

BOOK LAUNCH

**“Management of Success : Singapore Revisited” (2010)
Edited by Terence Chong**

14 September 2010, 3.00pm, ISEAS Seminar Room II

1 Ambassador Kesavapany, Dr Terence Chong, Mr Ngiam Tong Dow, friends from the diplomatic corps, Ms Irene Ng, MP and biographer of S Rajaratnam, chapter writers, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

2 First, I would like to thank Amb Pany and Dr Chong for inviting me to launch this big and weighty book. My wife has observed, after watching me struggle over many weekends to complete reading the 32 chapters of the book, that in future, it would be wise for me to decline the honour of launching such a voluminous book.

3 Second, much to my wife’s consternation, I have not only read the new book, but have also re-acquainted myself with the 1989 edition of Management of Success. I did so partly for sentimental reasons, because I was a friend of the two co-editors, and partly because I wanted to compare the two books. Professor Kernial Singh Sandhu was more than just a friend. He was my tennis partner. I am pleased to note that Professor Paul Wheatly’s son, Julian, had worked in Singapore, but has returned to the US.

4 Third, what are the differences between the two books? Apart from size, I have noticed a number of other differences. The 1989 edition had a two-page note containing a statistical summary of the topographical characteristics of Singapore. This could have reflected Prof Sandhu’s personal interests as a geographer. The 1989 edition contained ten photographs, five of which were taken by the editors. The 2010 edition contains no photographs, perhaps a reflection of the fact that neither Pany nor Terence is a talented photographer. I have also noticed that of the 53 contributors to the 1989 edition, only four, Koh Tai Ann, Lee Soo Ann, Linda Lim and Yap Mui Teng, have contributed to the 2010 edition. As an old timer, I welcome their re-appearance and enjoyed reading their essays. But, the biggest difference between the two books is in their terms of reference.

Dr Chong states: “This volume seeks to achieve two primary objectives: first, to reassess key public policies that have shaped Singapore since 1989; and second, to offer a critical update on the critical issues that have dominated public discourse in Singapore”. Dr Chong fails to include in his terms of reference one of the three objectives of Sandhu and Wheatly. They wanted the book to “offer the most comprehensive evaluation of the achievements of the government and people of Singapore” between 1959 and 1989.

5 Fourth, one of my criticisms of the 2010 book is that it does not give the readers a comprehensive evaluation of the achievements of Singapore in the 20 years between 1989 and 2009. Let me take the economy as an example. It would have been helpful to inform the readers that Singapore’s GDP had grown from \$56 billion in 1989 to \$265 billion in 2009, our per capita income from \$16,000 to \$48,000, our ranking on the UNDP’s Human Development Index had improved from No. 35 to No. 23, and our foreign reserves had grown from \$38 billion to \$263 billion. This is an impressive record of achievements. Our gini coefficient has, however, regressed from 0.436 to 0.478. I agree with Lee Soo Ann and Linda Lim that growing social inequality is one of our critical challenges. The growing disparity and the hardship faced by the lowest 20 per cent of our workers is a threat to our social cohesion and inconsistent with our policy of inclusive growth. As a Straits Times correspondent has recently commented, Singapore is a first world country with a third world wage structure. I welcome the recent debate (ST, 2 Sep 2010) between Prof Hui Weng Tat and Prof Lim Chin on whether Singapore should consider introducing a minimum wage or to fine-tune the Workforce Income Supplement Scheme, aka workfare, in order to help our fellow citizens who work in low-paying jobs. The argument against a minimum wage is that we should let the market regulate wages. However, is it not true that the market is not infallible? Is it not true that, when there is a market failure, the state should intervene in order to make the world a fairer one? I note that every advanced country and economy, including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong, has a minimum wage. We need not follow the practices of others. However, it is incumbent upon us to innovate and to deliver better governance and inclusiveness.

6 Fifth, the one area in which I find the book the least satisfactory is in culture and the arts. I must, however, confess my interests. I was the founding chairman of the National Arts Council (NAC). I chaired

the 1992 Censorship Review Committee. I was a member of the team which conceptualised and oversaw the building of the Esplanade and was a director of its board. I am currently the chairman of the National Heritage Board (NHB). I am, therefore, not an objective analyst. However, I would humbly submit that in the 20 years between 1989 and 2009, Singapore had undergone a cultural transformation. The first Minister of the Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA), George Yeo, is a visionary. In the nine years when he led MITA, he re-invented our public library system into one of the best in the world, built new museums, fought for state support for arts education, raised the social status of our artists, built the Esplanade, and created the conditions which have enabled us to become a more cultured and culture-loving people. Singapore was once described as a cultural desert. No one would do so today.

7 Prof C J W L Wee and Dr Terence Chong should not be so dismissive of the progress we have made in the last 20 years in culture and the arts. It is also not correct to say that we have been motivated primarily by our wish to attract foreign talent or economic growth. I cannot, therefore, agree with Dr Chong's statement: "That Singaporeans enjoyed the spillover cultural benefits of the government's efforts to woo foreign talent seems incidental". Speaking for myself, I can honestly say that everything I have done, at NAC, the Esplanade and NHB, and in liberalising our censorship policies and procedures, has been done primarily for Singapore and Singaporeans. Singaporeans were and are the principal, not incidental, beneficiaries of our efforts. Let me back up my assertion with some facts and figures. In 1989, the National Library Board (NLB) had eight libraries. Today, it has 23 libraries. It made 9.3 million loans in 1989 and 32 million in 2009. When I became chairman of NHB, our museums had an annual visitorship of 500,000. In 2009, we had 2.6 million visitors to our museums. Today, all Singaporeans who are students or over the age of 60, enjoy free admission to NHB's museums. Another 6.3 million attended our Heritage Festival and other outreach activities, many of which are free. 6.8 million people visited the 52 members of our Museum Roundtable. Over 80 per cent of our visitors to these festivals were Singaporeans. In 2009, the Esplanade welcomed 1.8 million people to its ticketed and non-ticketed activities. 75 per cent were Singaporeans, 20 per cent were permanent residents and 5 per cent were tourists. In 2009, 71 per cent of the concerts at the Esplanade were presented by local groups and 29 per cent by foreign groups. In 2009, the Esplanade

welcomed 1.3 million people, mostly Singaporeans, to its free concerts. As for the NAC, between 1991 to 2009, it made grants totalling \$74.7 million to our arts groups, awarded 1009 bursaries and 53 scholarships, provided subsidised housing amounting to \$40 million to artists and arts groups, and provided our cultural medallion winners \$3 million of prize money. The larger point I want to make is that it is perfectly acceptable to criticise, but one must do so on the basis of fact and reason.

8 Let me conclude. The two criticisms I have made against the book should be viewed in perspective. There are many things I like about the new book and it contains many excellent chapters. I like the fact that the new book includes topics which were not in the 1989 edition. I also like the fact that the list of contributors includes some of our younger scholars and some iconoclastic and contrarian thinkers. Like Minister Khaw Boon Wan, I like rebels with a good mind and a kind heart. There is a broad spectrum of views contained in the book. This is, therefore, an important book. It contains many thought-provoking essays. The fact that such a book can be published in Singapore today is a sign of the progress we have made in the last 20 years. The intellectual space in Singapore has broadened. The culture of tolerance for alternative and dissenting views has grown. In the spirit of a loving critic, I am happy to launch the book and hope that it will stimulate many respectful debates among members of our thinking class and between the scholars and the policy makers. I hope the debates will be conducted on the basis of fact and logic and on what my good friend, Prof Tu Wei-ming of Harvard University, calls the art of deep listening. All of us need to learn to listen deeply to others, especially those with whom we disagree.

9 I urge all of you to buy at least one copy of the book each. Thank you very much.

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Media reports of the launch can be found here

- *The Straits Times*. 2010. [New forum on state of the nation](#)  20 September
- *联合早报*. 2010. [许通美声援最低工资制](#)  15 September
- *The Straits Times*. 2010. [Basic pay: Tommy Koh weighs in](#)  15 September