notions of respectability—as being ‘depoliticised’, what we mean is that only a very narrow band of political opinion is publicly tolerated. Singaporeans are free to be

openly political if the views expressed align with that of the ruling elite, because those positions are easily accepted as ‘common sense’. People who voice out their disagreement with the dominant narrative are the ones branded as ‘political’ or ‘radical’, and are often incentivised in school, at work, or even at the family dinner table to keep their thoughts to themselves.

Despite a vibrant political scene in its pre-independence years, today’s Singapore has a small and underdeveloped civil society, its growth and maturity having been stunted over decades. Arrests and detentions between the 1950s and the 1980s saw over a thousand people locked up without trial, removing activists and volunteers from their work and disrupting continuity.⁵ Today, Singapore’s civil society doesn’t just build on work and inroads made over decades; it is also relearning theories and practices because so much has been lost to those early instances of oppression.

This work is continually hampered by a multitude of rules and restrictions. Public order laws state that a single person could constitute an illegal assembly or procession. There is only one space in the entire country where protests and demonstrations can be staged without prior police permission and it certainly isn’t, as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong put to CNN correspondent Christiane Amanpour during an interview, “an enormous speaker’s field”.⁶ Permits to proceed with ‘cause-related’ activity anywhere else can be difficult, even impossible, for activists to procure. One also needs to be wary of other broad legislation pertaining to contempt of court, ‘fake news’ or foreign interference—and all this even before we start considering the invisible practices of ‘blacklisting’ or ‘greylisting’ that can make one’s life and livelihood difficult.⁷

Meanwhile, journalists have parallel struggles. The local mainstream media—spanning print, online, television and radio—has long been hobbled by legislation requiring licences and giving the government indirect influence over key appointments, as well as an entrenched culture of self-censorship.⁸ In 2021, Singapore Press Holdings spun out its media business, which publishes all the country’s newspapers, into SPH Media, a not-for-profit company receiving government funding

and chaired by a former Cabinet minister.⁹ Independent media outlets struggle to stay afloat in a country where accepting foreign funding, even if it's a legitimate grant for journalism, is either banned or risky, lest one be branded a 'foreign agent'. The local monied class is reluctant to fund such operations, since it might get them into the ruling party's bad books.¹⁰ Bloggers and independent journalists have been met with anti-'fake news' orders, investigations and lawsuits.¹¹

The result is a country that looks free, but where everyone has an internal calculus about whether their speech or actions are taking them too close to real or perceived red lines. This vigilance has become so internalised that it's possible to find Singaporeans who insist that there are no restrictions on their freedom even as they refuse to engage on some topics, or who have decided to buy themselves peace of mind by giving a wide berth to 'politics' and anything deemed 'political'. There's no need to worry about wandering out of bounds if you never go near the boundaries in the first place.

Now consider the question of recognising and defining Singapore in this context. With such power dynamics, some narratives and messages are widely amplified, while others are obscured, excluded, censored or self-censored out of public discourse. Members of civil society are constantly told that we are wrong, unfair or biased, or that we have 'agendas' that undermine the credibility of our testimony and our work. Minorities and marginalised groups have their lived experiences dismissed, as government ministers from the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) characterise passionate discussions of issues pertaining to racial justice and LGBTQ+ rights as 'Western imports'.¹²

In such an environment, the 'real picture' of Singapore is what is seen from the point of view of the PAP-led establishment.

The challenge of covering Singapore

Singapore is a small country full of contradictions, inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies. Many things happen under the surface, off the record or in shades of grey, difficult to fully document or clearly recount. This makes writing about it challenging and fascinating.

My country's successes are often trumpeted in the local and international press: we're held up as a model for everything from education to city planning to economic and social progress. While often warranted, this praise is also regularly overstated or presented without adequate context. There are aspects of Singapore, of our government's policies and their implementation, of our society and culture, that only become visible the closer to the ground one gets.

One example of this was in 2018, ahead of the extremely high-profile Trump-Kim summit hosted by Singapore. Many foreign reporters flew in for the media circus, and as mentioned above, CNN's star correspondent Christiane Amanpour sat down to interview Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. Towards the end of the interview, she brought up what she described as Singapore's "strict internal logic" and lack of political plurality. "Where do you think Singapore is going? Do you see any flexibility in the future? Can you open up more?" she asked.¹³

Lee relied on a predictable defence. He pointed to how Singaporeans had opted for his party time and again during elections. If Singapore was "strict", if there was a lack of plurality in the political landscape, it was because the people wanted it this way.

I remember watching snippets of the interview and reading the transcript, itching for Amanpour to press Lee harder. PAP leaders always point to elections when challenged on their dominance, their restrictions on civil and political rights, and the stunted political landscape. But the existence of elections aren't the only indicator of a democratic society, and even if they were, there are further questions to be asked about the fairness of Singapore's electoral processes. Still, the PAP is allowed to get away with this hand-waving answer, because the foreign press either don't have the background knowledge, the airtime, or the determination to dig deeper. Singapore is just one of many places, many stories, that they cover in the 24-hour news cycle, and we're rarely the most important.

Between the political obedience of the local media and the short attention spans of international outlets, there is a systemic lack of diverse and layered portrayals of Singapore and the people who live on this island.

One for the record

The accounts and analyses in this book capture events up to June 2023. They are drawn from my own experiences and observations, as well as from interviews and conversations with other members of civil society, many of whom I count as close friends, comrades and colleagues. I name many of them in this volume, and they're only a fraction of the people I've had the great fortune of knowing, working with and learning from over the past decade. There are many others I can't specifically mention in the interest of clarity and brevity, and still others who can't be identified due to concerns about potential repercussions, a worry as common as it is hidden in Singapore.

Writing this book has allowed me to take a more personal and reflective approach, and to include observations and trains of thought that don't fit into the reports, features or commentaries that are my usual bread and butter. In the following chapters, I examine the experience of unlearning myths and assumptions about Singapore, and struggling against propaganda and dominant narratives while running into walls that block access to information. I consider the impact of being disconnected from key aspects of Singapore history and argue for the necessity of transitional justice. I distinguish between civil society and civil resistance and describe what they look like in Singapore's context. I set down in writing the instances in which I've been smeared and attacked in the press and other public platforms and pick at my own figurative scabs so that I can document, for the record, how it feels to have a target on one's back. We always talk about the political and rights-based implications of bullying, harassment and oppression; less addressed are the personal, mental and emotional impacts. I express frustration with others' complicity in perpetuating oppression and authoritarianism, and shame about my own. And always, I think about power and structures and how they're used to dominate, silence and alienate, so that certain narratives are obliterated under the weight of others.

It hasn't been easy to write this book. Apart from the Imposter Syndrome that led to procrastination and false starts, the whole process

was also beset with delays precisely because of my struggles with the power structures that seek to dominate and control. There were periods where writing was put on the backburner because I had to spend hours dealing with police investigations, or when I was so emotionally drained from facing online harassment from pro-ruling party trolls that I couldn't bring myself to look at the drafts sitting on my laptop. In 2022, the year this book was initially scheduled for publication, the state resumed executions after a two-year hiatus during the COVID-19 pandemic, ultimately hanging 11 men for drug offences between March and October. My work on the book halted as I transformed into a full-time anti-death penalty activist, focused on supporting distraught family members and writing urgent reports on the death row cases, then stalled for months more when burn-out inevitably set in.

This book isn't meant to set the record straight or make any declarations about what the 'authentic' Singapore is. I'm not arguing for a binary of a 'true' or 'false' picture of the country. What I'm pointing out here is that the act of defining a country—of asserting the Singapore one recognises as the *only* Singapore—is an exercise of power. It is those in power who decide what can be stated and recognised as truth, and what gets dismissed and brushed off as 'revisionist', biased or false.

By writing this book, I'm pushing back and introducing an aspect of Singapore that's as much a part of the tapestry of this island's politics, culture and people as the image that the ruling elite chooses to present. There are instances where civil society experiences directly contradict government claims, and many more in which our perspectives fill in gaps and provide much-needed context, without which understanding would be incomplete—and indeed, sometimes a situation might be woefully, painfully misconstrued.

I'm not a neutral or detached observer in this experience. I'm a Singaporean with strong feelings about what's happening in my home, and I'm heavily invested in what's to come. I have been, and continue to be, an active participant in trying to shape Singapore's future. My perception and understanding of what I've seen, the people I've met and the accounts I've heard, are coloured by my own background and

political views—which in turn affect my encounters and my work.

Writing this book is important to me because I believe that sharing experiences can be empowering, for both writer and reader. During the 2020 general election—when, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a great deal of election campaigning and discussion was carried out online—I was blown away by the activity of young voters and their hunger for political participation and a voice in Singapore’s future. There was not just an appetite for joining existing civil society groups or political parties, but also mobilisation to create new organisations, collectives and spaces for resource-sharing and solidarity.

I was already working on this book at the time, and what I saw made me realise that increasing numbers of Singaporeans are willing to question—to varying extents—hegemonic ‘hard truths’, and to seek, create and occupy spaces that we can call our own. I hope that by sharing what I’ve seen, heard and been involved in over the past 13 years, I can contribute to our collective learning and empowerment.

I must acknowledge the work that has come before, books like *The Art of Advocacy* and *1987: Singapore’s Marxist Conspiracy 30 Years On*.¹⁴ Academics and other commentators, such as Jothie Rajah, Lynette Chua, Cherian George, Donald Low, Michael Barr and Sudhir Vadaketh, have also enriched Singaporean public discourse with their research and analysis; I’ve learnt so much from their work and, in some cases, their friendship. I don’t aspire to beat these experts in analysing Singapore’s legal system, economic policy, history or politics; you might not believe me by the time you finish reading this book, but I don’t like to get into fights I know I can’t win. What I hope to contribute is my take on Singaporean politics and society as someone who is engaged in activism on the ground, and who has, sometimes involuntarily, been in the thick of things.

I’m also writing this book because I’m a strong believer in documentation. I believe that setting things down for the record is important, not just for contemporaneous activism but for future reference and, in the longer term, the historical record. This is especially important to me considering what I’ve already outlined: in an environment where

there are voices and stories that the powerful continually suppress, memory and storytelling are important forms of resistance.

“I cannot recognise the country Ms Han describes,” said Singapore’s ambassador to the United States. The contents of this book might be presented as an ‘alternative’ narrative or an account of ‘the other side’ of Singapore. But these stories aren’t ‘alternative’ to anything. They just *are*, and they have as much right to be acknowledged as part of Singapore as any other. This book is an act of claiming that right.

Endnotes

1 *The New York Times*, 26 April 2018, Ashok Kumar Mirpuri, “A False Portrait of Singapore,” accessed 17 January 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/26/opinion/a-false-portrait-of-singapore.html>

2 *The New York Times*, 28 March 2018, Kirsten Han, “What Trump Is Learning From Singapore — And Vice Versa,” accessed 17 January 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/28/opinion/trump-singapore.html>

3 If you are interested in reading more about any of these cases, here are some articles to get you started:

Hong Kong Free Press, 11 April 2021, Candice Chau, “Interview: Singapore’s smiley-face activist Jolovan Wham says he just wanted to make a point,” <https://hongkongfp.com/2021/04/11/interview-singapores-smiley-face-activist-jolovan-wham-says-he-just-wanted-to-make-a-point/>

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10 *Freedom Film Festival*, 2019, Calum Stuart, “An Online Citizen,” accessed 22 January 2022, <https://vimeo.com/368827287>

11 As of 2023, Singapore ranks 129 out of 180 countries and territories in a press freedom index by Reporters Without Borders. See here for their press freedom report on Singapore: <https://rsf.org/en/country/singapore>

12 *CNA*, 1 February 2021, “Gender identity issues ‘bitterly contested sources of division’; Singapore ‘should not import these culture wars’: Lawrence Wong,” accessed on 11 April 2023, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/moe-gender-identity-issues-gender-dysphoria-culture-wars-296366>

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14 Eds. Constance Singam and Margaret Thomas, *The Art of Advocacy in Singapore* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2017); Eds. Chng Suan Tze, Low Yit Leng and Teo Soh Lung, *1987: Singapore’s Marxist Conspiracy 30 Years On* (Singapore: Function 8 Ltd, 2017).