

## **New forum on state of the nation**

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IF THERE is one book on Singapore I consider instrumental in my intellectual formation as a political journalist, it is *Management Of Success: The Moulding Of Modern Singapore*, edited by K.S. Sandhu and Paul Wheatley.

The book appeared in 1989. I graduated from the University of Cambridge in 1990 and began work in *The Straits Times* as a political reporter in 1991.

Over the years, I covered major political events as they unfolded: three general elections; parliamentary debates on the formula to peg ministerial salaries to the private sector and the elected presidency; the change in premiership from Mr Goh Chok Tong to Mr Lee Hsien Loong; and the recalibration of the social safety net with the introduction of Workfare.

The Sandhu and Wheatley collection was a constant intellectual companion through those years. Its wide range of essays brought me up to speed on events up to 1989, with a mixture of fact, solid analysis and stimulating opinion. When I wrote my own book on the history of the public service (*Pioneers Once More*), I dipped into the collection once again - and it did not disappoint, with cogent essays on the history of the public service and the colonial legacy. I acknowledged my intellectual debt to the 1989 volume - and added the wistful thought that it cried out for a sequel.

So it was with anticipation this month that I picked up *Management Of Success - Singapore Revisited*, edited by Terence Chong.

The new book invites comparison with the first, given its title and its brief to authors, who were told to pick up from where the earlier book had left off. It is organised similarly, with sections on leadership and policy, economic restructuring, modification of the environment, transformation of society, community and national security, and life in Singapore.

Comparisons can be insidious, but since they are invited, the new book at 638 pages in a larger font, has half the heft of the first volume at 1,134 pages in close print. The new book has a more eclectic range of authors beyond academics: For example, it includes an intriguing ground-up perspective of opposition parties' tactics by blogger Alex Au, and an impassioned argument for more green spaces by green activist Geh Min.

In the first volume, there were over 120 tables and figures - a valuable resource for the reader. The 2010 volume has 33. And indeed, except for some chapters on the economy and social mobility, this volume is grounded less in empirical data and more in concepts and opinion.

Good academic essays elucidate and challenge. One afternoon last week, I finished my work for the day and sneaked off for a break for tea and kaya toast at Ya Kun - with law lecturers Michael Hor and Thio Li-ann for company. They weren't there, of course, but their words were, and what an invigorating tea it was.

Hor splices the laws on sexuality - in particular, homosexual acts between men and marital rape - and concludes there might be 'opportunity for our courts to adjudicate' as to whether recent amendments to these laws were constitutional, stating that 'there are definitely credible grounds' to consider such an action.

This dispenses with Singapore's laws, international treaties and policies on human rights with precision, pointing out Singapore's penchant for 'soft' guidelines rather than hard legal sanctions or rules when it comes to issues like discrimination in the workplace.

She highlights the double talk of the Singapore state when it comes to human rights: 'The language of human rights is spoken internationally to demonstrate compliance with international standards, while it is muted domestically, presumably to mute a rights-oriented political discourse.'

At the launch of the book last Wednesday, seminar participants at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, which published the book, were concerned whether it would be viewed as too critical, with the plea (presumably to the Government) that the overall thrust of the book pays due tribute to Singapore's success, and that the critical points should be viewed in context.

Indeed, those who come expecting to read radical criticism of Singapore's success story will be disappointed. As good academics, most of the authors give due consideration to official policy positions. Indeed, many of the chapters are written as competent chronologies of events since 1989, rather than as critiques.

There are certainly thoughtful critical perspectives. But perhaps because of the ubiquity of the Internet, many of the critical perspectives in this volume have already been well ventilated - and defanged.

For example, the question of whether Singapore's progress in the past 20 years has benefited mainly a foreign and local elite at the expense of the ordinary citizen, is one interwoven into many chapters of this book - on the economy, culture, labour and meritocracy. It is also an issue that has dominated parliamentary, media and cyberspace forums in recent years. Two chapters are particularly insightful on this issue.

One, by economists Linda Y.C. Lim and Lee Soo Ann - provocatively entitled 'Globalising state, disappearing nation' - provides a vigorous critique, suggesting that Singapore's extremely open labour and capital market 'arguably empowers and enriches wealthy foreigners, and the state itself, more than it does average local citizens'.

The other by geography academic Pow Choon Piew looks at Singapore's recent attempts to remake itself as a global city, complete with iconic megaprojects (Singapore Flyer, Marina Bay and the integrated resorts) within the context of 'urban entrepreneurialism', with the Urban Redevelopment Authority as marketeer, and as an example of an 'exhibitionary complex' (showing off grand public spaces).

Pow writes: 'While prestigious mega-projects may often be deemed structurally relevant for globalising cities, these grandiose projects may be socially disengaged with the majority of the 'heartland' population who, apart from being awestruck by the monumental scale and extravaganza of these developments, have little emotional depth or input in these spectacular spaces.'

Another cornerstone of the People's Action Party Government's policy that receives a critical look is meritocracy. Ho Kong Weng and Kenneth Paul Tan argue that meritocracy when entrenched becomes a form of elitism, with the well-resourced able to pass on their institutional advantages to family, kin or social networks.

As various authors also note, globalisation of the past 10 years has seen incomes at the bottom 30 per cent fall or stagnate, raising legitimate questions as to how meritocratic Singapore is today.

But again, these views have been well discussed publicly - sometimes by the same authors in

columns in these pages.

Another critical theme that runs through this book concerns the 'grindingly slow' (Hussin Mutalib) pace of political liberalisation in Singapore since 1989. Indeed, several authors note that the same concerns raised in the 1989 volume - such as the dominance of the state - remain relevant in 2010.

Political science lecturer Ho Khai Leong concludes that the PAP has in fact consolidated and strengthened its hold on various institutions in recent decades - including Parliament, the unions, government-linked companies and the media.

Journalists-turned-academics Tan Tarn How and Cherian George both consider the time ripe for a more liberal media policy, in view of the ascendance of new media - with George arguing that liberalisation is a rational response to this development, and Tan concluding that 'things may change, but still stay the same'.

The book as a whole grapples with the main theme - the management of success. As various authors note - including Eugene Tan on the social compact and Terence Chong in his masterly concluding chapter - today's Singaporeans take success as a given.

There is no sense of awe among those born after independence that Singapore occupies such a high position in the global league. It is just accepted as part of the natural order of things. Yet Singapore's political system remains premised on the assumption that the city-state is poised on a knife's edge - that a wrong choice at the ballot box, wrong policies, wrong laws could pitch the Republic into chaos.

The book makes an attempt to engage with Singapore's past, but only up to 1959, with even its colonial heritage barely acknowledged.

Another issue that could have been better discussed is poverty. There is much referencing of the income gap and a consensus that this is the result of an open economy and globalisation. But there is scant attention to what can be done about it.

Instead, an inordinate amount of space is given to a niche concern: gay and sexuality issues. There is a clear public interest involved, but surely the balance is a bit skewed, to say the least, when the glossary on 'gay community' has nine sub-categories, 'income gap' seven and 'poverty' none.

On the whole, this book offers a broad-ranging and stimulating survey of Singapore society as it has developed over the last 20 years. Perhaps I was more impressionable at 22 than I am now at 42, but the 2010 volume seems to me less authoritative than the 1989 volume.

While I found myself sitting at the feet - metaphorically speaking - of Lim Chong Yah, Edwin Thumboo and Wang Gungwu when reading the 1989 volume, I found myself engaged - metaphorically speaking again - in animated discourse, sometimes disagreement, with the authors of the 2010 volume.

Still, the hours spent reading this book were immensely engaging and enjoyable - perhaps because there was more for me to disagree with - and I consider this book a must-buy for those who can afford it, and certainly a must-read for everyone interested in how Singapore is developing, although not all will find the views here palatable.

And in the scheme of things, that is the way it should be for Singapore in 2010. Opinion is no longer monolithic; one has to engage with diverse voices.