

Not Born in Singapore — Fifty Personalities who Shaped the Nation

By Tng Ying Hui
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IPS Research Assistant Tng Ying Hui began working on [Not Born in Singapore – Fifty Personalities who Shaped the Nation](#) in September 2014. This IPS project aims to tell the stories of individuals whose efforts had contributed substantially to Singapore’s progress from Third World to First. They did so by making their mark in the fields of the economy, science and medicine, education and society, the arts and sports; helping businesses to flourish; and by honing and polishing the capabilities of Singaporeans, to help them and Singapore arrive on the global map of success. Ms Tng joined IPS after completing her master’s degree at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver. She was tasked to develop the final list of 50 individuals, conduct research and interview them, and write their stories for the book. IPS launched the book on 27 November 2015. Here are Ms Tng’s thoughts on the book launch.



About 90 guests attended the launch, including those who were featured in the book, their family members, academics, policymakers and other members of the public. Philip Yeo, Chairman of SPRING Singapore, was the guest of honour. Mr Yeo, a top civil servant, had been mentioned frequently by several of the individuals featured in the book, because of the role he played in developing Singapore's biomedical sciences industry and convincing top talent to relocate to Singapore.

To me, the book launch signified simultaneously an official conclusion to about a year of hard work and the first time the final versions of the stories would be read by the stars of the book — the individuals and their families. It was a celebratory event, but I could not help feeling slightly anxious at the many "what ifs" — what if there was a career-destroying mistake, what if the book was not well-received and what if people did not show up at the launch?

But as soon as the guests started streaming in and upon seeing familiar faces, such as those of dancer Santha Bhaskar, entrepreneur and businessman Alain Vandendorre and social work trailblazer Ann Wee, I managed to cast these uncertainties aside. I was delighted to meet some of those whom I spoke to over the phone and email, but never had the opportunity to meet in person, particularly 94-year old Hsueh Ying, wife of Confucian scholar Professor Wu Teh Yao. Prof. Wu had passed away in 1994. His son, Wu Ching-mai, who resides in Taiwan, had travelled here to attend the launch with his mother.

In my opening remarks, I reflected on some thought-provoking and inspirational stories that left a deep impression on me. Among these stories was the love story of Mrs Bhaskar and her husband, K.P. Bhaskar, who are known as the leading lights of Indian dance here. The respected academic Professor Wang Gungwu described the student movement in Singapore in the volatile period of the 1950s, and this brought what I had read in history and politics books to life. I also understood how memorable and deeply personal the task of forming Singapore's SAF had been for the Israeli commander, Brigadier-General Yaakov Elazari, after speaking to his wife and daughter, who had lived here with him in the 1960s. Similarly, former CEO of ST Microelectronics Pasquale Pistorio had so much life and zest in him when he spoke of his job, even though he had retired a decade ago. At some point during our conversation I thought he might jump up from his seat with excitement. His passion was truly infectious.



In closing, I said that my hope was that Singapore could “become a truly multi-cultural society that values diversity rather than one divided by ethnic categories or between local and foreigners.” Mr Yeo, who gave a 10-minute speech before launching the book, added: “Importing foreigners and foreign firms to build up new fields in biomedical sciences, research and industry created good jobs for Singaporeans and has helped Singapore capture opportunities in a competitive global marketplace.” But to remain “internationally broad and rich in talent”, Singapore has to draw its foreign talent from many sources, he said.

Edmund Wee, Chief Executive Officer of Epigram Books, the co-publisher of this book, explained why he had been keen on the project. He said that in the SG50 celebrations of Singapore’s Golden Jubilee last year, the contributions of foreigners had been largely unmentioned. *Not Born in Singapore* thus plugs this gap, he said.

In his closing speech IPS Director Janadas Devan reminded all that the celebration of foreigners’ contributions “is not to deny the role played by the Singapore-born but to acknowledge that our story is ... of co-workers tilling the land of the future.” He added, “As we read through these 50 stories of 50 different individuals, let us also remember that diversity of culture, language, race, religion and passion is part of the richness of Singapore.”

The event concluded with those featured in the book and their family representatives being invited on stage to receive a copy of the book and a photo plaque. As a chapter in my life draws to a close, the bitter-sweet memories of putting a book together will stay with me for a long time.



Tng Ying Hui is now with the Arts, Culture and Media research cluster at IPS. Not Born in Singapore — Fifty Personalities who Shaped the Nation can be purchased in bookstores or via [Epigram's online store](#) for \$35 (paperback) or \$45 (hardcover).

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