

To Singapore with Love and Diplomacy

Foreign ambassadors share what they most admire about the Little Red Dot, and their criticisms.

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AHEAD of Singapore's golden jubilee next year comes a new book launched last month comprising 61 essays by former ambassadors and high commissioners to the Republic.

Titled *Volume 3 Of The Little Red Dot: Reflections Of Foreign Ambassadors On Singapore*, it is co-edited by Chang Li Lin, Joanna Koh and myself. We thought it would be interesting to invite the senior diplomats who had served here to share their thoughts and reflections.

The diplomats come from 43 of the 70 countries which have embassies or high commissions in Singapore.

The great majority of the essays express a highly laudatory view of Singapore. Indeed, the book could have been named, *To Singapore With Love*. (Nothing to do with Tan Pin Pin's film of the same title, I might add). Many also provide insight into what the rest of the world see as the "secrets" of our success, and one or two provide food for thought on the future.

One of the essays that touch the heart is that by the former ambassador of Mexico, Mr Eduardo Ramos-Gomez, and his Canadian-born wife, Pam. Visiting Singapore as tourists in 1997, they secretly cherished the hope that, one day, they would move from their home in New York to Singapore. A year later, their wish came true when the new president of Mexico offered the ambassadorship to Eduardo.

Unlike their diplomatic colleagues, Eduardo and Pam chose to send their three young children, two boys and a girl, to local schools. They learnt Chinese as their second language.

When Eduardo's appointment ended in 2001, he returned to his law firm in New York. However, he left his older son in Anglo-Chinese School (ACS) to complete his PSLE. In 2006, Eduardo's law firm sent him back to Singapore to open an office. Their two sons have since completed their national service. Like a good ACS father, Eduardo believes that, for Singapore, just like the school's motto, "The best is yet to be".

Another moving essay comes from Mr Joergen Moeller, who, from 1989 to 1997, served as the state secretary in Denmark's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the equivalent of a permanent secretary. He could have chosen any capital in the world for his posting as ambassador in 1997.

He chose Singapore, a post which he held until 2005.

Since then, Joergen and his Vietnamese wife, Kieu, have remained in Singapore. He is a distinguished economist and is the author of several well-reviewed books. He teaches at the Singapore Management University and is affiliated to the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and the MFA Diplomatic Academy.

What has most impressed him are our economic competitiveness, our safety, the strength of the family and our social harmony. He is also impressed that "the Singaporean elite focused upon doing something for Singapore, thinking of the future for the country, and being fully aware that their prime duty was to look after the interest of the nation - not their own interest".

The Secret of Singapore's Success

SEVERAL writers have tried to identify what they considered to be the secret of Singapore's success. Mr Patrick Van Haute (Belgium) attributed it to: "Keeping its economy open, joining the fight against protectionism, building a world-class education system, investing in the skills of its workforce, in knowledge-based assets, in foreign economies through FDI (foreign direct investment), participating in the global value chains with highly efficient accompanying services."

Mr Juan F. Cordero (Costa Rica), meanwhile, pointed to Singapore's "vision, leadership, organisation, transparency, continuity, discipline and authority".

But for Mr Mohamed Abdel Rehim El-Zorkany (Egypt) the success story drew on "tolerance, respect, justice, the rule of law, a fair share and sense of ownership, for each and every one".

From Saudi Arabia, Dr Mohamad Amin Kurdi highlighted three points: "First, the remarkable success achieved in turning the problem of ethnic and religious frictions into a harmonious co-existence enriching the Singaporean culture.

"Second, the excellent management of the human resource, which allows Singapore to be among the best providers of management expertise for ports, airports and industrial estates and small-scale industrial estates.

"Third, the ability to always be vibrant."

Views from the West included that of Mr Alan Hunt (United Kingdom) who wrote: "Much of the credit for Singapore's remarkable success was attributed to the foundations laid by Lee Kuan Yew. And of all his many endowments, the greatest was the eradication of corruption and reinforcement of the rule of law."

Americans J. Stapleton Roy and Steven Green pointed to the quality of leadership, with Roy writing: "Living in Singapore reinforced my conviction that the quality of leadership is the most decisive factor in human affairs."

The Importance of Education

SEVERAL pointed to Singapore's emphasis on education as the decisive factor. Mr Juan Martabit (Chile) wrote: "The education of Singapore is the key to its rapid success, generating the human resources necessary to compete with the best in the world."

Mr Paul Madden (UK) noted that "the scholarship system that enables bright kids from humble backgrounds to go to the world's top universities, and then secure their talents for the public good, at least initially, is very impressive".

Singapore's success in promoting and maintaining racial and religious harmony impressed many writers. For example, Mr Abdulaziz Ahmed Aladwani (Kuwait) said that he was amazed by "the harmonious living among different ethnicities. While each group is encouraged by the Government to have a strong cultural identity and to be proficient in their mother tongue, these groups identify themselves first and foremost as Singaporeans".

Mr Folkmar Stoecker (Germany) wrote that Europeans could learn from Singapore's successful management of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society. Dr Sajjad Ashraf of Pakistan said: "The harmony of celebrating different cultures strikes me particularly because in comparison Pakistan started as a united nation yet it has faltered on its way."

National resilience was a feature for some. Ms Doreen Steidle (Canada) was in Singapore when it went through two traumas and a crisis: the 9/11 terrorist attack on America, the Bali bombing in 2002 and the Sars crisis of 2003. She was tremendously impressed: "Resilience, strength of character, determination and perseverance as well as a strong dose of pragmatism - these were the characteristics of the people of Singapore, their leadership and the nation that I came to admire."

Several praised the diplomacy of Singapore. Mr Frank Lavin (US) described the eight rules of the Singapore school of diplomacy. Mr Takaaki Kojima (Japan) identified the two characteristics of Singapore's diplomacy.

And Mr Ryu Kwang Sok (South Korea) cited three cases in which Singapore had not given in to pressure by the great powers and said that Korea should emulate Singapore's example. However, institutions languish when their lovers are uncritical and their critics are unloving. Singapore needs loving critics and critical lovers.

It is natural that several of our European and American friends should find our political system to be sub-optimal. They would like Singapore to become a liberal democracy like their own countries. When such criticisms come from our Asian friends, however, we should reflect deeply. For example, Dr Park Sang Seek (South Korea) wrote about Singapore's "three Achilles' heels: democratic deficit, economic inequality and a pseudo-non-aligned foreign policy".

Mr Yang Wenchang (China) recalled that Mr Lee Kuan Yew had told him his goal, "is to transform the country into an 'olive-shaped' society - the middle class was the majority at the centre, forming a broad base, with the rich and the poor, smaller in number, at either end, like an olive". Mr Yang would be very disappointed that the current income distribution in Singapore makes us resemble a pear, and not an olive.

What about the future? One of the most thoughtful writers, Mr Yoichi Suzuki (Japan), summed it up this way: "There can only be about a dozen top-class leading hubs/cities in the world.

"Singapore faces a bigger challenge than others being the only one without a national hinterland to support it. But as we move more and more into a border-free world at many levels, margins of manoeuvre for Singapore will become bigger. "I wish Singapore will play the game as smartly as it has done until now."

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