

COMMENTARY

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Reflections on Singapore by Overseas Singaporeans



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Commentary:
Reflections on Singapore by Overseas Singaporeans

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Foreword

As Singapore continues to grow its external economy, more and more Singaporeans choose or are assigned to work overseas. Many have taken up permanent residence abroad, with an increasing number electing to become new citizens in their host countries. Individuals and families leave for very different reasons. Some go in pursuit of dreams that cannot be fulfilled in our tiny city state, others to seek a slower pace of life or better educational opportunities for their children.

For years the government of Singapore has been concerned about the numbers of Singaporeans who have migrated. Physically the country has reached the limits of expansion. Yet the population continues to grow. It is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, and nearly a quarter of its people are foreigners. Singaporeans complain so regularly and insistently about such things as rising home prices, congestion in public transportation and on the roads that MM Lee has said that as a nation we have become

‘champion grumblers’.

In response to a speech given by SM Goh, an undergraduate said, “When I was younger, I was very proud of being a Singaporean. But that was five, 10 years ago. Five years later, with all the changes in policies and the influx of foreign talent, I really don’t know what I’m defending any more...I feel there is a dilution of the Singapore spirit in youth...We don’t really feel comfortable in our country anymore.”

But some Singaporeans living abroad see things differently. In 2002, the Report of the Singapore Overseas Network (US) Working Group carried the following observation of Singapore from Singaporeans living in Boston and San Francisco: “In spite of Singapore’s vulnerable position, many Singaporeans are artificially shielded from the harsh realities of the world through the protection offered by a benevolent government.” American journalist Tom Plate goes even further in characterising Singapore as “this era’s Neo-Utopia, a living example of getting

into as utopian a shape as is humanely possible.” What good reason could there be to leave the country?

Singapore is not, and can never hope to be, home to every Singaporean. No country can ever satisfy all the needs and interests of each and every one of its citizens. So, it's not simply a matter of being a stayer or a quitter. The reality is more complex. It is not surprising these days to hear of parents wanting to go, and children insisting on staying. Each has his or her own reason for leaving, or staying; indeed some of these reasons may change over time. In this issue of *Commentary* we offer five essays, each of which contains a unique perspective of a Singaporean living abroad. In the essays, they share aspects of their experiences living abroad that they thought would be of interest to readers in Singapore. Needless to say we were pleasantly surprised by the stories each had to tell. Readers will note that some are more cheerful and optimistic; others are somewhat more sober, and

even wistful. Nonetheless, we hope each essay would help to stimulate some reflections on the condition of being Singaporean in or out of Singapore.

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Reflections of a Quitter

Some people view Singaporeans who live overseas, for whatever reason, as quitters. But are they? The writer explores this question. **By Han Meinang**

Let's get something out of the way first. I never actually sat down and deliberated, and made a decision to leave Singapore. There was a sudden, serious illness in the family (of the incurable, eventually fatal, variety), and I found myself in a position of having to move to London as a result.

I subsequently learned that Singaporeans who live away from their country of birth for whatever reason are, apparently, quitters. There has subsequently been more of an emphasis on reaching out to overseas Singaporeans, with websites set up for this purpose, job fairs around the world, and Singapore Days in cities where Singaporeans congregate.

I attended a Singapore Day once, shanghai-ed by a friend to help out at his display. There were food stalls, and entertainers like Jack Neo and the Dim Sum Dollies, to remind you of home. I guess the idea was to make you feel a little nostalgic – perhaps nostalgic enough to consider moving back to Singapore – or, at least, think kindly of it. Anyway, perhaps because I never made a conscious decision to leave Singapore, I now find that, when my

thoughts turn to the future – whether I should remain in London or return to Singapore – these remain stubbornly inchoate and confused.

The Ugly Singaporean

There have been two occasions in my life when I have been ashamed, even appalled, to be a Singaporean. Perhaps when you've been away for a period of time, you begin to see your own, and other people's behaviour, more clearly. The first time was at Helsinki Airport. There was a small queue at the boarding gate, comprising some Singaporeans and *ang mohs*. A large number of Singaporeans were sitting down. I'd taken advantage of the long stopover to see Helsinki and was tired, so I remained seated, resigned to the fact that I would end up at the back of the queue when it was time to board. But, as it turned out, the other Singaporeans were not so resigned: The moment boarding was announced, they all morphed into the front of the queue, to the bemusement of the *ang mohs*.

The second incident took place in Singapore. I was in a car which stopped at a traffic light near the School

for the Blind. A blind man with a white cane was crossing the road. He was a little slow, and the traffic light turned green as he was halfway across the road. The cars immediately started up. The man found himself standing in the middle of the road with traffic rushing past him on either side. I still remember the look of bewilderment and fear on his face. It was an extraordinarily dangerous situation. To my eternal shame, I just froze in horror. After what seemed hours, a driver got out of his car, and guided the man safely to the other side of the road.

Why do I still burn with shame when I think of those two incidents? Surely that is to tar all Singaporeans with the same brush? After all, there was that person – a Singaporean presumably – who got out his car and took the blind man safely across the road. Why do these two incidents stand out so strongly when I think about Singapore and whether I should return permanently?

Perhaps the first incident suggested that, for Singaporeans, the sense of *kiasu-ness* (afraid to lose out) and *kakinang* (our own people) was

stronger than any sense of fairness. And the second incident exemplified what could happen if you take that proud Singaporean trait – *kiasu-ness* – to its logical conclusion. I must admit that living abroad constitutes part of an ongoing battle with myself to eradicate the traits of the ugly Singaporean. It's a comment on how ingrained such qualities are to acknowledge that it's probably a battle I'll never win.

Who's a Quitter?

Every so often I meet a fellow quitter at a restaurant in Chinatown, and we rehearse the same old arguments. All these conversations invariably assume that it is preferable – politically, morally – to remain where we are in the West: How do Singaporeans *stand* the lack of freedoms in Singapore? Do they not *mind*?

Why don't they *care* about the death penalty, detention without trial, the poor treatment of domestic workers, rules like the ban on (the sale of) chewing gum? Why is it that all they can talk about are the five C's – cash, car, credit card, condominium, country club membership?

And there is a certain smugness in the assumption that it is somehow morally superior to remain where we are in the West.

In any case, what is *wrong* with living abroad? Singapore welcomes foreign talent, but if the flow goes the other way, well, then there is something wrong with you.

Recently, some primary school friends connected up on Facebook, and they connected up with others, and they with others. I was surprised at the number of people who were living abroad. Put it this way: When I got to junior college, and had to introduce myself and the secondary school I'd come from, no one had heard of that school. And this primary school was the more *ulu* of the two feeder schools to that secondary school.

In later years when, in the course of my work, I interviewed students from top Singapore schools, many – if not most – considered studying, working, and living abroad as a natural course of things. But my primary school wasn't a top school; it was an *ulu* school from an *ulu* area. It's the sort of school, in

other words, where the children were most likely to remain in Singapore.

Yet, as my former schoolmates befriended one another on Facebook, it became increasingly obvious that many of us were living abroad. Some married *ang mohs* and moved to Canada or the UK as a result. Some had decided – for reasons they didn't divulge on Facebook – to emigrate with their families (Perth, Australia, seems a popular choice). One of the primary school friends had – upon graduation – spent quite a few years in social work. Approaching her forties, she decided to do another degree in New Zealand, and stayed on and bought a house, and finds tremendous enjoyment planting vegetables and growing flowers in a large garden. "It's not that I don't like Singapore," she says by way of explanation, "it's that I like New Zealand more."

God Save the Brits

And I suppose there's something in that for me as well. There are things I treasure about my life in the UK. There is the sense of personal freedom that comes from the lighter hand of government. There is the humanity of

the National Health system. There is the sense of fraternal solidarity in the unions and among co-workers. There is the pleasure of driving out of London and, within an hour, finding yourself in the beautiful countryside. And there are the Brits – the ironic sense of humour, the self-deprecation, and the willingness to criticise themselves and their own country. Among my students (an admittedly limited sample), Chinese nationals have a reputation of being the most defensive of their country, sometimes to the extent of sending lengthy emails complaining bitterly of Western imperialism if a lecturer even attempts an analysis of the Chinese political system. Other students – from Asia, Europe and the US – too are willing to offer critical comments about any other country except their own. It's often the British students who are willing to submit their behaviour, and that of their government and countrymen, to scrutiny and criticism. There is something admirable about that. Then there is the BBC – the mind, the heart and the soul of a people. Sure there is a lot of rubbish on the BBC. But it serves as the nation's memory through its documentaries, and commemoration of

events like Remembrance Day. It celebrates British literature through its dramas. It represents the views of the people: Every day I wake up to the *Today* programme where politicians of the day are interrogated on the 8am interview slot. Should the day come when I move back to Singapore, I shall miss all this terribly, and I fear – I know – it will be a gap that will never be filled by what passes for the media there.

The Struggling Stayers

As for family and friends who have 'stayed' in Singapore, I've seen many lose the job for which they were originally qualified, and start over again in a new job or, even, jobs. It's all very well to talk about globalisation and retraining and upskilling, but if you're personally affected, it may not be that easy to adapt to the new jobs that are supposedly out there.

True, some are making a mint, and wealthy enough to retire in their 30s. But equally, there are people who struggle day to day, just trying to make a living. Increasingly, I find friends (mainly women) caring for increasingly dependent elderly parents. And there are family and friends who are just

getting on with the business of trying to raise a family.

Somewhere in there, you may get some people who are trying in their area of work – as a teacher or civil servant – to change things a little bit at a time, and to do some of the things we talked so much about as idealistic graduate students at an ancient university wanting to change Singapore and making it a better place. Most of the time, as middle age approaches, people are too ground down with the cares of life. And I can't say that I blame them.

Returning to Singapore

I return to Singapore regularly. I work with a local institution to deliver a Master's programme. The irony is that I only have this opportunity because of the reputation of the university for which I work in London. Nonetheless, I'm glad of the opportunity to be able to contribute to Singapore in a small way. It is, after all, still my home, and where my family are. And each time I return, there is a sense of both the familiar and the alien. It's always good to see family and friends. And of course there is the food.

But the landscape in Singapore has become increasingly unfamiliar. A friend of mine once bemoaned the fact that the area of Punggol she grew up in, had been redeveloped. I had very little time for her gripes, considering that she hadn't lived there (or, for that matter, in Singapore) for 20 years. You can't very well deny change and development to people who *do* live there.

Having said that, the changes in Singapore's landscape are bewildering when you've been away for any period of time. So many of the familiar landmarks – the National Library, for instance – are gone and, with this, the sense of belonging and nostalgia associated with them. In any other country, national landmarks or buildings of architectural or historical value, are protected, and you need to seek permission to even modify them.

There is also the immediate sense of claustrophobia as soon as you step back in Singapore. If the media represents the views of a country, then *The Straits Times* is the equivalent of having one

voice – one standard opinion – shouting at you all the time.

As for television, I've given up on it. There was a time in the 80s when the then Singapore Broadcasting Corporation had a nascent local current affairs division. While many of the programmes weren't great, it was a bit of an attempt at something at a national level that was intelligent, and that might have amounted to something in time.

Now, all that has long been sacrificed on the altar of viewing figures. And the death, this year, of Chandra Mohan (then Director of Current Affairs) just seems to seal the finality of it all. Now, what you get on television are a lot of foreign imports and franchises of reality shows, and what you get on radio, are deejays with a fake cheeriness who don't even sound comfortable in their American-type accents.

Having said that, there is a lot to admire in Singapore. There is the sheer contrast when you fly out of Heathrow, and arrive at Changi. At a time when all is economic doom and gloom in the

UK, Singapore is, by contrast, still doing well, and there is a sense of optimism and growth. And, where the Conservatives (what LibDems?) seem to be carrying out a slash and burn policy of everything including education, the Singapore government is still investing heavily in education and training. And unemployment is relatively low. What is the point (and here I know I'm at risk of sounding like an editorial in *The Straits Times* mouthing the government position) of freedoms if you don't have a job? In any case, all you need is a tyrannical boss on whom you depend for a job, and who dictates what you should think and do, to lose a huge amount of your personal freedom. And that can happen to anyone, anywhere in the world.

Can We Adjust?

Yet there is no denying that the sense of claustrophobia does engulf you when you return to Singapore. Perhaps that is a problem of re-entry. Perhaps you can eventually adjust back to the country and society. After all, you grew up with it. Surely you will be able to get used to it again. What is it they say about the frog that gets used to

increasing water temperatures? On second thoughts, that may be a poor analogy. Doesn't that frog end up cooked? And that signifies what – the death of conscience, idealism, an important part of oneself?

But ultimately, when it comes to staying put or returning to Singapore, the essential question is not really about political freedoms, or the media, or rules like chewing gum. A lot of it is personal. Will I be able to get a secure job? Will I be able to work in a stimulating environment, with people who are passionate about their work? Where are my loved ones, and with whom do I want to spend the later years of my life?

And there are practical questions as well. Having paid into a national health insurance and pension for so many years, will I be able to accumulate

enough for my old age? At some point, a decision will have to be made, and a final investment made in the remaining years of one's life. But I don't see that decision getting easier any time soon.

About the Writer

Han Meiniang was educated in Singapore and in the UK. She has lived the last 10 years in London, where she teaches and carries out research, but returns regularly to Singapore for work and personal reasons. She is a typical overseas Singaporean in that she misses family, friends and local food. But so far none of these have managed to trump the attractions of the UK. Her vacillations, documented in the article as to what she should do with the rest of her life, continue.

A Seeker's GPS

A traveller who followed her intuition, the writer sojourns in a cold country far from home, where a chance incident on the train, leads her to ponder the gap between the dream and the reality. By Dr Low Sor-Ching

When I told my friends in Singapore that I was planning to 'settle', they could barely suppress a 'hurray' – not because they were happy to see me go (they were quick to assure me of that) – but because I was promising to grow furniture legs and roofs more solid than the star-spangled sky or the nondescript plastered ceiling of rented rooms that I have been more accustomed to.

For much of my life, I have been on the move. When I first started, it was more a response to a restlessness that had urged me to jump onto the next train, plane, or bus. It was as if the answer to a question that I couldn't yet formulate, that buzzed about in my ear like a persistent long-legged mosquito, was to be found out there, in that, as yet, undefined space.

Sometimes an image from a movie or song would give that restlessness shape and color. For example, copious viewings of early Woody Allen decades ago, got me packing for the Big Apple; then Edith Piaff's

smoky voice sent me reeling into a Spartan, leaf-less Paris in the middle of winter, where I felt to my very bones the chill of a loveless night. But mostly, it was that, as yet, inchoate question I mentioned above.

Persistently it gnawed and threatened to disrupt and destabilise all attempts at what one might call a 'normal life' – a 9-5 job; a five-year plan to marry and bear fruit by the second year; and a 10-year plan to own a piece of property. Because everyone else I knew was doing so, pressure mounted as the years passed and as I moved from job to job. Alas, the question – Is this all? – mocked these attempts.

Hitting the Road

In those days, my only recourse was to travel. Sometimes I entered a different time zone that turned the clock on my wrist upside down; other times it was the land that seduced. In Pagan, I entered a phase where I pretended to be one of the Burmese. Behind the lovely patterned longyi I wore and the white paste called Thanaka that the Burmese women

taught me to put on my face (“Keep face cool and very white!”) I felt a sense of liberation, much as clowns must feel behind their painted faces. Time was momentarily suspended and I entered into the new space anonymous, a stranger and almost brand-new. It was in these interstices of time and space that I felt renewed.

Lacking the rigours of religious rituals as I was growing up, I have subconsciously sought it through more secular means. And as with religious rituals, the journey itself became for me, a means to renew and to leave the old self behind. Indeed, it was often the case that where I went, did not ultimately matter – as long as it disrupted the metronome that regulated my everyday life, and as long as it took me outside of myself.

Is this all? The question gnawed on.

Travelling On

And so I travel on. In the process I learn that the world is big yet small, the people different yet so similar. I like to think that I have become a better person for having encountered

these diverse peoples. In these everyday people I encountered on the street – sometimes across chasms of linguistic, cultural and religious barriers – I discovered depths of generosity and kindness that humbled me and urged the better side of me to rise to the fore. I have lost count of the number of times a stranger had turned up from out of the blue to help me. Like the time in Bangkok when a woman and three teenagers took me under their wing, introduced me to the most delicious Thai food I had ever had, and then proceeded to take me home as well.

I will say now, as I look back several times more, I have wondered at the person who accepted their invitation. Not once, in the two days I spent with these kind people, did it occur to me that I could be poisoned, abducted, drugged and sold to the brothels. No, I was too busy enjoying myself. But my friends were always horrified.

“You were just lucky” was the uniform response.

“You mean you would have said no?”

“No way!” they chorused.

Piqued, I argued with them that had I not followed my intuition, had I followed merely stereotypical notions, I would not have discovered this side of Thailand. Worse, I would have left the country carrying the same notions that I had on my arrival. Nothing would have changed.

“In that case, why bother to travel?” I said to my friends.

“You were just lucky!”

“And crazy! Won’t be so lucky another time!” said another.

As if to prove my friends wrong, I accepted an invitation to visit a home when one came along in Marrakesh in Morocco. Being Ramadan, my new friend, whom I just met on the bus, decided that I should join her family to break fast in the evening. It turned out to be a delightful experience. But I learned something else.

Travelling is never just a one-way experience. I realised that day, as I sat with the family over a mountain

of food, that I was the exotic one. That even as I observed, I was being observed and even discussed while I was there. And as the news bearer of the world outside, I was plied with questions, mostly about my country – they wanted to know everything there was to know about its economy, its politics, its education. The curiosity and sophistication of their questions impressed me, and I felt that evening I had unwittingly become an ambassador.

Whatever doubts I may have had about my country, I left them behind in the presence of my new friends. As my voice rose an octave in stirring patriotism, I became immodest about its achievements, I found myself defending its policies, painting it to be more beautiful than it actually was, its economic success more miraculous than real.

“Oh, will you show me your country when I visit?” the young brother of my new friend asked in French.

“Of course! Just give me a call when you come. I will camp overnight at the airport to wait for you!” The young boy

literally glowed in anticipation!

Ok, I lied – some. I was already living in the United States at the time, but I felt duty-bound to keep the wheels of dream-making going for as long as I could. Duty-bound because the journey I had made would have been impossible without the dreams they had woven for me, and therefore, like it or not, they have partaken of my own dream-making. As such, I felt that I couldn't do less for them.

Is This All?

Years have passed since. And I have clocked in more miles than I cared for. But the more worldly I became, the more cautious I turned out as well. There were times I miss the carefree self I once knew. I won't deny that there were times – during my travels to the various cities for conferences – when I wished I could journey back in time to recover, perhaps, that innocence, openness of spirit, confidence and child-like trust in the goodness of humanity that had led me, decades ago, to follow a stranger to her home.

And yet, even as I upgraded from two-star to five-star accommodation, the question insists: "Is this all?"

I started to look around and in the eyes of my fellow travellers, I learned to recognise a certain wounded expression, a faraway look on their faces, and always a wistfulness of tone in their voices.

"How long have you been travelling?" was the standard question to ask of these ones.

"Six months."

"A year."

"Three years."

Their answers astonished me. I didn't know one could travel forever in that way. For me there was always the city to return to, the safety of a job to fall back on. My travels, up to that point, were always ritualistic, a hiatus, a stop in the bushes for a pick-me-up, much like a superman getting charged in his red underwear – or if you prefer something more mundane, like a spa-stop for a quick lift. Up to

that point, I had not considered the possibility of being away forever, as in fairytale 'forever', of being up, up and away and never coming back. The idea incubated and grew inside me.

Canada Calling

So when Canada called on an afternoon when Singapore was sizzling on a record high, I sat in a tundra-like café, dreaming of snow, of the enfolding cold that would slowly strip the trees of their leaves, the chill in the breezes, and birdsong heralding spring, even before it officially arrives on the calendar.

I arrived on a wintry day with two suitcases of my worldly possessions. That day, I joined more than 200,000 new immigrants from that year alone. In two months, I learned how to navigate the roads and found out where the best cafés were.

I have become a regular commuter on the Toronto subway, and daily the sprawling city of highrises and tidy suburbia unfolds before me, as the train plods along from the suburbs to downtown in 45 very long minutes.

For hours, I sit in a café not too different from the one I used to go to in Singapore, except that this one has to be artificially heated inside. I watch the sky empty itself out, and from where I sit, it sometimes appears as though somebody above was cooking up a squall and plucking feathers from ducks and geese.

By evening, the lights flood the city and through the looking glass, the café becomes a spectral world of moving figures, like a world captured in miniature, not unlike those Viennese porcelain toy houses where figures twirl and turn to the beat of the waltz, seducing the eye to think it real.

But another reality from the outside intrudes: tramps barely equipped for winter push their carts of cartons and newspapers; ladies with pinched faces skid on the icy pavement, and trams roll by as more snowflakes are tossed about in the winds, caught in a mad whirl as they cluster around the street lamp moths like round a flame. The trees and their bare branches are outlined in a silhouette, lonely and valiant, waiting for spring to come. In

spite of the heated room, I shiver and feel spring's great distance. From time to time, I ask myself, as I sip my latte, "Is this it? Is this what I have come to settle for?"

An Incident on the Subway

It took a public confrontation on the subway for this question to take on a darker shade. It was mid-day when I took the train and it was nearly empty. I could count the number of commuters in there. Two suburban girls were busy opening their eyes with lid clippers, multi-hue colours and voluminous mascara. What they appeared to share in common with worshippers of gods, was their intuitive understanding that eyes – no matter what and where – must be properly pried open before presenting them to the world. In another corner, a young Indian couple pressed their two young children close to their bodies, their sweaters declaring, "I love Canada". Like new lovers anxious to make their love known, newly minted immigrants are not shy to make their feeling known. And in a further corner, a young Korean boy buckled down to read *Theory of Knowledge* while a young Indian man

thumbed through a big computer programming book.

There were no smiles, no attempt at eye contact, and all seemed content to lose themselves in this sea of anonymity. The cold had been building up and I pulled my woolen cap down over my head, wound the scarf round my neck, and sank further into the seat to read.

"Did your ticket pay for this seat?" the gruff voice startled me. I looked up and saw a puffy-faced white male staring down at me. Stunned and speechless, I instantly removed my bag.

"You're in Canada. This is not China." The man said and proceeded to sit next to me even though there were many other empty seats.

"Excuse me, I am not from China," I said before turning back to my book.

As I mull over it now in the café, I think of all the things I could have said to that man. Indeed, if I had felt more belligerent, I might have added, "The Canada I used to know did not have

such rude people.”

Is this what I had come to this country for? I fumed.

Is This It?

From that day on, I joined my housemates, who came from different corners of the world, in their daily liturgy of complaints. Amparo is 38 and was a high-flying corporate lawyer in Madrid before she gave it all up for Canada. Andrea is 29 and had a successful restaurant business before she too gave it up for the lure of Canada. Another, a Korean teacher, wanted a fresh start in life, a chance to experience life differently than it was in her own country. I realise that I am not alone. Nightly, our list grew.

“The bus took so long to come!”

“So many people! So cold.”

“So boring!”

I could see that the isolation and difficulty of connecting with the ‘real’ Canada was beginning to eat into them. I could hear the questions

running through their complaints like a murmuring brook, “Is this it? Is this what we have come for?”

“There are too many immigrants here. Too many Chinese, too many Indians. This is not the Canada I remember,” said Amparo, looking straight at me as if I was invisible. I marvelled at the audacity of her remark. I tried to flatter myself that, of course, I am not like *those* Chinese who chatter in languages intelligible only to themselves! All this set off a few more sleepless nights.

As I turned over these questions, I suddenly recalled the rejoinder of William Teo, my dear friend and hairdresser, whose death 10 years ago was untimely and left us all headless and heartbroken.

“What do you want?” he asked, without pausing his scissors. I watched my hair whirl to the ground.

“What do I want?” echoed in my ears now – a decade and half later.

“What are you looking for?” I posed this question in a different way to my

housemates. There was a momentary silence as each withdrew to consider the question.

“I want to be happy.”

“I want to lead a simpler life.”

Another simply shrugged in response. A simple question with no simple answer but which perhaps contains within it, its own panacea.

On New Year's Eve, we cooked up a storm and stayed up to welcome the New Year. Perhaps, some of us secretly wished we had more exciting parties to go to, more exciting companions to spend the night with, but the reality was that there was

nowhere else to go. We have each left our families behind to come to this very cold place; and by the most convoluted of paths, we have ended up being each other's family.

As I watched my housemates seated around the table, I thought, how brave we all are. Indeed, however wobbly and imperfect our view of human destiny was when we first started, we have each come a long way to hold this, what Arthur Miller once called the golden thread of history.

Is this it? The question intruded just momentarily.

Yes, this is it, I whispered. For the moment.

About the Writer

Dr Low Sor-Ching is a writer and curator and she received her Ph.D in Religion from Syracuse University. Formerly a Professor of Religion at a liberal arts college, she taught in the United States for the last six years until she decided to take up permanent residence in Canada. She has written extensively for academic journals where her research focused on Buddhism and contemporary religions. Dr. Low continues to pursue her interest in writing and art and, aside from academic journals, she also contributes to art journals and exhibitions. Currently she is working on completing a novel which she hopes to publish by 2011. In addition, she is planning curating an exhibition of Contemporary Art as well as researching the changing religious identities of the Chinese in the diasporic communities in Southeast Asia. For leisure, she loves swimming in the oceans.

Like Going Home Again

From riding the dot-com boom (and bust) to savouring life in a slower lane, the writer finds that his simpler more satisfying life in the US now reminds him of his wonderful childhood in Singapore. By Jek Kian Jin

It was the cresting of the dot-com wave that brought me to California in the summer of 1997. It was all Internet mania in those days, and everybody I knew was either into start-ups or raising money to invest in one. Before the crash came, I had made and lost several fortunes. I saw two companies go IPO on NASDAQ, and a couple others change hands for millions of dollars in funny money. Then, when the curtain came down on everything, all I was left with was a house, a car and a few hundred thousand worthless shares in all sorts of improbable NASDAQ companies.

Boom and Bust

From a pioneer in a dashing dot-com to a venture capital investor in Internet start-ups to unemployment, took just five years. In that time I'd seen everything. All-nighters to get a new web service up and running: business as usual. Skimming through business plans by the hundreds and talking to start-up founders by the dozens: all in a day's work. Boardroom horse-trading: no big deal. Pre-IPO road shows to investors: walked the walk and talked

the talk. An entrepreneur in the 'New Economy': been there, done that.

By 2002, I was down, all burnt out, and left high and dry on the shores of Silicon Valley. My wife had gone to graduate school to study for her doctorate. My two sons were in school and we just had a new baby.

I must have realised during all that madness that I was not meant to be a corporate worker. Nor was I comfortable with the cut-throat high octane life in the financial sector. Although I enjoyed working in teams of earnest and motivated idealists, I was fundamentally anti-authoritarian and I didn't like to take orders or work for someone I didn't agree with. In the end I decided not to look for a job elsewhere but to be self-employed and start my own business. At least I would succeed or fail all by myself.

I took what I knew about software systems in a previous lifetime, and added to that what I learnt about the stock market during the Internet boom. I spent two years reading up everything on technical analysis, and

attended seminars and conferences. In a few years I developed my own electronic algorithms to trade in the financial markets. I did most of the work myself. I used a commercial trading platform but let it run my proprietary algorithms, on a remote server on a cloud, out on the Internet. Finally, I automated the system so that I didn't have to wake up before dawn to catch the opening bell.

I thought I could take it easy, having built a robust trading system that could run unattended. I had things all ready by the end of 2007. I sold off whatever stocks I had left lying around and raised enough cash to fund an electronic trading account. I was all set to go online. I didn't know it then, but I couldn't have chosen a more challenging time to re-enter the fray, as the financial markets were about to crash again for a second time.

After the Crash

In those fallow years after the crash of 2000, I discovered the joys of living as a simple family man. Taking care of matters on the homefront took on a significance and importance that I never knew before. We never had a

maid, since most people in America don't, and so my wife and I had to do all the domestic chores ourselves.

Things that I used to take for granted, such as cleaning the house, doing the laundry, folding the clothes, watering the plants in the garden, and most importantly, preparing every meal for the family - had to be done by somebody. And there were only two adults in the house, as my wife would remind me. She was, by then, going to school herself, and so I had to look after the three boys, sending them to school in the mornings, cooking their meals when they came home, and doing whatever errands needed to be done in the meantime.

The house we bought is in a quiet little town about half an hour south of San Francisco. It sits on a ridge overlooking a canyon that finds its way down to a lake formed by the San Andreas fault. You might think that it is hazardous to live so near the most famous earthquake fault zone in the world, but that is just part of life in California. When the earth last shook for us back in 1989, this house sustained only very minor damage.

Our neighbour told us that because we were so near the fault, the rocky nature of the high ground protected us from the worst tremors. So we sleep peacefully at nights.

The first thing I hear when I wake in the morning is usually the sound of the wind in the canyon. In late autumn, the trees turn brown and the leaves pile up outside my window, while the bright Californian summer sun is replaced by a cold fog from the ocean, that creeps through the mountains and blankets my backyard in a sea of white.

If the wind isn't blowing, the fog brings a silence that envelops our whole world. The few hours of the morning, before the sun gets high enough to burn off the mist, is my favourite time of day, because I can sit down and meditate, or read a book in quiet and peaceful solace.

A Stranger Back Home

When I returned to Singapore a year ago, for the first few days I was beset by a nagging unease, a sense that something was not right. But I was too caught up and absorbed by the things

that were going on around me to stop and think about it: in a short trip home there are too many events to attend to, family members to talk to, old friends to meet with and business contacts to look up. Only on the last few days of the trip did I realise what was happening: The constant activity that engulfed me, fed me with a frenetic energy that didn't seem part of me anymore, and left me with this sense of unease.

And there is the noise. It starts with the air-conditioning: You can't escape its soft low-frequency drone. It is always there in the background. When I go outside, there is the hum of traffic, construction, all the sounds and noises of a bustling city. I find that I cannot live with this noise anymore, even if it's the sound of progress and development. I have become a stranger in my own land.

Stargazing

Back in California it is easy to be close to the land, and closer to the sky. On dark nights in winter, far away from the city haze, the stars seem within reach and near enough to touch. When I was a little boy, my

uncle brought me a book on the stars. It grouped them into constellations, and using the book, we both traced these patterns in the sky. Back then, in the 1970s, the sky in Singapore was clear enough for us to see most stars and constellations. On certain nights in June and July, the Milky Way was almost overhead. The Big Dipper could be seen in the north, and in the south, after Scorpio was high in the sky, the Southern Cross would show up around midnight.

By the 80s, the skies had started to fade. When Halley's Comet returned to earth skies in 1986, it was just a tiny faint smudge that took great effort and an eight-inch telescope to see. Buildings had sprung up around my house and the stars were first obscured by them, and then by a haze that washed out the skies above me. This was not just due to atmospheric pollution but also light pollution from the bright lights of the city.

As our present house is on a ridge, the adjoining hills block the lights from San Francisco and the Greater Bay Area, and most nights the stars can be very clearly seen. In 2004, during

the near approach of Mars, I bought myself a new telescope and taught myself to see the stars again. On weekends, an hour's drive south of my home takes me to a dark sky location called Coyote Lake, which can be reached by taking the freeway and then a short drive up a windy country road. Here, the stars seem even brighter and more numerous and on summer nights, the Milky Way blazes brighter than when I knew it as a child. This time I was able to track and spot faint nebulae and galaxies, and best of all, enjoy views not just of Mars but the moons of Jupiter and the rings of Saturn. On one particularly clear night, I was able to glimpse the faint blue disk of Uranus.

But as the days get shorter, the nights get colder too, my weekends in autumn and winter are taken over by another activity, more strenuous than stargazing.

Time For Football

The little girl, she couldn't have been more than 11 years old, received the ball on the left wing, her back to an opponent who tried to challenge for the ball. With a deft touch of the

inside heel of her right foot, she turned inside the tackle, pushed the ball through and broke away towards the goal. I nearly dropped my flag. But I had to applaud that move, and so did the coaches and spectators on my side of the touchline. That little girl had just executed an almost perfect Cruyff turn [a move by Dutch footballer Johan Cruyff].

When I was a boy I saw this exact move at the World Cup in 1978 when Holland played Sweden and the game has become famous because of the tantalising skill on the ball demonstrated by this Dutch master. I was in Secondary school then, a studious nerd but obsessed with football. My friends and I would hang around the big field near school (now a car park) for a kick around, or walk a mile or so to another open field (now another car park).

Sometimes, if we could get at least 10 people, we would take a bus to the Bukit Timah campus and play on a real football pitch with goalposts. However, when I grew older, work took over and the football fields started disappearing, so playing

the game became a distant memory.

Three decades later, I still enjoy the game, but I'm no longer fit enough to be chasing a ball. As watching it on TV is not good enough and I want the exercise, I took a referee's course and these days, you can find me, most weekends, on the pitch as the referee.

In California, football (soccer to them) is one of the largest organised sports for youths. In the town where I live, with a population of 25,000 (a fairly typical township) about 800 children participate in soccer games every weekend during the autumn months.

When we first came to California we faced the typical immigrant's challenge of integrating into a new community and culture. The first place to look for new friends would be wherever or whatever our children did. I enrolled my eldest son in the soccer programme and from there things began to have a life of their own. For me, the soccer field is where you meet other like-minded people. I've encountered and made friends with coaches and referees who were Ukrainians, Swedes, Brazilians and Irish.

Even if soccer is not the most natural of American sports, it was through meeting people here that I was eventually inducted into that most emblematic of American alpha-male activities – the poker night. It was initially a little strange to find myself, a second generation Singaporean Chinese, at a round table playing Texas Hold ‘Em with other Americans, until I realised, that most of them were also, not too long ago, immigrants like myself. It struck me then that America has become quite racially integrated and multi-cultural within a generation or two. At first it was a little unusual to find myself a minority here, yet I didn’t feel out of place or out of sorts and soon it didn’t bother me anymore. America, or at least California, in the 21st Century, is a true melting pot of different ethnicities and cultures.

Getting Back on Track

Having lost almost everything to the stock market in the dark days of the early 21st Century, I was determined to climb back onto the same market that took me down. Fate decided to give me another chance. Although I could not have foreseen it, the wild roller-coaster ride of the Crash of 2008 was better

suited for a computer programme to trade and not a human.

The stock markets are open from dawn to 1pm most weekdays, and during that time I found myself unable to work. Watching a live trade often made me worry, so most of the time I didn’t. If I had woken up to watch the markets crumble most mornings, I would have become a nervous wreck. I would switch off the monitor and go and read a book or take a walk. The only times I could work on the algorithms was when the market was closed, since, if the system was live, you could introduce human errors and compound any mistakes. So although I made time on weekends to pore over the results of the week and adjust whatever parameters seemed necessary, I didn’t even have the heart to do that.

It was an unsettling time because there was too much news coming in. Banks were collapsing, multi-billion dollar bailouts were being bandied around and to top it all, a Ponzi scheme, in the billions of dollars, came to light. For anybody who lived through the crash of 2000, 2008 seemed like the end of the world.

Paradoxically, in hindsight, the best thing to do was to have done nothing. From September 2008 onwards I watched with detached fascination and occasional horror as the biggest financial meltdown in living memory unfolded. I could have turned off my system but I didn't for some reason. I let it run. Although unable to escape my roots as a Singaporean, I tuned them back to trade as conservatively as possible. Then I stopped watching the system altogether, until after the dust settled sometime in March the next year.

To cut to the chase, my algorithms did their job. The system went to work methodically. It shorted the steep declines and went long on the brief attempts at recovery. It cut its losses whenever the market reversed and took

back what it gave. By the end of 2008 it had posted a most impressive 150% gain for the whole year. On the other hand, if I'd let it trade more aggressively, I could have made over 400%!

When I was a boy there were simple things that brought me joy: There were the stars and the jungle walks in the Nature Reserve or along the beach at Changi, where we went for holidays. And there was football. When I grew up, I let these slip away from me by circumstance and sometimes by choice. Then, when I travelled afar and stayed on to work and live in California, I found that you could do more by doing less. Among other things, I have rediscovered those simple joys of my childhood. It is like going home again.

About the Writer

Jek Kian Jin was an early Internet pioneer who survived two financial market crashes and now lives a simple life in his home in California. Married, with three boys and a cat, he watches futures in the morning and the stars at night. Kian Jin was involved in various capacities with putting Singapore in a wired future, beginning with the IT2000 plan, setting up web servers and exploring the use of the Internet as early as 1993. He played a key role in getting Pacific Internet off the ground and took a front row seat in the dot-com boom (and bust). From 1998 to 2000, he wrote a column for *The Straits Times* called Life in Silicon Valley about ventures and misadventures in the dot-com industry.

Home Thoughts From Abroad

A Singaporean working in the US throws a fresh perspective on hot home topics such as foreign talent, immigration and the Singapore identity in an increasingly borderless world.

By Kwek Ju-kay

In mid-2010 I had the pleasure of hosting a visiting Ministry of Education (MOE) delegation at Google and we engaged in a thought provoking conversation on Singapore in general, living overseas, and managing foreign talent.

We discussed how Singapore's amazing prosperity is rooted in it being an international hub and much of the conversation centred on the notion of the "Singaporean Diaspora" – Singaporeans living and working abroad. What are the career opportunities in Singapore and the US? What is it like being foreign talent in another country? Under what conditions would you consider returning to Singapore? What about raising and educating kids?

Two themes in particular seemed especially relevant given the recent discussion at home:

- *Foreign talent:* What can Singaporeans at home learn from those who live and work as foreign talent overseas in places such as the US?

- *Identity:* What does being Singaporean mean in a world where you may have many formative experiences and relationships overseas?

The Myth of Foreign Talent

With the influx of foreigners into Singapore to fill jobs in all economic tiers, foreign talent has been a hot topic for some time now. Our ambivalence toward it is reflected by our contrasting concerns – on one hand, attracting the best international talent to Singapore, while on the other, feeling uneasy about being over-dependent on foreigners. Both are valid concerns.

However, to centre the discussion on 'foreign talent' is to miss the larger point – that in order to create a world-class hub of innovation and excellence, there is only 'talent' and what you do to attract and engage it. This is borne out by personal observations from living and working in Silicon Valley.

Observation #1: Foreign talent is very much a non-concept in many parts of the US.

In Silicon Valley, with its giant melting pot of races and cultures, foreigners are a key part of society. Consider some of the data. Up to 50% of workers in some high-tech firms are immigrants. One in three Silicon Valley start-ups have a founder of foreign origin. Some are American-born, while others are naturalised citizens or Permanent Residents. Still more are on work visas.

It is challenging to see how the term 'foreign talent' can be used meaningfully in this context. Who in these groups can be termed foreign talent, and who, local talent?

You can see this daily at Google, where it's not uncommon to overhear conversations happening in Mandarin, Hindi, French or Spanish. In Singapore, perhaps we sometimes make unnecessary distinctions between workers who are local and those who are foreign. In the end, as long as our collective work contributes to the advancement of Singapore, should it matter?

Observation #2: The US has created conditions for foreigners to thrive, much to its benefit.

Some of Silicon Valley's most influential and respected individuals were originally foreigners. For example:

- Andy Grove, one of the founders of Intel, immigrated to the US during the Hungarian revolution of 1956.
- Sergey Brin, one of Google's co-founders, came to America as a refugee from the Soviet Union.
- Vinod Khosla, general partner at VC firm Kleiner Perkins, co-founded Sun Microsystems after coming over from India for graduate studies.

Most Americans I know consider these individuals to be their own and express pride that America has been able to nurture their success. In Singapore have we created the conditions under which talented foreign individuals can be highly successful? Do we celebrate their successes as our own?

Observation #3: *How people are regarded and rewarded depends more on what they achieve rather than on their skin colour or where they are from.*

As a foreigner I feel that I'm not treated differently from anyone else. For one thing, the ethnic and cultural diversity of the Bay Area means that no one can really tell the difference. For example, the Afghan grandmother speaking in Pashtun with her friends at the supermarket, may well be a US citizen, while the well-dressed Caucasian man at a business function, who speaks perfect English, is a foreigner.

As an English-speaking Singaporean of Chinese ethnicity, I have never felt that I stood out or that people looked at me differently because of my background. As a foreigner, this is a big deal: I feel that my host country affords me the same opportunities as everyone else, and thus I feel a strong sense of ownership and desire to help make my host country a better place. In Singapore perhaps we may wish to consider whether our colonial roots sometimes lead us to defer to certain nationalities and races, while

at the same time looking down on others from less developed nations.

Anti-foreigner Sentiments

But what about US anti-foreigner sentiments that we hear reported in the news?

That certainly exists at the macro level, and arguably, for good reason. Millions of Americans have been hit by record unemployment in recent years. For example, in the manufacturing industry, thousands of mid-level skilled jobs have been moved to countries with far lower wages.

The same has occurred with white-collar jobs, such as those with back-office and call centre functions. This has naturally led to some public backlash against foreigners, as the harder-hit portions of the country perceive foreigners as both taking key jobs overseas as well as coming in to take over the remaining ones.

While the most effective solution would be to invest heavily in education, worker retraining and employment assistance, unfortunately

the US political establishment has responded with well-publicised but unconstructive denouncements of companies seen to be “shipping jobs overseas” and proposals to tax companies that “hire foreigners over Americans”. Even in the high-tech sector, the US government enforces a strict cap on skilled workers, limiting H-1B* work visas to just 65,000 each year. The US government maintains this policy even as many high tech businesses stress that they cannot hire sufficient skilled local talent to fill the gap.

This is a huge mistake that threatens to undermine America’s long-term technological leadership. Other countries would do well not to repeat this error.

The Singaporean Identity

What does it mean to be a Singaporean in an increasingly interconnected and borderless world?

One could argue that Singapore has benefited from globalisation more than almost any country. Free trade and open communications level the playing field, allowing small nations

like Singapore to take advantage of world growth and advance at a much more rapid rate than some much larger and advanced countries. But with these advantages come the challenges of maintaining identity and retaining local talent. As its citizens grow in skills and sophistication, can Singapore hold on to its best and brightest, given appealing prospects abroad? Should it? I find it helpful to break this issue into several key components: education, identity, expanding influence, and redefining the notion of retaining talent.

Let’s start with education as a key shaper of identity. This has been a key topic of discussion between my wife and I. Like me, she is a product of the Singapore education system and she has been working and living in the US for many years. While we don’t yet have children, we have discussed at length what it would mean to raise and educate children in the US. This has led us to consider the strengths and weaknesses of education systems in both the US and Singapore.

In considering the US education

system, the strengths we value include the following:

The focus on breadth; the flexibility in choosing coursework which reflects the students' interests; and, perhaps most importantly, the emphasis on creative problem solving and critical thinking. While we share concerns about the cost and variable quality of US schools, we recognise that the best ones provide a well-rounded education that is second to none.

In considering the Singapore education system, the strengths that we value include the rigorous academic discipline and emphasis on hard knowledge such as mathematics and sciences, which we consider key to future success. While we are extremely cautious about an over-emphasis on standardised testing, we are also mindful of the indirect benefits this imparts in terms of the ability to compete under pressure.

Given our current situation, my wife and I concluded that the most desirable scenario would be to expose our children to both education systems. Our children would spend

their first of couple years in the US getting exposure to the rich set of cultures in the Bay Area. Next, it would be very important for them to get a rigorous grounding under the Singapore education system through primary, and perhaps secondary school. We consider those formative years key to growing up "Singaporean" in terms of family connections, values and culture. Subsequently, we would strongly encourage them to attend university overseas. This is mainly out of a desire to expose them to global influences during their growing up process, rather than in response to any particular set of strengths or weaknesses.

With regards to identity, perhaps it is this preference regarding the education of our children, that most clearly articulates our view of what it means to be Singaporean in a global context. It means being grounded with a strong sense of Singaporean culture which includes family and values such as discipline, dedication and focus. It means being savvy to other cultures and able to confidently engage with foreigners. And it means participating in activities that

contribute to Singapore's continued advancement. Thus we believe that one can possess a strong sense of Singaporean identity without being physically bound to Singapore.

More Should Go Overseas

This brings me to an important point about expanding influence. I would strongly argue that it is in Singapore's best interests to encourage more citizens to live and work overseas. This may seem counterintuitive and even anathema to the idea that Singapore needs its best and brightest at home. After all, if our goal is to turn Singapore into a global hub of services, ideas and innovation, then surely, to do so, we need to concentrate as much of our talent in Singapore. However in an increasingly global and borderless world, one of the key values of a hub lies in its connections to other hubs. Overseas Singaporeans have a critical role to play here.

The often-cited example for expanding influence is Israel. And it's worth looking closer at the dynamics. To borrow a popular boxing analogy,

Israel is a small country that consistently punches above its weight. It is highly successful in managing its foreign and domestic talent, and in engaging its best minds wherever they may be.

I see this often in my Israeli friends in Silicon Valley. Some are entrepreneurs; others work in major tech corporations like Google; and still others work in the venture capital community.

Many of them are constantly in touch with each other, and on the move between Silicon Valley and Tel Aviv. This free-flow of ideas, talent and capital has helped transform Tel Aviv into a major technology innovation hub, which itself has given rise to numerous start-ups and inventions that get acquired by US companies or invested in by both US and Israel venture capital. It's a virtuous cycle that acts as a force multiplier, enabling tiny Israel to exert a far larger influence on global industry than its population or geographic location would suggest. It's a great example of how a well-engaged overseas diaspora can magnify a

country's global economic and social influence.

So perhaps it makes sense to redefine our notion of 'Retaining Talent'. Instead of having the goal of 'Retaining the best and brightest in Singapore', what if we restate it as 'How can we fully engage the best and brightest, wherever they may be'?

This is especially true in today's world with global companies and distributed start-ups. We're now surrounded by tools like email, SMS, Facebook and Twitter, which have become increasingly part of our everyday lives. Geographic borders mean less and less in this context. For example, within Google we use video conferencing for virtual meetings. This enables teams to work across multiple sites and time zones in order to leverage the best skills wherever they may be located.

Keeping In Touch Is Easy Now

On a personal level, in spite of the distance, my ties to Singapore have never been stronger. Thanks to technologies like Skype, Facebook, and WhatsApp, I can communicate with friends, family and colleagues

instantly and whenever it suits us. It matters less and less whether we are 10km or 10,000km apart.

If we consider our new goal in the context of these social and technological trends, this will lead us to ask the following questions:

How can we promote the free exchange of ideas and talent?

How can we encourage our citizens to spread out into the world to extend our hub?

What incentives can we provide to keep the network active and engaged?

The answers to these questions have the potential to affect the influence and commercial success of any hub. I believe that in the long term, it will greatly benefit Singapore to 'engage talent' on a much broader, worldwide scale rather than 'retain' it in the traditional sense within its borders.

Lessons Learnt

In my time in the US, I have picked up many lessons which can be

applied to challenges faced by Singapore. The first is that America has an incredible capacity to embrace different cultures and incorporate their best attributes. In spite of unease in some regions, talent is generally embraced wherever it comes from. This is a tremendous advantage in a world in which the best talent may be spread out across the globe.

I have also realised that being Singaporean and contributing to Singapore's progress need not necessarily involve being in Singapore. Lastly, a diaspora can be a huge strategic advantage to a small country if leveraged well. So, rather than focusing on retaining our best talent in local government-related roles, it may make sense to encourage more to drive entrepreneurship both in and beyond Singapore.

Singapore is widely respected in the world, as demonstrated by its first rate reputation in a range of diverse areas – from financial and business services to things like water management expertise. An amusing but telling measure of Singapore's ability to capture the world's imagination could be seen in popular YouTube videos of driverless MRT trains. With so much to offer, Singapore has every reason to send more Singaporeans out into the world and to benefit tremendously from it.

**The H-1B visa is the primary work visa that allows skilled international professionals or international students to live and work in the US.*

About the Writer

Kwek Ju-kay was born and raised in Singapore but went to university in the US. He has worked in the San Francisco Bay Area for the last 12 years, holding engineering and management positions in start-ups and high-tech corporations there. He is currently a Product Manager at Google Inc, where he manages emerging product strategy.

Life is Like a Peach

*When Australia beckoned, Singapore journalist **Juat Leng Halliday** packed her bags for a cross-cultural life *Down Under*, which she likens to two halves of a peach. She discusses her integration there, and an earlier stint in the US.*

Life may be how we live it and some of us try to live in quiet pursuit of our dreams.

When I was twelve, I came across an unwanted bag of brochure maps while browsing in a Bras Basah Road bookshop. The textbook seller was happy for me to take them off his hands. They were freebies he did not want.

I clutched the stuffed bag all the way home and counted, to my delight, dozens of encyclopaedic-quality world maps. What a find! I was keen to pass them around and so brought them to class the next day to give away as prizes in my own quiz game (Name-the-Capital City-and-Spell-It-Out). Winners received a glossy illustrated map of the world to put on their walls.

Looking back, my fun with the cast-offs and attempt at television ‘largesse’ pre-Oprah Winfrey style, was based on a deep fascination with the outside world – a prized world which lay beyond the dot of the city-state where I lived, and which I

dreamt that I could one day experience and appreciate.

As Singaporeans began to afford to travel, their list of ‘must-see’ destinations grew longer. For a decade in my career I had the privilege of engaging the interests of the growing flock of vacationers, armed with my travel pen. I tried to delve into cities and countries on my personal map and to look at their culture. I might have encountered a bit more than the package-tourist, but still, I was only skimming the surface. Cultural immersion was needed – to live like a local where possible, and preferably, to even try to learn to speak the language. It became my little motto.

When 9-11 Happened

The opportunity to work overseas came knocking on my door when my Australian husband was transferred by his company to the US. I resigned from my sub-editing job, leased out the condo, grabbed the kids and put on my multicultural ‘dreamcoat’. Virginia, here we come!

The boys went to school and I volunteered in the studio of a community television station. In the second year of our American Dream-*idyll*, we were rudely awakened by that calamity of astronomic proportions: September 11, which altered lives not just in the Land of the Free but the world over.

Watching the second plane hit, and the Twin Towers crumbling on CNN 'live' was unforgettably raw. Like other mums there, I rushed to the boys' school, as we lived only 10 minutes from the airport that cleared the Pentagon-targeted flight for take-off. Life seemed to be in total limbo for the next 72 hours, with rumours initially flying around that there were more planes. Ironically, my husband was flying back from Changi Airport at the time of the attacks. He was stranded in Tokyo when the US sealed all its borders for the first time in history.

I cannot forget the eerie air of silence that descended on our neighbourhood, like it must do on helpless residents in conflict-zones before an air-raid. We were waiting,

expecting and hoping that the all-clear would soon be given.

It has since been my prayer and hope that Singapore and Australia be spared an attack on their soil. Homeland security has to be a serious job for everyone. No matter how many mistakes were made, or could still be made, it is through mistakes that we learn, and America paid dearly for her lesson.

The Washington Sniper

In Virginia, the sense of security was to elude us again, just a year later. This time the Washington Sniper struck, terrifying an entire population in the D.C. area including us. Schools were in 'lockdown'. Even the window-blinds in my sons' school were tightly closed, to deny the cruising mad gunman his random mission.

We got in and out of our front doors and cars with eyes at the back of our heads, and walked zig-zag for three interminably-long weeks, until the sniper and his accomplice were caught. The relative safety of Singapore and its zero-tolerance gun laws were a relief when we returned.

Many Americans see it as their right to bear arms to protect themselves – a marked cultural difference that we first noticed in a K-mart store there. No toy water-pistols were stocked, just the real thing.

Back To Singapore

We headed back to Singapore after our three eventful American years, with lessons learned about vigilance. My husband continued with the same company and I went back to work. But it was with our two Singapore-born sons that the hardest adjustments were in store when they were introduced to Singapore primary schooling and the mother-tongue proficiency requirements.

After a semester, we sought permission for them to be transferred to the Australian International School while still doing Chinese as a LOTE (Languages Other Than English) subject. Although both had started on French in America, the older boy still preferred Mandarin, and despite the gaps in his young language-learning years, I am pleased that he will be offering it for his VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education) exam. Our

hope is that he'll do the best he can. After all, if the previous Mandarin-speaking Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, started learning it at a later age than my son, there is plenty of hope that he will, one day, attain fluency because he continues to like and respect the language.

We found the Australian education system similar to the American, but both are different from Singapore's. But then again, there is no such thing as an Australian education system, as each State runs its own school system right up to the different university entrance exams. All that will change with the expected launch of a national curriculum by the Federal government. It has already met with resistance from the States, which treasure their right to determine what children in their State should learn.

It does sound a bit chaotic coming from Singapore, but Australian States have differences in their natural and cultural environments that they are proud of. Looking at the way children are taught in the American and Australian systems, creativity, self-confidence and group interactions are encouraged. A few minutes of 'Show and Tell' in class has

taught young American children that all-important storytelling skill and given them the confidence to stand before an audience.

In the Australian system, I also remember my children getting up on the school stage to give a short talk each about a researched favourite personality.

Emigrating Then and Now

Families are in for a great cultural leap when they emigrate. I went online to search for an unofficial estimate of the number of Singaporeans now abroad: It was 40,000. I cannot vouch for the veracity of the figure, but it provides a ball-park figure of Singapore's overseas population. I am unsure if the figure includes Singaporean entrepreneurs and expatriates who have gone to regional countries such as China, Vietnam and India, or students studying in overseas universities. With the rise in inter-cultural marriages, an increasing number of men and women, too, are also settling overseas.

Singaporeans have largely descended

from migrants themselves. It took courage for this pre-war exodus to make their way into the unknown, sometimes with only the clothes on their back. Many arrived to hardships of a different kind, which they stoically endured to carve out a new life. No landed property or even property markets for migrants awaited them. There was no Internet or Skype to pre-empt them about what lay ahead, only perhaps a letter from a family member who left earlier to 'Nanyang' (Southeast Asia), which an itinerant letter-writer would read to them.

Now more than a century later, many Singaporeans are saying they want to do it again.

Life in Australia

I have ended up 'crossing the seas' to Australia, but even though the physical journey was a seven-hour flight, mentally, like others, I hit cultural jetlag. After five years, Singapore and her way of life can be re-appraised and appreciated through the experiences I have known.

I return to Singapore as least once a

year to see my own family and I often hear the conversational catchword – “migrate”. Taxi-drivers need no prompting to launch into a running commentary. The litany of issues seems to grow longer each year. Sometimes, drivers proudly tell me their Poly-graduate son or daughter is studying in Australia for a degree, and that some are working there.

Interestingly, one driver told me his son had come back to Singapore and he spoke of the long hours he put into his I.T. job in Melbourne. I smiled and told him that Australians have been working fairly long hours for a while, and business migrants work harder at their own businesses in order to succeed. Personal taxation is high, something you need to get used to. There is a retirement programme called superannuation, which is akin to the CPF, and an age pension for both men and women in their sixties that is means-tested.

Australia is certainly not an unfamiliar place for Singaporeans as many have lived and studied at its tertiary institutions for the past 20 years or more. The favourite questions I get

from Singaporeans are regarding property and car costs. It is cheaper to have a car in Australia than Singapore but try not to drive it into the heart of Sydney or Melbourne where city parking is grossly expensive. Elsewhere it is generally free, at least for an hour or two. Like Americans, Australians need their cars due to the vast distances. The office could be more than an hour’s commute away, and families and friends a long way off.

As a mother, I naturally now worry about the affordability of housing in the long-term for my children. If you wish to live near to the major cities of Sydney, Melbourne or Perth, you need to fork out far more nowadays than five or 10 years ago, due to increased demand. That demand in Melbourne, for instance, is coming from 1,500 people being added to the population every month, many from China, India and the rest of Asia. Desirable homes are often sold by auction instead of a private sale – a process that can be highly disappointing. You may have thought you found your dream home, only to see it slip from you in the bidding.

Thoughts on Melbourne

By some standards, Melbourne is considered to have done well, having warded off the global financial crisis. Yet, in the 2010 Victorian State Election in November, the Labour Party in government for the past 11 years, lost office to the Coalition in Opposition which campaigned on cost-of-living policies.

Victorians have seen rates of public utilities go up, the public infrastructure strained by population increase and frequent breakdowns of train services. A young Indian graduate was stabbed to death by a teenager wanting his mobile phone. The Indian media portrayed the violence as racially-motivated while Melbourne police maintained they were opportunistic robberies and urged students not to carry expensive-looking gadgets around.

A growing knife culture, street violence and drunken behaviour are besmirching the reputation of this highly 'liveable' city. With such disquiet on top of everything else, it is not surprising that the incumbent government lost the recent state election.

House and Garden

When I first came to Australia to visit in the 1980s, I was astounded by a comment that "only the elderly and poor" live in units (apartments) when I asked who lived in them. That was not really an accurate remark as I later found out. Nevertheless, a house with a backyard is the Australian Dream, where you can raise your family, with perhaps a pool and tennis court thrown on the quarter acre or larger.

But more than house and land, it is the lifestyle that Australians seek. Their backyard is the place to hang out in with good friends casually invited over for drinks and a 'barbie'. As Australian actor Paul Hogan said, "So come on over and we'll slip another shrimp on the barbie for ya."

The outdoors under an azure sky is to Australians what air-conditioned shopping malls are to Singaporeans.

Australians are easily the most sports-loving people on the planet. Whether it's cricket, rugby, footy, tennis, swimming, fishing, sailing, surfing, or snowboarding (did I miss

something out?) they love the outdoors and their sports. It was said that the Australians' previous dominance in world tennis was due, in part, to the prevalence of the home tennis court.

But living in a large house with recreational facilities or a productive backyard requires muscle to upkeep it, in order to enjoy it. We cook our own meals and do the housekeeping ourselves. The boys, now teenagers, help to mow the lawn, do the dishes, pick up the dogs' poo and clean the house. My husband loves using his green thumb in his spare time in the fruit and vegetable garden that all-year-round delivers a bountiful harvest according to the seasons, now that the drought is officially over. Nothing beats the taste of homegrown vegetables, whether in veggie plots or pots.

The Australian comedy *The Castle* is, I feel, a must-see for new arrivals. It's a movie that depicts a community fighting against an airport development encroaching onto the backyard of a home. It is hilarious, but reflects the Australian

'battler' psyche. Where we live, a parallel was coincidentally drawn when local residents banded together to protest against a developer's proposal to build a caravan park in the middle of a desirable seaside suburb, and succeeded in having it turned down.

The Master Key

So how can Singaporeans adjust to life outside of Singapore? Take with you the master-key of understanding, adapting, and accepting. There are cultural differences everywhere, and a prejudiced mind is a closed one. Change your environment if that makes you happy but always be accepting of cultural differences. After the initial weeks of culture-shock that is bound to occur, adjustment comes along and your feet will find their home.

When you are an emigrant you automatically become an immigrant. You always bring with you a part of yourself from the old country, and when you return to where you came from, you see it with new eyes.

I view my life as two conjoined 'halves' of the twin-peach hanging from our fruit tree, that is still one whole fruit. Each half is not richer or poorer, not better or worse, just different. I like to think that I crossed the world not to enrich my bank account but to adapt to and adopt a different culture and way of life as it unfolds. But nothing is discarded from the heart. And no matter where I live, my 'dream castle' is where my heart wants it to be.

About the Writer

Juat Leng Halliday is a Singapore-born, naturalised Australian living outside Melbourne on the scenic Mornington Peninsula since 2005. She works for an Australian company handling public relations and the media, and is involved in a local Australian writers' group. Her personal dictum is to always embrace changes and experiences, and take life one step at a time. In Singapore she worked in newspapers and magazines writing under the byline, Teng Juat Leng. She took a break from full-time work to enjoy her children. Upon her return from the United States, she freelanced for Singapore newspapers and magazines, and also worked in the NUS Office of Corporate Relations as Editor/Writer of *Knowledge Enterprise*. She holds a Masters in Mass Communications.

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