BROADER PERSPECTIVES

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THE ESSAY ISSUE

To what extent does the migration of people have a positive effect?

'Nowadays, the pleasures of reading can never compete with the pleasures of visual entertainment.' To what extent do you agree?

'Air travel should be discouraged, not promoted.' To what extent do you agree?

Many developed countries are paying increasing attention to the needs of the disadvantaged. How far is this true in Singapore?

Discuss the view that too much faith is placed in statistics.

How important are dreams?

To what extent is design important in your society?

Does the presence of a foreign power ever help a country with problems?

'The more science advances, the more religion will decline.' To what extent do you agree?

'Contemporary music has no artistic value.' Is this a fair comment?

How far do physical features, such as size and location, determine a country's progress?

How far is it possible to ensure that all producers of food and goods are fairly rewarded?

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A U.S. Army Soldier with 4th Platoon, Delta Company, 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division out of Fort Carson, Colo., talks with local residents about whose house was struck by small arms fire from insurgent forces in the area of Dora in southern Baghdad, Iraq, July 23, 2007. (U.S. Air Force photo by Master Sgt. Jonathan Doti)

DOES THE PRESENCE OF A FOREIGN POWER EVER HELP A COUNTRY WITH PROBLEMS?

Helps.

BY ELIZABETH KON

The infringement of a country's sovereignty or appreciated support from allies in a bad situation? Therein lies the crux of a contentious issue that still engenders much heated debate today. World War II memorials foreground the significant and welcomed role of foreign soldiers in liberating Europe from Hitler's regime. Yet the deeply unpopular and unsuccessful Vietnam War and the continued bitterness over the legacy of Agency Orange and left behind landmines in Vietnam show the distinct polarities in process and outcome when global powers try to deal with the internal problems of other countries. At times like this, foreign presence in the form of direct action, aid or influence can be the making or breaking point of whether the host country is able to successfully deal with problems like political instability and economic meltdowns, ethnic and civil strife or humanitarian crises. While the motives and agendas of such foreign assistance may sometimes complicate the problem, the nature of the challenges most countries face today is such that foreign help is actually crucial and necessary, especially when carried out in the spirit of cooperation and altruism.

Most foreign intervention in the world tends to be backed up or undertaken by established nations and the UN and its attendant agencies. Hence when countries have problems, help from these global players are always definitely needed because they have the most resources and the best expertise to achieve the most direct and beneficial effect. Foreign investment from the richest and most developed nations of the world can exponentially affect the development of poor nations struggling to raise the standard of living of their people or bring their economies in line with the international flow of trade and finance. Foreign powers have the most extensive financial reach and influence, hence their ability to bring into effect free

trade agreements and development projects can substantially raise the GDP of needy nations. Such wealth of technology, money and expertise is particularly crucial in times of humanitarian need and disaster, preventing death tolls from rising and extending the necessary damage control. Recovery from the 2004 tsunami was quicker because foreign powers were invited in to help raise billions of dollars of aid and had a whole contingent of relief workers, engineers and doctors to send in to aid recovery and construction work. Contrast the success of this effort to the spread of death and sickness in Myanmar after a devastating typhoon when the local government refused international help, in particular that of the Western powers.

Critics may argue that countries only come into their own when they have the leeway and independence to deal with their own problems. However, as Kofi Annan, the former Secretary General of the UN, once stressed, the challenges countries face today are problems without passports. The nature of these problems is increasingly and unavoidably of a global scale and complexity as the world becomes more interconnected. As such, the ability to pull together different levels of help and knowhow is even more crucial. Only through the involvement of foreign powers can we then coordinate the necessary responses and actions; to help nations that have civil wars that too easily spill over into neighbouring countries, tackle climate change that recognises no borders and communicable diseases that need international organisation to stage health interventions and to give out life-saving vaccines and medicines. The proliferation of terrorist cells and networks has necessitated joint military operations between global powers and local states to train armies and police forces, like in the Philippines, Pakistan and Yemen. The intractability of these problems means that no one local strategy is ever the best way to fight Aids, preserve biodiversity, combat drought and famine and the refugee problem. No local agency can substitute for the scale of operational expertise and depth of engagement that foreign powers can pull across nations and races.

The most common grievance against the presence of foreign powers is the concern that it would violate the notion of national sovereignty and hence cause more complications than real help. But foreign involvement, even of a more robust nature, serves the needs of local populations when it is the local government themselves that are causing the problems and squandered their own legitimacy to rule. When oppressive regimes curb and abuse the rights and freedoms of its people and deviate from international norms of good governance, foreign intervention is the only route by which these people can get hope to get relief. Repressive nations like North Korea and Iran tend to flagrantly disregard the well-being and desires of their citizens and it is only the combined pressure put on them by foreign powers that can keep them in check and nudge them to take steps to resolve the issue. The argument of the sanctity and independence of local borders pales in regard to the horror engendered by the atrocities that the Rwandan and Sudanese genocides can spawn on its own people. The legitimacy of such interference by foreign powers out trump the supposed right of local governments to deal with their own internal problems of strife and conflict. When governments fail their own people, foreign powers are needed to step in to build democracies, punish war criminals, enforce and promote internal reconciliation and answer questions about how to govern. Such recognised moral authority and influence works especially for failing or nascent states, pulling different parties together as the country recovers from civil strife or transition from subjection to independence. East Timor, Cambodia, Bosnia and Kosovo have been able to pick up the pieces with the help of foreign powers. Only advanced nations can generate the necessary trust and patience in the embryonic process of nation building, building up governmental and state apparatus and legal and financial institutions from scratch.

Granted, foreign powers are not always a one-sided miracle cure and may exacerbate existing detriments. The vested interests and motives of such foreign powers can sometimes give local leaders a disincentive to change for the better, building up a too reliant co-dependent relationship instead. Other times, cynical acts of real politick and a calculated cost benefit analysis of best outcomes may cause foreign powers to prop up local despots or turn a blind eye to certain unsavoury aspects of local governments. This only creates a vicious cycle of mistrust and suspicion, hampering future efforts of other powers to fix the problem. Pakistan is crucial to the fight against terrorism and has a significant American presence to help in that fight. But it is still one of the most corrupt nations in the world with a substantial amount of developmental aid lost to local governance. China has also come under criticism as its hesitance of putting pressure on Sudan is because of its oil interests there. Therefore, wanting to intervene to contain a country's problems and stabilising the region may prevent the country from repeating such mistakes but also ironically cause more problems for the future.

Given the technological advances and increasing connectedness of today's world, the presence of foreign powers in national matters is becoming more of a given. And their influence is not always restricted to military or economic terms. The advent and impact of new media communication tools has granted easy access to information and made it possible for foreign ideas to spread rapidly and have influence over internal events without even a real physical presence in the country. The collaboration with the United States government to delay Twitter's scheduled site maintenance to help the protesters of Iran is recent disputed elections is a case in point. Since the spread and influence of any nation over another can no longer be confined to and shut out by territorial barriers, the work ahead is to manage these interactions so local nations can better leverage the full level of benefits that the cooperation of foreign powers can accord them. This state of the world will outlast shifting policies, changing parties and bureaucratic switches. And probably strict oversight is needed by empowered and independent overseers. It may be the strengthened role of IGOs and NGOs that can help keep all countries, including powerful nations, on the straight and narrow, to push global powers to do the right thing while benefiting the nations which really need help. "

Does not help.

BY VIVIENNE CHUA

At last count, the new millennium has witnessed numerous wars, and a dozen scattered "lesser" armed conflicts and civil unrests. Whether struggling over inequalities of wealth and resource distribution, wrestling for regional and political dominance or ethnic cleansing, such situations occasion diplomatic, economic or military interventions by foreign powers. Ostensibly, foreign powers intervene and establish a presence in these countries, whether individually or collectively under the auspices of international communities like the United Nations or NATO, to stop injustice, aid victims, and create social and political structures that will operate differently from previous modes of government. In reality, such interventions have not always benefited the countries helped and often been motivated by the less-than-altruistic desires of foreign powers which stand to gain power and economic benefits.

Undeniably, the presence of a foreign power can stem the tide of human rights abuses, stabilise political uncertainties and facilitate more peaceful conditions in a country. Throughout the 19th century, the Europeans were backing humanitarian expeditions, dispatching troops to stop killings in places like Poland and Bulgaria that were then undergoing political and social transitions that created ripe conditions for massacres. Greek nationalists intent on rising up against Ottoman rule to create an independent Greece in 1827 would not have been successful without the British, French and Russian navies combining to repel the threat of the Ottoman empire and navy. In our time, the leadership, concerted organisation and superior firepower provided by global players like Australia in East Timor, the United States in Bosnia and Kosovo, and the British in Sierra Leone, paved the way for the nascent governments to move towards eventual self-rule, and helped its shell-shocked people to recover from prolonged bloodshed and abuses to embrace societal progress.

SURF THIS

Which country was the best coloniser?
http://www.slate.com/id/2151852/

IMAGE CREDITS

War and Peace by Jayel Aheram, Flickr Creative Commons

However, the desire to remake the world and right human wrongs does not guarantee a fairy-tale ending. The history of foreign power intervention is littered with victories that cost native peoples much hardship and the experience of being treated as second-class citizens in their own land, as colonialism has demonstrated. Till today, U.S. presence on Japanese soil is a sensitive matter despite the security it provides because of Japanese concerns about noise pollution and high crime rates in the vicinity of U.S. military bases. In addition, the high hopes that civilian atrocities and genocides would cease with the creation of the international document The Responsibility to Protect in 2001 – in which the international community had the responsibility to intervene if local governments were unwilling or incapable of protecting their own citizenry – were unfulfilled as seen in the failures of the UN to stop the large-scale massacres, rapes and lynching in Bosnia, Somalia and Rwanda. The presence of foreign powers with the intention of offering military security does not offer guaranteed results and is ineffectual in preventing the internal strife and suffering amongst the locals.

Too often, the objectives of the foreign power are not aligned with those that it attempts to "rescue" and its actions can even exacerbate crisis conditions and bring about even more chaos and anguish instead in the target nation. At times, its very presence may incite greater counter-activity on the part of rebels or insurgents to repel efforts to stabilise the local or interim government the foreign power supports. Worse, even ordinary citizens may view such meddling as a threat to the status quo, however miserably they had been labouring under it. America's War on Terror is a case in point. While George.W Bush announced lofty aims of freeing oppressed Iraqis from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein in 2001, ordinary Iraqis were rooting for a quick and decisive victory for the despot. Their reasons? Fear of the chaos, instability, suffering and pain that any form of fighting will bring. 8 years down the road, as the Americans begin to pull out from Iraq, there is little optimism that the campaign has actually achieved its aims. Far from making Iraq and the world a safer place, such intervention has ironically achieved the opposite, creating a new generation of Islamic radicalism and increased terrorist threats. Often when the intentions and values of the foreign power do not match or effectively take into consideration local desires and culture, greater conflict and suffering ensues, making the presence of the foreign power counterproductive.

Moreover, foreign powers often have their own concerns to deal with at home and may have to base their involvement abroad on public sentiment and availability of resources. This makes foreign powers unreliable and limited in terms of what they can do. Frequent pull-outs by foreign powers tend to create power vacuums that facilitate struggles to fill the void, ironically bringing the problem back to square one, but in an even more tangled mess. This was demonstrated in Somalia which has lacked an effective central government since President Siad Abarre was overthrown in 1991. Earlier UN-led task forces such The United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM) and the United Nations Task Force (UNITAF) attempted to enforce ceasefires between warring civil factions, encourage peace talks and observe the distribution of food aid. However, these efforts were costly, running into billions of dollars and repeatedly sabotaged by local rebel groups. High numbers of casualties sustained in the course of restoration by both local Somalians and the foreign peacekeeping troops, eroded good will towards foreign powers and led to premature pull-outs by U.S. and Ethiopian forces before any concrete results were established, leaving the country in a state of political limbo and social instability. The same is happening in Iraq and this calls into question the true purposes of foreign power presence. What is the point of intervention when the cost - both financially and politically - to both the locals and the foreign power is so high and failure so frequent?

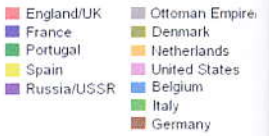
THE PRESENCE OF FOREIGN POWERS WITH THE INTENTION OF OFFERING MILITARY SECURITY DOES NOT OFFER GUARANTEED RESULTS AND IS INEFFECTUAL IN PREVENTING THE INTERNAL STRIFE AND SUFFERING AMONGST THE LOCALS.

Interestingly, the last two decades have experienced a heightened fervour for foreign intervention. Fuelled in part by a growing human rights movement and a global media that regularly depicts images of victims of human rights abuses, ordinary citizens are quick to seize on the moral imperatives of intervention. Tragically, foreign power interference has a largely dismal progress report card, whether due to self-interest and arrogance on the part of the foreign powers, or the intractability and brutality of the civil conflicts themselves. However, foreign intervention will persist in a world fraught with injustice and complexity. Countries will likely continue to feel the need to act and get involved in other countries since the alternative is doing nothing which, as Rwanda has taught and that Darfur is now teaching, "shames the conscience of us all" (Barack Obama). Still, history has been strident about the pitfalls of foreign power intervention. We would do well to heed her warnings before plunging into more rescue missions, for in righting a wrong, no more wrong should be done. "

DID YOU KNOW?

This map shows how many countries in the Asia-Pacific region were occupied by colonial masters in 1914.

This map shows how many countries in the Asia-Pacific region gained independence (in light grey) by the end of the Second World War in 1945. Most colonial powers were too drained by war's end to support their empire.



HOW IMPORTANT ARE DREAMS?

(On this page) The Lightness of Being, alicepopkorn, Flickr Creative Commons

BY ELIZABETH MESENAS

The word 'dreams' conjures up many images – the activity our brains engage in when we are asleep; the woolgathering that our irate teachers and parents catch us doing at times when we should be paying attention; the aspirations that give our lives meaning and purpose. Many psychoanalysts tell us that dreams are important for 'clearing out the software' from a busy day, a form of 'off-line' processing to save the good stuff and get rid of the useless. Pragmatic employers, parents and educators, however may scoff at the idea that dreams are important, arguing instead that dreams – in particular, daydreaming – take precious time away from work, as success is achieved through hard work, and hard work alone. While their arguments are not totally wrong, dreams are still important for our health and overall functioning, for igniting our creative spark, and for giving us the impetus to stay true to our ideals.

First, dreams are integral to our physical and mental health. Dream theorists argue that while we sleep and our bodies are at rest, the mind, through the act of dreaming, sorts out the events of the day – what Freud terms 'day residue' – and gets it ready to function at its optimal best the next day. Seen from this biological point of view, dreams are necessary because they help our bodies de-stress and rejuvenate. Given the increasingly hectic pace of modern living, dreams therefore are essential to help us manage our daily avalanche of sensory experiences, so that we remain physically and mentally productive, rather than falling prey to stress-related illnesses.

Furthermore, dreams – in the form of daydreaming – have value because they allow our creative juices to flow. Unfortunately, many sceptics (mostly bosses and teachers and anxious parents) dismiss day dreaming as a waste of time, an occupation of the lazy and the bored. Thankfully, for those of us, whether students or employees, who treasure and enjoy the time spent daydreaming, there is strong support for the importance of daydreaming. When we daydream in school or at work – just relaxing or woolgathering as some of us like to call it – we let our minds wander. Unfettered by time, space and logic, we have the glorious freedom to imagine and link ideas in unrelated ways that our conscious minds will not do. The result? We make connections that we have never seen before and imagine things that do not exist, expanding our horizons and allowing true reflection that is usually curtailed by the pressures of time. Daydreaming enabled Newton to discover his laws of gravity, Robert Frost to ponder the road less travelled, and the Wright brothers to imagine the possibility of flying. In today's innovation-driven age, it pays for companies who want to succeed to allow more time for their employees to daydream. Already, companies like Google and 3M have taken steps to harness this creative need for individual expression in concrete ways. Google lets its employees spend 20% of their time on technology projects of their own choice, projects that catch their fancy. Google News, G-mail and Orkut were developed from this freewheeling time. Such 'idea labs' indeed attest to the sweet irony that dreams, far from being a waste of time, can actually help companies to come up with more cutting-edge products and services and become pioneers in their industries.

(On this page) Victorian woman in waiting, www.karenswhimsy.com

DREAM THEORISTS ARGUE THAT WHILE WE SLEEP AND OUR BODIES ARE AT REST, THE MIND, THROUGH THE ACT OF DREAMING, SORTS OUT THE EVENTS OF THE DAY – WHAT FREUD TERMS 'DAY RESIDUE' – AND GETS IT READY TO FUNCTION AT ITS OPTIMAL BEST THE NEXT DAY.

More significantly, dreams – the act of aspiring towards a goal – give us vision. They provide direction for our lives and give us something to work toward. Some sceptics complain that dreams can be overly ambitious and unrealistic, and as such, may give individuals the false hope that they can succeed despite their lack of talent, resources or circumstance. However, it is precisely having goals beyond our present reach, a big picture or high flown ideals, that allows us to challenge our 'fate' or 'destiny' and make great transformational changes. That black Americans enjoy a greater measure of racial equality today is due in no small part to Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'overly ambitious' dream. Who would have thought at that time that it would be possible for black Americans to vote and to enjoy basic civil liberties? Or that amongst them, one would one day lead their country as President? Dreams evoke emotions and drive that can power our actions more profoundly than pure logic and reason. They can unite people and capture the imagination, and be the platform from which our desires to enrich and renew society can be envisioned.

Dreams – our hopes and our aspirations – are vital because they help us stay the course and remain true to our ideals amidst disappointment and suffering. Dreams act as the bright Northern Star that helps us navigate and find our bearings; help us find what gives our lives meaning and purpose. Iran's Mousavi may have suffered defeat against political incumbent President Ahmadinejad in the latest elections, but his dream of ending political and religious oppression, and improving the economic lives of Iranians will help him stay true to his vision, even as he suffers the repercussions of his political defiance. Gandhi, Mandela, and Mother Teresa – they have all endured suffering and hardship, but remained true to their convictions. Why? Their dreams gave them the courage to pursue what they believed was right, provided them with the moral ballast to speak out against the injustices of the day, and the power to inspire many other generations after to champion their causes.

It is striking that in a world that is increasingly focused on concrete material realities, people continue to dream big. Sporting events, the media industry, the animation industry, the fantasy and science fiction industries continue to emphasise the fact that dreams do come true and one should dream big. The filming of stories conjured up by people's imaginations like *The Lord of the Rings*, *Star Trek*, *Batman* and *Harry Potter* have been hugely popular, showing that people continue to appreciate the other worlds our minds can offer, to desire alternate realities, to need an escape. People idolise sporting greats, Hollywood stars and the rich and famous, who represent a life beyond the ordinary, and through newspapers, tabloid magazines, and television shows, enjoy the vicarious pleasure of watching them do things ordinary people combine. Talent shows, lucky draws, and sweepstakes all testify to people's dreams of making it big, and the commitment shown by contestants and the faithful who make their bets each week speaks volumes of the need for hope that things can change beyond our beliefs and our mundane experience.

Dreams are often dismissed because of their intangible and mysterious nature, and because time is so limited and there are so many other important things to do. Yet, the things we do not understand and which may seem unrelated and trivial hold a power beyond our expectations, a function that proves to be necessary to our daily lives. Dreams are important not just for individuals' physical and mental well-being, they are also useful in helping us solve problems and create new ideas. Dreams provide the impetus for radical change, and keep us true to our vision amidst suffering and hardship. Dreams fuel our existence and make life that much more colourful, interesting and rich. Seen in this light, it is difficult to accept the view that dreams have little place in our pragmatic society today. 99

Unimportant.

BY SAMUEL WONG

It is almost quixotic, in this technology-driven world where practicality trumps fantasy, to see that there are people who still believe in the importance of dreams. While we do not question the reality of dreams, either in the form of ambitions, fantasy or what we think about in our sleep, what one should question is the belief that dreams matter. Those who hold on to the belief that dreams are important do so because they can make a good living out of the interpretation of dreams, or believe that dreams can inspire someone to greater deeds, or that dreams can provide a sense of hope. However, one can also argue that those who hold on to such beliefs are ignoring the criticisms against the pseudoscience of psychoanalysis, or have failed to note the difference between dreamers and visionaries. Ultimately, people who believe that dreams offer hope have not considered the illusory nature of dreams.

Many have the misguided belief that dreams are important because they help to discover what ails the human mind and spirit. The interpretation of dreams, in itself, is a medical cottage industry around the world today. Many psychiatrists and psychotherapists believe that the careful analysis of the subconscious mind offers a glimpse into the inner thoughts and feelings of humans and can also cure patients of their mental illness. The medical world has indeed documented a number of successful cases where many patients suffering from various mental maladies were cured through such therapy. However, many doctors have long argued that psychotherapy remains an inexact science, and that the use of such techniques to cure mental patients is merely pseudoscience; there is no scientific basis that dreams are indeed the windows to Man's inner being. Critics have accused psychiatrists and psychotherapists of consciously or unconsciously imposing their own thinking on their patients, giving them false memories through psychotherapy. Examples of psychotherapy patients who after undergoing treatment began to falsely accuse their parents of sexual abuse abound in many nations. Similarly, the explosion of such pseudoscience has fuelled the multi-billion dollar pharmaceutical industry, as psychiatrists dispense medications to their patients for, perhaps, non-existent mental illnesses and conditions. If dreams serve to enrich "doctors" at the expense of their patients' interests, and serves commercial interests rather than curing genuine mental illnesses, perhaps society should take a step back and reconsider its importance.

THOSE WHO HOLD ON TO THE BELIEF THAT DREAMS ARE IMPORTANT DO SO BECAUSE THEY CAN MAKE A GOOD LIVING OUT OF THE INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS, OR BELIEVE THAT DREAMS CAN INSPIRE SOMEONE TO GREATER DEEDS, OR THAT DREAMS CAN PROVIDE A SENSE OF HOPE.

Often, history also lauds dreamers as change-makers who bring new ideas to society. Indeed, when Mankind becomes too comfortable with the status quo, we need people who can remake societies into better places of living. People like Martin Luther King Jr., the civil rights movement leader in the U.S. during the 1960s, are cited as examples of dreamers who have forced societies to reexamine themselves and correct social injustices. However, while the image of a dreamer is often admired, we should accurately differenti-

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I WANT YOU TO WANT ME
Artist Jonathon Harris explores how we dream of romance.
http://iwantyoutowantme.org

ate between dreamers and visionaries. The crucial difference lies in the fact that visionaries do something about their dreams. Dreamers are merely content with dreaming. People like Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, who between them have revolutionised the computer and consumer electronics industries, certainly can be considered as visionaries rather than dreamers. Of course, one must also remember that, sometimes, dreams can also become downright dangerous if such visionaries can move societies to do some truly horrendous acts. People like Hitler, Pol Pot, Mao Zedong and Osama bin Laden have committed crimes against humanity because they were able to move people with their twisted dreams of grandeur. Still, the distinction needs to be made between visionaries and dreamers, lest anyone falsely believes that dreams in themselves are important.

Some might argue that dreams are important because they can provide a measure of hope of better tomorrows. The lack of hope is often cited as one of the causes of suicides in people. It is commonly believed that dreams allow one to be detached, or be distracted, from the bleakness of the current situation as it allows one to fantasise of an alternate reality where the world is a better place, at least in the mind for a brief moment. However, we have to remember that there are factors beyond human control in any situation, and troubles cannot be merely "dreamed" away. In this case, dreaming is often a denial of reality, which is in itself useless unless one is able to do something to mitigate the situation. A Japanese government report reported that 30,000 people committed suicide in 2006, an increase for the ninth year running. The main causes of suicide were due to depression caused by unemployment, financial and family problems. In fact, having dreams of a better life when things are going poorly can often drive people to greater despair and frustration, causing them to slip into denial and depression, drug or alcohol dependency, or resorting to suicide as a means of rejecting this life. While the ability to dream of a better place in one's mind might offer some respite, the over-dependence and false hope in dreams as an escape from reality is certainly delusional and often harmful.

HUMAN NATURE IS SUCH THAT WE ALWAYS WANT A BETTER LIFE, BUT THIS DESIRE SHOULD BE FIRMLY GROUNDED IN REALITY AND REAL ACTIONS, BALANCED BY ETHICS AND INFORMED BY HISTORY.

For some people though, the importance of dreams cannot be overstated because an entire money-making industry is created and built around the manufacture and supply of dreams for escapism. The entertainment and media industries are about supplying consumers with fantasies to escape their humdrum reality, vicariously "living" a "life" they always wanted. However, many cultural critics have long complained that the entertainment industry of America is a thinly veiled disguise for cultural imperialism, with the export of American culture leading to a loss of traditional cultures in many countries. Some governments have nevertheless argued that the positive economic benefits that the multi-billion dollar industry brings in the long run through the creation of entertainment-related jobs like digital animation far outweigh the costs the invasion of American culture brings. Certainly, the economic importance of dreams cannot be underestimated when many people's livelihoods depend on it. However, few developing countries really benefit since investments in info-technology and skilled and creative labour are most needed to grow the entertainment industry. Most countries are mere consumers of American culture, feeding the coffers of the media industries in America. Certainly, if the consumption of dreams as a form of escapism leads to societal upheavals and cultural backlash, then we have to reexamine the importance Mankind places on dreams.

Societies often have this romanticised image of dreams and their power to evoke feelings and change lives or transform societies. The problem lies in the ephemeral and delusional nature of dreams that can consume a person. While idealism and some form of hope and temporal escape from reality is necessary in order to keep going, overstating the importance of dreams is counterproductive if people reject reality and become distanced from it, choosing to become dream junkies instead. In fact, emphasising dreams over reality weakens boundaries that create safety and enable actual achievement. Human nature is such that we always want a better life, but this desire should be firmly grounded in reality and real actions, balanced by ethics and informed by history. Reality and life, seen in this way, should always be more important than dreams. "

'THE MORE SCIENCE ADVANCES, THE MORE RELIGION WILL DECLINE.' TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE?

Agree.

BY ELIZABETH KON

Science

and religion have had a long and fractious relationship. In the early centuries, religious institutions and leaders were so frightened of scientific discovery and the social change that inevitably followed, that they expended much of their power trying to halt the tide of scientific progress. One only has to consider the trials and controversies of Copernicus, Galileo, Darwin, Freud and John Thomas Scopes to understand the significance of the advance of science for religion. Scientists like to joke about science's starring role in the history of time: how monotheism reduced the gods to one but then came science and reduced them to none. Facetious as the rhyme may be, science and its truths were an inexorable tide whose time had come and the dominance that religion held in society soon tilted in science's favour. From Galileo's rebellious utterance "and yet it does move" in the face of religious censure, claiming the Earth revolved around the Sun, Science has continued to move from discovery to discovery, creating the modern world as we know it. This onward march of scientific inquiry and scepticism is causing the widespread weakening of religious belief as the decades roll by and responsible for paving the way forward for the secularisation of society today.

In providing rational explanations for natural phenomena, scientific knowledge eroded popular belief in superstition, magic and ultimately, religion. The advancement of scientific knowledge was able to reliably prove and disprove beliefs about the world and man, knowledge that used to be religion's sole domain. In being able to empirically work out the reasons behind what we observe in nature, people were less dependent on the vagaries of clerical interpretation. The progress of this scientific system of belief led to organised religion diminishing in followers and influence. Such rigorously tested and evidence-based truths has become a balm for modern man who no longer has to accept that everything is divinely ordained or that an immaterial soul is the be-all and end-all of answers. Today, we live in a world where the mysteries

SURF THIS

HAS DARWIN FAILED?
http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,602644,00.html

IMAGE CREDITS
(on facing page) Psalter of Blessed Virgin, from Prussia
(on this page) Jewish High Priest, www.karenwhimsy.com

of the natural universe and its phenomena are still being penetrated, even beyond our expectations. This expansion of knowledge, especially in fields of evolutionary biology, zoology and geology has gained so much traction that religion's chokehold over understandings of reality continues to be dismissed. The advance of science is the decline of religion as evidenced by how notions of human identity and destiny are more intimately connected to scientific progress and technology as we head further into the 21st century.

The expansion of scientific knowledge and thought also broke religion's vaunted and once impenetrable hold over political power, enabling a democratic revolution that gave people more political choice. Scientific demystifying of the world enabled states and citizens to realise that religion did not have a monopoly on political rule and governance, and individuals could attain power without being divinely ordained. The result is that religion no longer plays a central role in determining political leaders or building political and legal institutions, being shunted wholly to the personal sphere. This separation of religion and state is a distinction that many nations today take for granted. For much of the 20th century, religion was banished from politics as a sign of ignorance and fanaticism as modernising political leaders of developing nation states like Turkey, India and Egypt saw scientific progress as the key to their economic and national well-being. Much of Continental Europe today still frowns on any religious manoeuvring in politics and fights ferocious battles to keep public life and policy secular. This diminishing influence of political religiosity will only continue as countries become more multi-cultural in today's globalised world. It is political leaders who transcend religion, not religious authorities, who govern most successfully and can be most trusted to protect the rights of all people.

Proponents of religion have long railed against its growing irrelevance as they argue that its system of ethics offers guidance out of the morass of today's conflicted and strife-torn world. Science, with its neutrality and objectiveness, seems too close to amorality for their comfort. However, the uncomfortable truth is that religion's history of tyranny, violence and hypocrisy has made it easier for science to push religion into a decline, undermining religion's importance as the sole bastion of moral values. The appeal of a world governed by scientific reason and rationality comes from a popular unease with religion's reputation as one of the most destructive forces in the span of human affairs, all of which shed doubt on the tolerance of its institutions and its message of peace and good. The extension of religious values has only fanned the flames of hatred in Northern Ireland, Palestine, Sri Lanka and India. Belligerent attitudes, intractable beliefs and the alarming readiness to consider violence as a viable solution poison the well of international relations because all sides believe their actions have been legitimised by God. Disenchanted followers assert that science-backed progressive concepts and humanist values can replace the positive aspects of religion without its accompanying historical baggage. As a result, secularised versions of tolerance and justice have easily pushed religion to the background, offering a better route for the individual to live an honourable and altruistic life.

Yet admittedly, the increasing marginalisation of religion over the centuries will lead to an inevitable backlash. A world that has become so dependent on science and technology to the extent that religion can be mocked by non-believers as the worship of the invisible spaghetti monster will garner a strong reaction to such a show of arrogance and dismissal. In the last few years, an increasing number of overt advocates of religion have gained political power and begun an open conflict with secular and atheistic leaders and states, and the beginning of the 21st century has seen a jump in religious intensity and vitality from the 20th century. Scientists reason that this backlash is the vestiges of a primordial instinct fighting for its survival but the inchoate human yearning to belong and believe in master narratives like God cannot be dismissed. So while the mainstream decline of religion is real, there is a hardening of extreme and radical fringes reacting against an overreach of scientific rationalism which they find frighteningly empty of meaning. These citizens are the most likely to bring their beliefs to the ballot box as a way of pushing back science's influence on society.

SCIENCE-BACKED PROGRESSIVE CONCEPTS AND HUMANIST VALUES CAN REPLACE THE POSITIVE ASPECTS OF RELIGION WITHOUT ITS ACCOMPANYING HISTORICAL BAGGAGE

So while the veracity of religion's decline due to science's influence cannot be doubted, no one is arguing that religion will diminish to a vanishing point. God is not dead as Nietzsche proclaimed and His demise has been prematurely written by intellectuals. Interestingly, science-driven secularism has given rise to a modern pluralism based on choice and freedom, benefiting believers and non-believers alike, allowing more open forms of religious movements. Religious numbers may be increasing slightly in the new century but atheism is a big part of this pluralism too, and counted as a mode of belief, is the fourth largest religion in the world. The complicated relationship between science and religion ensures there will not be a linear path of dominance from one to the other. No matter what form belief encompasses, humans still need to make sense of their short and brutish existence. If the signs in recent years are correct and the wars between science and religion are on the upswing again, the best lesson that we can take is to remember that frames of meaning are not hermetically sealed and that as long as man can choose and reason is free to combat any form of oppression, then let the debate continue. ""

Disagree.

BY NOEL KOH

While

debates surrounding the issue of science versus God have evolved over the years, the central issue has not. At the heart of the debate is the belief that science and religion are at odds: that science implies a methodical set of beliefs informed and grounded by evidence while religion, on the other hand, rests on the idea of faith, a belief in the unseen to explain the unknown. Shaped by this understanding of what science and religion are and are not, many believe that as science develops as a way of understanding the world, especially in the 21st century, religion will eventually cease to be accepted by a world fixated and guided by the mantra 'evidence is everything'. However, it is my belief that the contrary has proven to be true, as the development of science serves to reaffirm the relevance of religion.

First and foremost, the advancement of science does not mean that religion will decline because science is an empirical method to understand the world, while religion is a belief system built on morals and values. This means that science and religion are not in direct conflict with each other. Prominent American scientist Stephen Jay Gould posits the view of the "Non-overlapping magisteria (NOMA)", where science and religion occupy two separate realms of human experience. The practice of science means that one follows sets of procedures or rules in order to test or debunk theories that explain why things work in a certain way. In contrast, religion deals more with the meaning and significance of life, and the ethics and principles on which we live our lives. Hence, as science develops, scientists only become better at discovering and explaining phenomena, which does not impede religion because in this regard, both are mutually exclusive.

SURF THIS

GOD VS SCIENCE
http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1555132,00.html

IMAGE CREDITS
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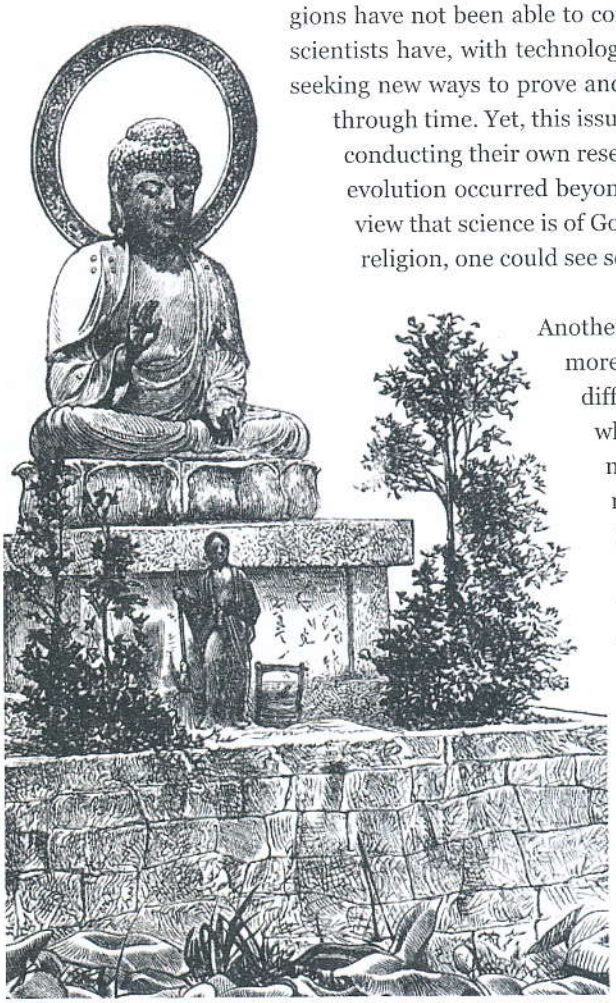
By extension, the advancement of science does not negate religion and in fact, serves to provide 'evidence' that God exists. Religious belief is not devoid of rationale; in fact, theologians put forth that the existence of an almighty God is based on irrefutable evidence, painstakingly chronicled in the Bible, the Quran and other religious books. The Dead Sea scrolls and the many other records of God have all been verified scientifically, proving the centrality of religion to human civilisation through the ages. All these have been possible because science made discovering them possible: carbon dating, developments in archaeological techniques and scientific inquiry, to name a few. Thus, one may argue that as science advances, it will provide, rather than undermine, the existence of God or gods.

SOME ALSO ARGUE THAT EVEN IF SCIENCE IS ABLE TO PROVE THAT EVOLUTION OCCURRED BEYOND ALL REASONABLE DOUBT, IT DOES NOT DISCREDIT RELIGION IF WE ARE TO TAKE THE VIEW THAT SCIENCE IS OF GOD.

Furthermore, the more science progresses, the more religion needs to play a prominent role so as to guide its corresponding developments and the actions of scientists. If advancements in science are applied without any overarching moral direction, the consequences will be dire for humankind. In fact, religious fundamentalists often claim that the pursuit of science destroys morality and trivialises human life. Breakthroughs in stem cell research and biotechnology are exactly and rightly controversial because scientific inquiry unchecked by right and wrong is susceptible to abuse and misuse. Applications of scientific knowhow have serious implications for human life both in terms of extending it and improving its quality. With each new ability science bestows comes questions of how best to use it, as seen in the different ways societies are grappling with how to regulate euthanasia, abortion, surrogacy, organ transplants and dangerous surgery like the ones undertaken to separate conjoined twins. Thus, morality guided by religion is called upon to bear judgeent on the results of scientific advancement and inquiry. Without these guidelines to preserve the dignity of human life, the potential pitfalls of scientific advancements used for selfish gains will be too great a cost for society to bear and may lead to waning support for scientific research.

One of the key contentions put forth is that science has increasingly been able to explain the origins of life, thus deeming religion-based accounts of creation to no longer be relevant in this day and age. More and more, scientists have been able to prove that the theory of evolution happened, which seems to disprove the 'evidence' of direct creation. Conversely put, religious-based accounts of creation from various religions have not been able to convince people enough that these accounts are factual. On the other hand, scientists have, with technological advancements such as the Large Hadron Collider, been relentless in seeking new ways to prove and explain how the earth came to be, and how human beings have evolved through time. Yet, this issue is far from resolved given that proponents of Creationism have also been conducting their own research in this area. Some also argue that even if science is able to prove that evolution occurred beyond all reasonable doubt, it does not discredit religion if we are to take the view that science is of God. In other words, instead of seeing science as a distinct set of beliefs from religion, one could see science as yet another evidence of God's work.



Another argument used to validate the idea that the more science advances, the more religion will decline is the fact that there are multiple religions, each with differing of opinions on creation and redemption and beliefs and practices, while science has been able to provide, via its unified body of knowledge, a more coherent picture of the world. Presumably the fact that there are so many religions, denominations and factions is evidence that religion does not and cannot present a logical and coherent understanding of the world. However, religious diversity does not mean that religion is not valid. It offers different ways of looking at the world, just like how science attempts to validate its findings via different means.

In conclusion, while science and its advancement are seen by many as the binary opposite to that of religion, it does not mean that religion has lost its relevance or place in society. Instead, one should argue that contrary to what the question implies, the existential relationship between science and religion is not an inversely proportional one; in essence, they can be seen as complementary responses to the unknown. As religions continue to flourish in our increasingly technologically advanced and scientifically-based world, it would seem as if both science and religion will advance together in the future. 99

'AIR TRAVEL SHOULD BE DISCOURAGED, NOT PROMOTED.' TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE?

Agree.

BY BAEY SHI CHEN

As a key contributor to global economic prosperity, the aviation industry has become an indispensable part of our lives. It is a primary mode of transport and source of employment for major sectors such as tourism and trade. Moreover, it facilitates access to remote areas and plays an integral role in delivering humanitarian aid in times of crisis, while also helping to increase cultural understanding by bringing people of diverse backgrounds and nationalities together. In recent years, air travel has been promoted more aggressively with cheaper fares and frequent flyer programmes as competition in the industry heats up. As a result, schools and families have begun making trips abroad as part of their yearly programmes. Additionally, flying for business is now the norm as flying becomes more cost and time-effective and companies expand overseas due to globalising forces. Nonetheless, despite air travel's central role in contemporary life, its shortcomings can create adverse and far-reaching consequences that outweigh its advantages, and present a strong case for why it should be discouraged rather than promoted.

The most compelling argument against air travel is the harmful impact that it has on the environment and climate. The air transport industry is one of the most rapidly growing sources of pollutants and greenhouse gases, especially carbon dioxide – which stays in the atmosphere for up to two centuries and has enormous implications for global warming. Numerous international airlines such as British Airways and Cathay Pacific are attempting to assume more ecological accountability by offering passengers the option of offsetting their carbon footprints: charging higher fares that go towards various emission-reduction and renewable energy initiatives. However, this is merely a convenient means to assuage one's conscience when the most effective method to minimise environmental damage is simply to fly less and explore alternative modes of transport, especially to destinations that are relatively nearby. Besides, the increasing sophistication of communications technology like video conferencing and messaging services can help to reduce the need to fly for business meetings or conferences. Hence, given the adverse effects air travel has on the environment and the increasing severity of problems caused by environmental degradation, the least we can do as consumers is to rethink our travel patterns and habits.

Moreover, the airline industry contributes significantly to the depletion of fossil fuels. It is thus both an ecological and economic necessity to discourage air travel. The increasing scarcity of oil in the world market and the current global downturn suggest that non-essential air travel should be strongly discouraged. Yet, airlines are continuing to hawk fares and tour agencies have even begun to encourage "travel-now-pay-later" schemes and overseas holidays funded through installment payments, getting people to

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100 WORST AIRPLANE CRASHES
http://www.planecrashinfo.com/worst100.htm

SURVIVING AIRCRASHES: HOW AIRLINES PREPARE FOR THE WORST
http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1881758,00.html

spend on air travel they cannot comfortably afford. On top of that, jet fuel costs have increased greatly due to rising oil prices and airlines are having difficulty staying profitable. Even though airlines such as Virgin Atlantic and Air New Zealand are exploring the use of biodiesels such as coconut and jatropha oils to power their aircraft fleets, they have yet to prove feasible, much less affordable, replacements for fossil fuel. Given that there is no imminent solution to the problem of dwindling oil resources, air travel is set to become an economic liability for the average consumer as well as airlines who run half-empty flights on expensive fuel. Therefore, in a recessionary climate that calls for scaling back on luxuries, there appears little reason to endorse air travel.

Furthermore, there have been rising health concerns with regards to air travel. Aside from health hazards like the potentially fatal and increasingly common occurrence of deep-vein thrombosis during long-haul flights, air travel patterns have exponentially increased the transmission rate of infectious diseases. Given the increased volume of air travel, the threats of highly contagious viruses and even bio-terrorism during commercial flights have become important public health issues. The recent global outbreaks of viruses such as SARS and the H1N1 flu virus have demonstrated that air travel has become a major conduit of newly emerging infections that can potentially spark off pandemics. Therefore, until there is a better understanding of global disease transmissions and more effective detection and preventive mechanisms are incorporated into the air transportation system, air travel should be viewed with caution rather than actively encouraged.

In addition, while travelling by air used to be considered safer than driving a car, the recent spate of aviation accidents, such as the catastrophic Air France Flight 447 and Yemenia Airlines Flight 626 tragedies, and the mounting reports of aircraft malfunctions have raised serious questions about the safety and reliability of this major mode of transport. Midair collisions and the heavy casualty rate of such accidents have proved that increased traffic in the sky has outstripped over-taxed air controllers' and antiquated air monitoring systems' ability to cope. The fact is that ageing airplanes are still used for commercial flights and too often, discoveries of poor maintenance and safety checks come only after a fatal crash. While it may seem too extreme to discourage air travel solely because of potential calamities, there is certainly enough reason to exercise caution and raise awareness of its risks, rather than promoting it aggressively.

Also, while it is undeniable that the air travel industry generates tourist dollars and employment opportunities for many countries, it can also lead to development-induced displacement of communities through the building of airports and other aviation facilities. Such projects heavily impact those forced to relocate but there is often a lack of recognition, support and assistance for them especially since this problem disproportionately affects indigenous and ethnic minorities as well as the urban or rural poor. Moreover, developing countries may be better off channelling available resources towards the bread and butter issues of meeting their citizens' basic needs rather than placing too much priority and emphasis on developing their aviation centres over other transportation options that may better serve their own populations.

In conclusion, while it is unrealistic to propose the elimination of air travel given the world's heavy dependence on it, there remains a need to raise more awareness of its potential risks and harmful effects rather than actively promoting and embarking on it in an unthinking manner. As consumers, we have to acknowledge that our unquestioning reliance on air travel inadvertently enables harmful practices that can have adverse effects on us in the long run. While the choice to travel by air is undoubtedly up to the individual, its drawbacks certainly function as an incentive for us to reconsider our travel habits and explore alternatives. More importantly, by assuming greater personal responsibility, there is an increased likelihood that we may influence industry attitudes over time and propel the sector towards greater accountability and better use of our precious resources. ❝❞

IMAGE CREDITS

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Disagree.

BY TONG YEE

As Jules Vernes rightly observed of the impact of modern transportation in his celebrated novel *Around The World in Eighty Days*, man has indeed become increasingly intrigued with the idea of travel. To date, no other form of transport has offered the speed and extensiveness of modern air travel, bringing people to any one spot at unprecedented speeds. The attractiveness of air travel, beyond the economic and cultural incentives it can bring, has been further augmented by falling prices, greater choice in operators and increased comfort. Certainly, like most human activities, air transport has an impact on the environment, mainly through noise and emissions that affect local air quality and the climate, so much so that some people believe the continued use of air travel should be discouraged. Though the industry fully recognises its responsibility in this regard, it remains determined to accelerate action aimed at mitigating its environmental impact – while preserving and enhancing its economic and social benefits. The popularity of air travel is increasing every year, for no other mode of transportation can compare to the advantages offered to consumers. It is a given that air travel is here to stay and in most circumstances should be promoted as the key means of long distance travel.

Perhaps one of the most important contributions air travel has made is in its role in propelling global economic prosperity. Aviation provides the only rapid worldwide transportation network, which makes it essential for global business and tourism. It plays a vital role in facilitating economic growth throughout the world, and should hence be promoted. In particular, it facilitates global trade in developing countries, helping countries participate in the global economy by increasing access to international markets and allowing globalisation of production. Air transport even improves productivity: by encouraging investment and innovation; improving business operations and efficiency; and allowing companies to attract high quality employees from all over the world by improving their mobility and access to more remote markets. Just consider how the total value of goods transported by air represents up to 35% of all international trade. Or think about how air travel has become indispensable for tourism, which is a major engine of economic growth for almost any country in the world. It is certainly not an exaggerated claim that air travel is one of the main engines of globalisation and is vital in allowing economic integration to unfold at the phenomenal speed that it is progressing at now.

The popularity of air travel also inevitably catalyses social integration and interaction among different cultures. This has meant greater integration of the world's diverse populations and increased exposure across communities, broadening people's perspectives as they learn from the strengths and weaknesses of their counterparts in other regions of the world. We cannot overstate this claim but suggest that air travel plays a crucial role in creating opportunity for this process to accelerate. Discouraging air travel would

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FLYING COFFINS :
THE WORLD'S WORST AIRLINES
http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/travel/news/article694530.ece

1. *Air Koryo, North Korea*
2. *Air Service Comores, Comores*
3. *Ariana Afghan Airlines, Afghanistan*
4. *BGB Air, Kazakhstan*
5. *GST Aero Air Company, Kazakhstan*
6. *Phoenix Aviation, Kyrgyzstan*
7. *Phuket Airlines, Thailand*
8. *Reem Air, Kyrgyzstan*
9. *Silverback Cargo Freighters, Rwanda*
10. *Africa One, Congo*

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only serve to isolate communities, keeping people short-sighted and myopic from a lack of contact with other people and environments. The range of cosmopolitan cities like New York or London, without coincidence boasting several international airports, would clearly illustrate how a diverse spectrum of travellers or migrants add to the vibrancy of the city and contribute to social innovation. Air travel's contribution to this cultural exchange is intangible but also explicitly important and should therefore be duly encouraged.

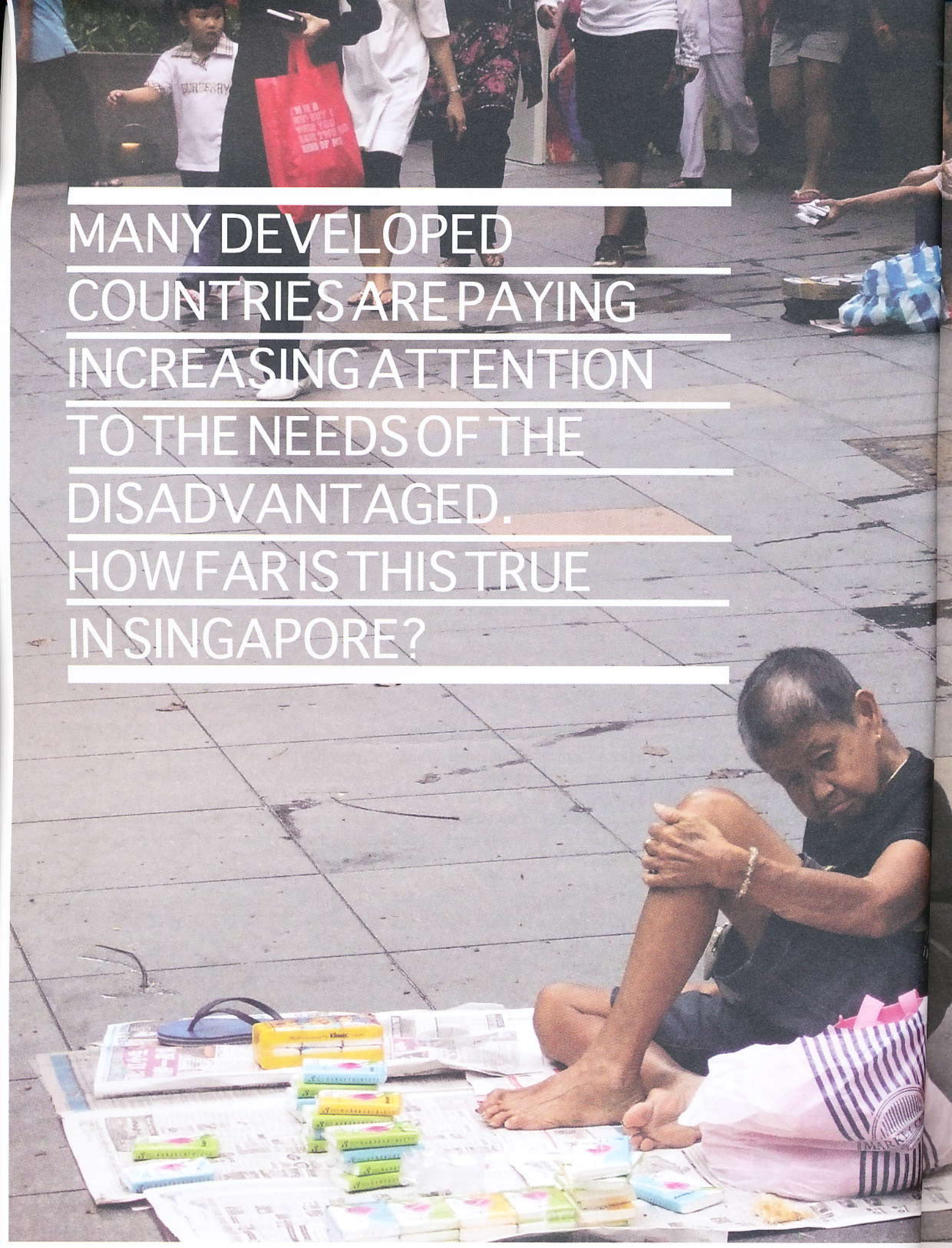
Air travel is especially crucial in augmenting opportunities for development and aid to more remote areas. Developing countries, which are not geographically well positioned along air routes or sea routes, or simply landlocked, would find that major transportation networks would not travel to their destinations. This inconvenience discourages tourism, investment, and disconnects already isolated countries even more. Thus, it is important to encourage air travel, proven by how landlocked countries like Botswana have hugely gained from its benefits, becoming the fastest growing economy on the African continent because of the impact of air travel. Some remote countries have resorted to setting up their own services, with airlines as obscure as Rwandair and Mongolian Airlines, to make emphatic proof of this point. The fact that the second hand aircraft market is booming, with vehicles transferring hands from developed countries to developing is clear testament that air travel is still very much being promoted.

In cases of natural disasters, or where border controls are restricted due to a closed-door policy, air travel is instrumental in providing quick and effective relief. The typhoon in Myanmar, or the 2004 tsunami, are just but two of the many examples where 'air drops' are among the first response of aid agencies to stem a humanitarian crisis simply because it provides the most immediate access to areas where traditional transport infrastructure has been crippled. Air travel thus plays an essential role in humanitarian assistance to countries facing natural disasters, famines and war through cargo deliveries, refugee transfers or the evacuation of people trapped by natural disasters. Authoritarian states like Myanmar may be protective of their air space citing a loss a security or privacy, but this is precisely where air travel may be used for the greater good in the event of a crisis, and should hence be promoted.

Perhaps one of the more obvious downsides to air travel may be found in the voice of the many victims of air travel disasters. Air travel disasters are the most commonly reported in the news in relation to accidents involving other forms of transport, simply because one accident often involves a large number of fatalities and causes a lot of collateral damage. We are highly conscious of the arguable risks of air travel only because the mass media chooses to play it up in order to feed upon our unending appetite for dramatic sensationalism. In actual fact, road and sea accidents far outnumber that of air accidents, and statistics show that the overall risk in air travel is the least of all three modes of transport. Air travel should not be discouraged simply because of the rare chance of an accident, just as it makes no sense for someone not to take a walk for fear of being hit by a car.

Unfortunately, if air travel makes it easier for legitimate businesses and countries to operate, it also facilitates the operations of criminal syndicates. From money laundering to the trafficking of drugs, contrabands, weapons, endangered animals and even humans, criminal networks exploit air travel as much as any multi-national corporation. Having the convenience of flying past traditional customs checkpoints or using smaller aircrafts to fly undetected into otherwise secure countries is a huge boon for such syndicates. Alas, short of tracking the movement of every aircraft that has been produced, and every private airstrip that is constructed or even worse every small body of water that bi-planes can land on, regulating this exploitation of air travel would be futile. This is one of the few exceptions that give reason to the discouragement of air travel but certainly not strong enough for us to put the brakes on this otherwise largely beneficial industry.

By and large, the air transport industry is an innovative industry that drives economic and social progress. The growing availability of affordable air travel has considerably widened aviation's role in our global society. With technological breakthroughs and the increased capacity to fly more people at increasingly cheaper prices, and with national governments finding ways to partner with airlines, the popularity of air travel will only continue to grow. Consumers have already decided the fate of air travel with the air transport industry responding to the overwhelming demand for mobility by investing heavily in safety and security improvements, quieter and more fuel-efficient aircraft and improved customer services. With all this in mind, how can it even be possible that we discourage the continued expansion of this exciting and beneficial industry? ❝❞



MANY DEVELOPED COUNTRIES ARE PAYING INCREASING ATTENTION TO THE NEEDS OF THE DISADVANTAGED. HOW FAR IS THIS TRUE IN SINGAPORE?

True.

BY XIAOCHING LING

Living

in cosmopolitan developed nations, it's easy to assume that every citizen has access to the necessities of life. The fruits of our relentless pursuit of material wealth are so evident: gleaming skyscrapers, swift bullet trains, well-stocked supermarkets and 24-hour entertainment. How can anyone be in want surrounded by such excess? But it is ridiculous to imagine that the poor and underprivileged reside only in developing countries, for their presence is obvious even in the fashionable streets of New York, London and Singapore. Although the poor may be in the minority in such rich nations, governments know it is retrogressive - even dangerous - to ignore the needs of the disadvantaged if they want to build a truly world-class, progressive and harmonious society. For the tiny island state of Singapore, where everyone is so interconnected and every person is factored in as valuable human resource, it has made even more sense to pay heed to the needs of the disadvantaged. Whether talking of the poor, the mentally disabled, the physically handicapped, the homeless or the alienated, Singapore has tried to extend some form of financial help, educational opportunities, job security, housing or adequate medical care to these needy groups.

Firstly, Singapore has chosen the strategy of social integration of the haves and have nots as far as is feasible. We do not segregate the disadvantaged but actively seek to incorporate them into the fabric of our society. We avoid the divisive practice of creating ghettoes for the needy as that only serves to create neighbourhoods of inopportunity, insecurity and potential centres of resentment waiting to explode. Our public housing estates have from the start been created with strict racial quotas in mind, establishing a fair mix of ethnicities and social classes. Though controversial, the Singapore government has gone ahead with integrating a migrant worker dormitory within the comfortable neighbourhood of Serangoon Gardens. Vulnerable elderly folk living alone have also been given cheaply priced studio apartments in public housing estates, near all forms of public utilities and gathering spaces to ensure they do not feel abandoned. Handicapped-friendly facilities are now a more common feature in various public places of interest such as shopping malls and museums and even public transport.

Secondly, though it will always adhere to its philosophy of economic pragmatism and never go the way of the welfare state, the Singaporean government still provides room for economic assistance to the disadvantaged. Financial aid is given out to those who most desperately need a leg up, ensuring that their basic living needs are being met. Subsidies for healthcare, housing, education as well as allowances for

transport and utilities are given out to the poorest of the poor. A very strict needs assessment is carried out before the disbursement of aid though, and this may offend those of more purist socialist sensibilities. Still, the income gap was lowered in 2008 partly thanks to government aid in the form of GST credits and Workfare Income supplements. Economics professor Tan Khee Giap of Nanyang Technological University noted that government aid helped prop up the lower-income households, stating in an interview that "This was the result of the targeted approach promised by the Government; take from all, give more to a few". Singapore's wealth has been used to build up a safety net for its disadvantaged citizens. Take the government's fund for health care, MediFund, which covers the poorest in Singapore who need hospital care. More than 90% of patients treated at the Institute of Mental Health - Singapore's largest mental health hospital - were heavily subsidised.

Thirdly, many like to criticise Singapore's culture of meritocracy for penalising the disadvantaged but it is only a system that rewards intellect and hard work that can ensure that everyone - including the disadvantaged - stands an equal chance to get what they need. Students who do well in school are rewarded with bursaries and book allowances and stand as much a chance as their richer classmates in winning prestigious state scholarships to elite schools like Harvard and Oxford. In a meritocracy where one is rewarded based on one's diligence and talent rather than one's class or ethnicity, even the poorest can find some way to excellent job opportunities and upward mobility. A state that is too generous in its handouts and cushioning of life's harsh realities may risk breeding a sense of entitlement and dependency that ultimately damages self-esteem and consequently the capacity for independence among the lower-income groups.

However, even though the government is paying attention to the needs of the disadvantaged, there is a limit to the impact of their efforts. Income redistribution efforts by the Government that attempt to bridge the income gap can only go so far. These efforts cannot be too customised to meet unique needs - thus inevitably, some of the disadvantaged will fall between the cracks. Given all these limitations to what the State can do at a macro level, there will always be gaps that only the private sector, grassroots organisations and non-profit organisations can plug at the micro level. It cannot be just the State who looks after the needs of the disadvantaged because it is an impossible Herculean task - the people of Singapore must get involved, and to their credit, many have. Perhaps this is the best solution where cooperation rather than antagonism rules: the State looking after the general needs and the citizens looking after the specific needs of our disadvantaged. From large corporations like the Singapore Kidney Foundation to smaller advocacy groups like Aidha and HOME, we have seen Singapore's charitable sector grow with encouraging enthusiasm.

In conclusion, Singapore is indeed paying attention to the needs of the disadvantaged even as we climb up the economic ladder. There is evidence that our society is still mostly progressing together. While it is true that it is the government's responsibility to look after its citizens, it is not a right that we, disadvantaged or not, should demand or take for granted. Hence, it is good that some of Singapore's policies are geared towards cultivating a culture of self-reliance, where we empower people to move towards being able to help themselves. Furthermore, we should also remember that we cannot rely on the government's plans and vision to gear us towards paying attention to help the needy. It is wise to constantly assess the state's efforts to help the poor but ultimately, we citizens and armchair critics need to play our part and help where we can, immediately and wholeheartedly. Some things - like the desire to right wrongs and help others - cannot be legislated but must come spontaneously from the heart. ❝❞

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LINKS TO VISIT IF YOU WANT TO HELP THE DISADVANTAGED IN SINGAPORE

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For Needy Families & Elderly
METHODIST WELFARE SERVICES
www.mws.org.sg/
TOUCH COMMUNITY SERVICES
www.tcs.org.sg/
For Migrant Workers:
http://migrantworkerssingapore.blogspot.com/
H.O.M.E.
http://home.org.sg/
AIDHA
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Untrue.

BY SHIAO-YIN KUIK

Every developed country acknowledges that the past two decades of intense economic globalisation have managed to lift multitudes of their citizens from relative poverty into middle-class comfort. Unfortunately, the same surge in absolute wealth came hand in hand with a widening gulf between the haves and the have-nots, for those who are unable to catch on to the wave of wealth are usually weighed down by a complex array of disadvantages - age, ethnicity, culture etc. The state's struggle to address the needs of those left behind while dealing with their unique political and economic context is a highly emotional topic. Frankly, it is impossible for Singapore to meet all the needs of the disadvantaged in a manner that will satisfy all parties and all audiences. It is fair to point out that for all the good Singapore has done so far for its needy, Singapore should not shirk from being held accountable to the highest moral standards to see how much more she could be doing.

Constrained by our geographical size and limited natural resources, Singapore has chosen to meet socio-economic needs by emphasising a culture of personal responsibility and self-reliance rather than adopt a welfare state model. Singapore believes that the "Many Helping Hands" approach is the most sustainable method of helping the needy – grassroots and voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs), compassionate individuals, the Government and the individual himself all have to work together to solve social problems. For the most part, this strategy has been considered effective. Take healthcare for instance: although, government subsidies help to keep basic healthcare affordable, Singaporeans are expected to co-pay part of their medical expenses and pay more when they demand a higher level of service. Using taxes, the state only funds about one quarter of Singapore's total health costs. Comparing state expenditure on healthcare between Singapore and the USA, Singapore looks miserly in meeting her people's needs by spending only US$381 per capita compared to America's US$2660 per capita. But in actual fact, Singapore's system is regarded as one of the most successful and efficient healthcare systems in the world by focusing her efforts and monies on funding preventive health campaigns, subsidising public hospitals and providing a safety net for the poorest who cannot save enough to pay their way. In comparison to USA, Singapore boasts higher life expectancy (82 vs 78) and lower infant mortality (2.3 deaths/1000 births vs 6.4 deaths/1000 births). This shows us that Singapore's effectiveness in meeting the needs of her people cannot be judged simplistically by a comparison of numbers but by results.

In the eyes of the international community, Singapore is considered successful in looking after the needs of its own disadvantaged. When you see how far she has come, it is easy to forget that half a century ago Singapore was once a place of crowded squatter colonies lacking proper sanitation. Singapore has a home ownership rate of 91%, the highest in the world. Over 80% of Singaporeans can afford to be housed in flats under the public housing scheme managed by our Housing Development Board (HDB). HDB is also focused on ensuring the housing needs of the more vulnerable, such as the elderly and the lower income

YOUTUBE THIS

AL JAZEERA CLIP: POOR PEOPLE IN SINGAPORE AFFECTED BY RISING FOOD PRICES
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RSEB8P3DAnk&feature=related

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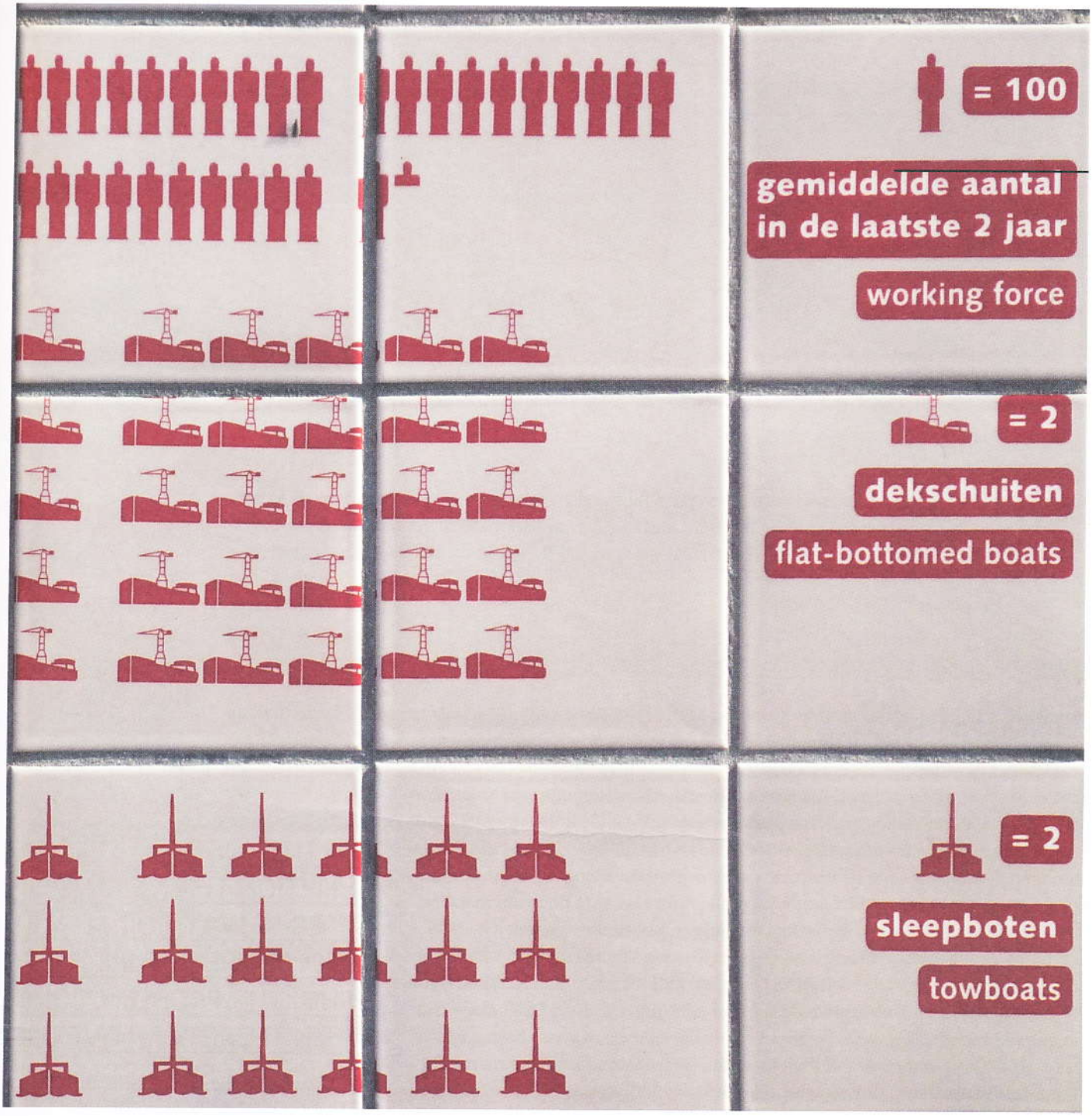
(overleaf)
Old man at Sungei Road Thieves' Market in Singapore, by yeowatzup, Flickr Creative Commons

group, can continue to be met even as local standards of living shoot up. Because of our system of meritocracy, Singaporeans of all races and creeds, no matter their beginnings, have a fair chance at a subsidised education, resulting in a 94.2% literacy rate, one of the highest in the world. Our unemployment rate stands at 2.3%, making us 23rd in the world, outranking many other developed nations like Switzerland, South Korea and the UK.

However, looking at our tremendous wealth and our priorities in spending, it is obvious we could be doing a whole lot more for the needy. There is no point boasting that we do not have streets of homeless vagrants as America does or slums like Mumbai's. The fact is we still have very needy people living in Singapore who are not being helped. Member of Parliament Dr Lily Neo highlighted that the public assistance of SG$290 a month doled out was increasingly insufficient to even pay for a decent three meals a day for the 3,000 households currently on the scheme due to illness, old age or disability. The official number of public assisted families also has not changed significantly since 2002, raising concerns that the state is being too rigid about what constitutes as needy although charities insist that the effects of globalisation are tipping more Singaporeans into that category. To some local charities who are supplementing increasingly more public assisted families with free food and grocery vouchers, the state and ordinary Singaporeans could do a lot more just for these 3,000 families alone. A SG$50 increase in public assistance for each family ultimately adds up to SG$150,000 only - a pittance in a country nicknamed Asia's Switzerland for millionaires where owning two or three pieces of million-dollar properties is considered normal.

There are also particular niche groups of disadvantaged whose needs cannot be met as long as they do not fit into the particular moral or ideological worldview of the Singapore state. For example, government subsidies do not cover HIV medication and Medishield insurance does not cover mental illnesses, HIV or AIDS treatments. The provocative issue of how we treat transient migrant workers in Singapore is also revealing. Singaporean migrant rights advocacy groups like TWC2, HOME and Migrant Voices have been leading the public conversation and keeping the public conscience on track and the state has responded with the passing of important new laws to limit the abuse of foreign construction workers, ship welders and domestic helpers on our turf. Maid abusers and errant employers have also been levelled with harsher punishments. But the end consensus is that we have limited resources and unskilled aliens should never be prioritised over Singaporeans. Thus, this puts restrictions on the extent of help the state is willing to give them. For this same reason, Singapore is not open to providing sanctuary for asylum seekers or refugees. In February 2009, NGO Human Rights Watch sent an open letter to the ASEAN Secretary General to chastise Singapore for her failure to protect migrant worker rights: many are not assured of even having days off, overtime pay, adequate lodging, access to labour courts and other employment benefits.

While we have created a world class system that has alleviated many needs and has exceeded worldly standards, it doesn't mean we should rest on our laurels. If Singapore has swelled its coffers and built its shining cityscape through the combined sweat and tears of ordinary people, it is only right that more of those coffers go towards alleviating the needs of ordinary people rather than providing ever more comfort for the elite. Ultimately, the gap of expectations between the state and the disadvantaged of what is the best way to meet needs will result in accusations that Singapore is uncaring - and there is truth in that. The needy want a comprehensive system that is simple to navigate and unquestioning in its largesse but the state wants a careful system that does not cultivate a spirit of dependency, that maximises efficiency and minimises abuses. The day when Singapore instinctively asks "What can we do to help?" before asking "Does this person deserve my help?" is the day when we can say we are paying sufficient attention to the needs around us. "



DISCUSS THE VIEW THAT TOO MUCH FAITH IS PLACED IN STATISTICS.

Too much.

BY SAMUEL WONG

If there is one defining characteristic of this modern world, it would be the dominance of rationality and science in our everyday lives. An obvious manifestation of this is the prevalent use of numbers to track trends and quantify the world around us. Man uses statistics for a variety of reasons: for predicting the future, justifying his actions, or deciding what action to take with limited resources at hand. One cannot deny the importance of statistics in our modern day society. However, one can question if the pre-eminence of statistics is too much of a good thing, and whether absolute faith in the truth of numbers is detrimental to Man.

Statistics is the major tool used by governments, corporations and individuals to predict future human behaviour based on the past. Most governments or major corporations have teams of statisticians gathering data on how people behave so that they can base their decisions on something more concrete than conjecture. For the most part, the presumption that statistics offer a way for Man to predict the future holds true. The problem comes when there is an over-reliance on statistics and its accuracy in predicting human behaviour. Man is not an automaton. Sociologists and behavioural psychologists have long argued that statistical data might not be a good predictor of the future because there are many factors that affect human behaviour that statistics cannot fully capture. One major aspect of that in today's society is how access to information and new technologies can change Man's behaviour. During the recent U.S. Presidential elections, many respected polling companies like Gallup and AC Nielsen believed that Americans were still divided along racial lines and would be ambivalent about having a black president. These companies did not consider the impact of modern communication social-networking technologies like Twitter and Facebook which were used extensively by Obama's election team to spread his message of change. The result was that the majority of the Americans voted for him, despite his ethnicity. Thus, the ability of statistics to effectively predict Man's future behaviour is certainly in doubt with the unprecedented level of access to modern, instant communication technologies making human behaviour less predictable.

FOR THE MOST PART, THE PRESUMPTION THAT STATISTICS OFFER A WAY FOR MAN TO PREDICT THE FUTURE HOLDS TRUE. THE PROBLEM COMES WHEN THERE IS AN OVER-RELIANCE ON STATISTICS AND ITS ACCURACY IN PREDICTING HUMAN BEHAVIOUR. MAN IS NOT AN AUTOMATON.

The public has an implicit trust that "numbers don't lie" as they have been long used to governments and corporations providing numbers as a sign of transparency and honesty to justify their actions. However in reality, this is far from true as statistics can be twisted, leading to false justifications of actions and abuses of power. Often, statistical evidence is gathered with pre-conceived notions, and data is often manipulated to suit certain purposes or results. Even the interpretation of the data collected can be faulty when false correlations between statistical data and social trends are made. In 2007, the *Telegraph* newspaper in Britain reported that more than 25% of all crimes committed in London were by foreigners, especially the Poles and Romanians. However, under closer scrutiny, it was discovered that the *Telegraph* fudged

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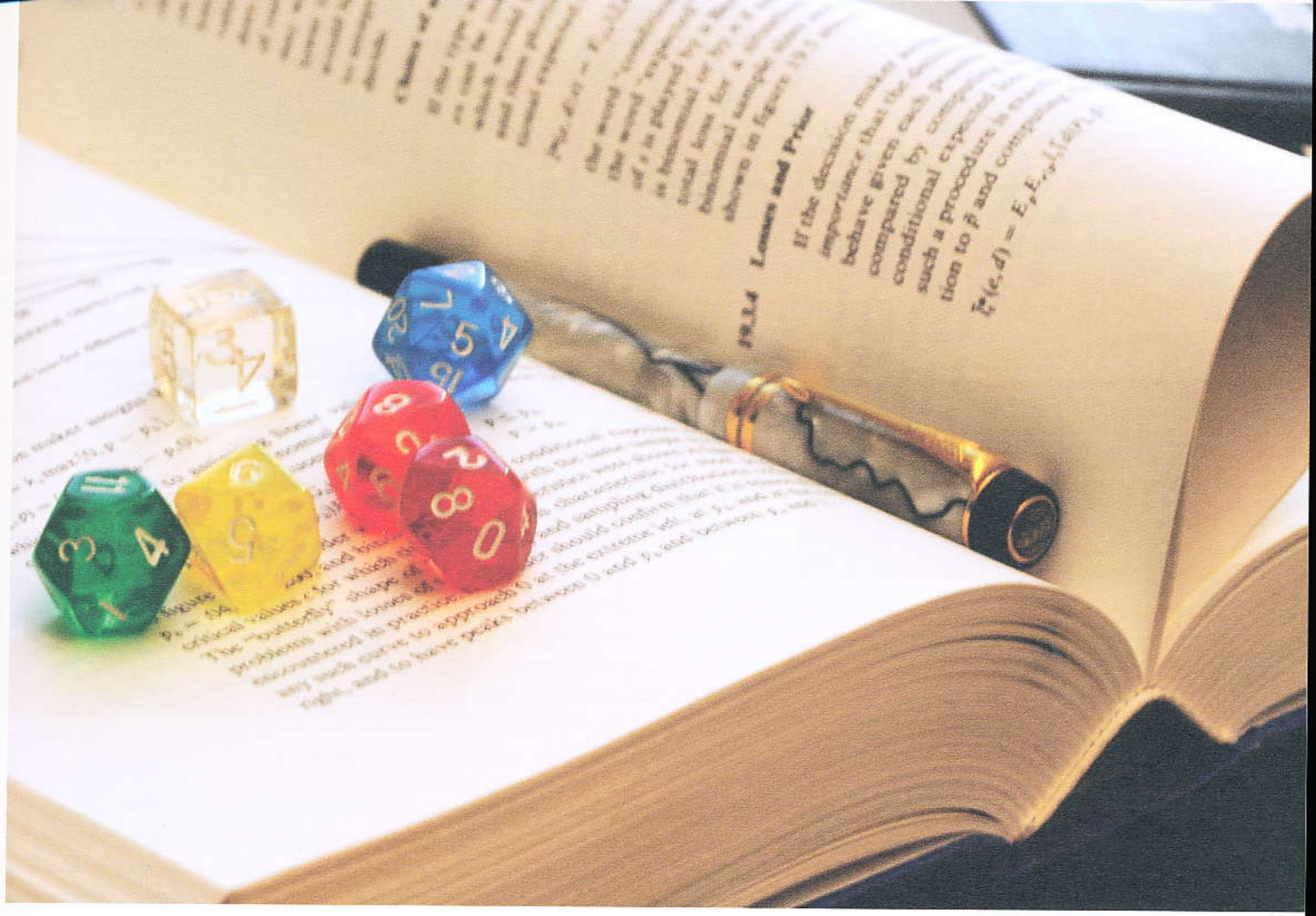

TEDTALK THIS

HANS ROSLING
www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/hans_rosling_shows_the_best_stats_you_ve_ever_seen.html

With the drama and urgency of a sportscaster, statistics guru Hans Rosling debunks myths about the so-called "developing world."

PETE DONNELLY
www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/peter_donnelly_shows_how_stats_fool_juries.html

Oxford mathematician Peter Donnelly reveals the common mistakes humans make in interpreting statistics -- and the devastating impact these errors can have on the outcome of criminal trials.

the numbers by not distinguishing between those arrested and those actually charged for crimes. Of far greater concern is the fact that such alarmist reporting was intended to stir up xenophobic feelings among the British towards the increased immigration of Eastern Europeans and drum up support for the Conservative Party. Thus, we need to be wary of placing too much faith in the use of statistics particularly since statistical data can be faulty in collection, analysis and interpretation and used to support less than noble intentions.

It has been said that the biggest question economics has to answer is how to satisfy the infinite needs of people with finite resources at hand. In order to better allocate scarce resources, decision makers often use statistics to find out where the needs are, who needs them and the possible outcomes if resources are allocated to the recipients. This is a logical and quantifiable way to best determine who should get the most help and a fair method in ensuring that everyone gets an equitable share of the scarce resources. However, numbers do not really capture the full essence of the situation, especially for those who deserve the most help. In Singapore, one can read of those who fall through the cracks because on paper they are not "poor" enough to deserve welfare help but in reality can hardly get by. The reason for this is almost 80% of our local population own their own flats, making it possible to be asset "rich" and financially poor at the same time. Numbers may be limited by the types of information that are readily available on record. This has serious implications on how resources are allocated for social welfare. Systems are imperfect and the categorisation created by statistics is often part of the problem. If nations continue to solely rely on statistics to differentiate between and categorise different groups of people and their needs, human suffering and political fallout will likely be severe in the years to come. Statistics should be viewed critically because they are not comprehensive or responsive enough to fully reflect the needs in society.

Society cannot do away with the dependence on statistics. We need them to help us make better decisions but Man needs to recognise that numbers do not tell us the whole story. Often numbers can be manipulated at all stages, from collection to interpretation, to tell the story one desires. More importantly, too much faith in statistics reduces all problems into digits that fail to capture the complexities of social and human problems. We must remember to inject ethics and a sense of humanity in the use of numbers, acknowledging that people are not just digits on a balance sheet. "

Not too much.

BY TONG YEE

The modern world can be described as a world committed to ensuring success in every area of development; the use of statistics being vital to ensuring that success. In an effort to make better decisions daily, whether for policy, investment or even having a child, people have come to almost obsessively rely on statistics to help them make an informed choice. They believe that statistics can quantify the world and sum up the various factors in concrete ways that allow for accurate analysis of the situation or a better grasp of the truth. Yet, as much as statistics compound life's subjective mystique, they also paradoxically erase it. Thankfully, although the staid cloud of predictability does sometimes obscure our ability to truly experience the fullness of life, this obstruction does not last for long as hope, faith, values and instinct, no matter how irrational, usually shine through, convincing us that the use of statistics has fortunately not come to dominate our lives.

The most common argument raised is that too much faith is placed in statistics because it takes away our freedom of choice by always dictating the most rational decision to be made. It would seem obvious that if ironclad statistics were presented to us, then we would undoubtedly make the obvious choice that the statistics point us to. Yet, this is not entirely true because even statistics are open to interpretation. Statistics may show us facts and trends, but how we interpret these figures in relation to a context and how we predict future trends are entirely subjective. Perhaps as important as the use of statistics in our daily decision-making is how cultural identity, luck, and even destiny are factored in our conclusions and decisions. The very fact that the stock market, whether it be the Dow Jones or Hang Seng indexes, sees myriad different decisions made everyday despite decision makers having access to the same statistics, shows that we are far from being too reliant on statistics, and certainly still capable of making independent decisions, whether supported by statistics or not.

We might also be overreacting when we believe that we have become over-reliant in the use of statistics just because it is extensively used as a key reference point to assess everything from national economic competitiveness to social problems. Take for instance the extensive use of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a universal tool to gauge the economic health of a country despite the knowledge that this statistic is a huge generalisation of a country's economic progress. Granted, we most often use this statistic to get a sense of the comparative economic standing of more than 150 countries in the world, but we do so because alternative methods of measurements would be too time-consuming and go beyond the broad understanding that we require. In this respect, we use statistics as a gauge, fully conscious of the fact that they are not absolute or exhaustive. More often than not, they are used only as a rough guideline, and serve as a means by which to create a general yardstick for assessment or comparison. We do use other methods of assessment, but continue to use statistics as the main method for the convenience they provide.

The effect that the extensive use of statistics creates is also contested as romantics argue that statistics reduces the world into facts and figures, murdering serendipity and spontaneity with all its stiff computerised analysis. Surely if statistics derail our illogical passions and gut instincts into clear-cut, objective responses, they would be denying us of the joy of fun, of careless discovery and the

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A MAP OF THE LIMITS OF STATISTICS [9.15.08]
By Nassim Nicholas Taleb

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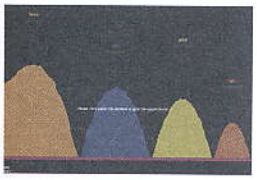


WE FEEL FINE
by Jonathan Harris
Statistics never looked so beautiful. A website that collects data on how people are feeling around the world.

www.wefeelfine.org/index.html

experience of being erring humans. The reality is not however as bleak as it's made out to be, for we have not become so obsessed that life has lost its drama and flavour. Just consider the millions of fervent sports fans who continue to blindly pledge their loyalty and follow the games of their clubs, despite glaring statistics telling them otherwise. Or consider the countless stubborn investors and entrepreneurs who sink their life savings into their little dream eatery, despite statistics showing that nine out of ten such ventures fail. We can feel assured and safely claim that our relationship with statistics has not gone so far that we have lost the irrational beauty of risk, adventure or unflinching belief in the impossible.

If anything, the clear sign that we have placed too much faith in statistics would be when so much trust is invested in them that we become prone to deception. The blind trust that some extend to statistics causes them to forget that facts and figures can be manipulated, and outright lies could be presented as truth. People who have agendas have been known to exploit our trust in statistics. It is not uncommon to hear cynical consumers complaining of sly corporations who use the guise of statistics to convey an image of reliability or value. Political parties exploit herd mentality by spinning data to create favourable assessments of political candidates. Popular children's drink Ribena for example exploited consumer complacency in New Zealand by claiming their syrup contained a certain percentage of vitamin C, and further backed this up with data of how much the everyday consumer loved the brand. This consumer confidence was proved to be statistically misrepresented and in the case of vitamin C content, an outright lie. While some discerning consumers are conscious of the manipulative way statistics are used, a majority of consumers are not as statistically literate as we would like to believe. Thankfully, in a modern world where multiple media sources are available, literacy by cross-checking information is likely to increase. But till more education is provided in this respect, we should be cautious.

TRY AS STATISTICIANS MIGHT, STATISTICS HAS NOT BEEN ABLE TO ACCURATELY QUANTIFY ELEMENTS SUCH AS CREATIVITY, CHARISMA, TEAM WORK AND TRUE HAPPINESS AS THEY ARE TOO INTANGIBLE OR IMMEASURABLE TO BE ACCURATELY PORTRAYED BY MERE NUMBERS

As a broad final observation, the comforting knowledge is that not all things can be measured via statistics and in some cases we do not put our faith in it at all. Try as statisticians might, statistics have not been able to accurately quantify elements such as creativity, charisma, team work and true happiness as they are too intangible or immeasurable to be accurately portrayed by mere numbers. Taking this further it is unlikely that all things can be represented by plain numbers because the world moves as a result of a complex web of interconnected factors. Pop economists or observers of world events like Malcolm Gladwell or Thomas Friedman have popularised the Outlier Theory or the Golden Arches Theory, trying to attach a statistical reference to seemingly random events. While we enjoy exploring the possibility of their ideas, we still take most of them with a pinch of salt. Till we find a way to prove theories as random as the Butterfly Effect, we can still comfortably accept the uncertain variables life throws our way. We have certainly not gone so far in our belief in statistics that we have lost our ability to discern between popular theory and reliable statistical facts.

There is nothing essentially wrong with looking to statistics to aid us in making better decisions, especially in creating more stable and accountable environments. We can also appreciate that the best things life has to offer are very much lyrical rather than statistical, manifesting surprising colour, perspective and narrative. Yet, the use of statistics in our decision making has bred a tension between brain and heart, fact and faith, design and free will. It has never been more difficult to pull these forces apart, to know which one is at work and which one to believe in. To totally dismiss statistical analysis would be ignorant as computerised analysis does offer sound insight but more importantly, believing in them unconditionally is just as dangerous. For at least a million years as society evolved, way before statistics came into play, we lived life based on our gut instincts. As far as we can see today, nothing much has changed. Statistical analysis might offer insight but it will probably never replace the good old empirical one, a keen set of eyes and gut instinct that still yells as loud as any statistic that might be offered. ""

HOW FAR DO PHYSICAL FEATURES, SUCH AS SIZE AND LOCATION, DETERMINE A COUNTRY'S PROGRESS?

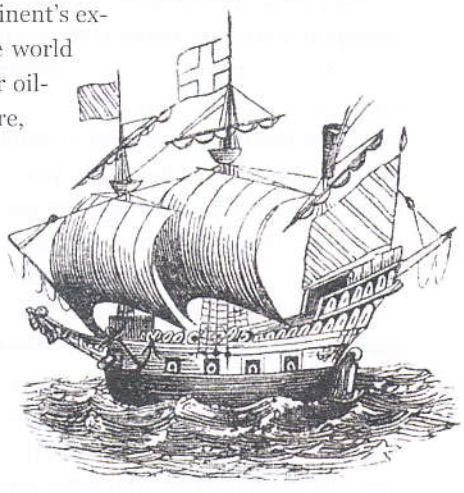
Determines.

BY WENDY GOH

In considering the factors at work in determining a country's progress and development, people commonly cite factors such as government, economic policies, history, political ideology, forces of globalisation...the list goes on. Admittedly, a country's transformation and development depends upon a broad range of human factors, yet at the end of the day, its progress is determined and limited by the success of managing and utilising what geography has endowed on a country, whether it be physical size, location, climate, landscape or resources.

Firstly, the geographical location of a country is a key factor in driving economic progress. Consider a country's proximity to booming economies, such as China, and how trade and in turn economic growth is given a boost. The Kunming-Bangkok Expressway is an example of a land link that connects China to the ASEAN countries. Such a link enhances trade exchanges between ASEAN countries and China and allows the region to tap on the economic growth of China. The Baltic states of Estonia and Lithuania have similarly used their close proximity to their European neighbours to gain from trading with them during economic boom times. Even though there are more global economic opportunities available today, geographical proximity is still the primary basis for good economic cooperation with neighbouring countries and thus an exchange of goods and services that contribute to economic success.

Next, countries that possess natural resources have also been able to harness these to aid economic growth and consequently national development. Natural resources such as oil and gas have enabled many countries, through export of these resources, to grow their economy and even alleviate poverty in some cases. The example of Africa's economic growth stemming from the continent's export of petroleum to China, United States and other parts of the world is a case in point. The continuing power and significance of major oil-producing countries has become an undeniable reality. Furthermore, countries with the natural resources of unique landscapes can benefit greatly from tourism. Physical landscapes such as the Swiss Alps and the Grand Canyon have long awed and drawn visitors from all over and Nepal as a developing country has derived economic benefits from travellers trekking the Himalayas or visiting the famed Mount Everest. The riches of the land, whether it be resources needed by industries or geographical features that attract tourists, are a definite economic advantage to countries while also providing a basis for nationalistic pride.



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"Seattle Urban Design Report: Determinants of City Form."
Word map of Seattle, 1971
Seattle Municipal Archives
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Yet physical features have in instances proven to be a curse rather than a blessing, derailing rather than aiding economic progress. Consider how countries often suffer both economically and socially as a result of being located in geographical regions that expose them to harsh weather conditions. Tropical temperatures with extreme heat encourage insects and parasites to thrive, bringing about sicknesses that can have a crippling effect on work productivity and human health. Agricultural growth in agrarian economies can also be hindered as crops wither in uncertain drought-afflicted climate. This is not helped by the fact that these countries, especially those in sub-Saharan Africa, often lack knowledge and technical expertise in the area of water and drought management to combat such conditions. As such, the climate in these countries only serves to hinder them from experiencing economic growth and overall progress.

For countries situated along geographical fault lines, progress could be stalled as a result of natural disasters. Volcanic eruptions and earthquakes can undo years of progress and constantly threaten life in those areas such that progress is not possible as seen in Indonesia's island of Java. Countries situated in low-lying areas are at greater risk of suffering the effects of natural disasters, like tsunamis or flooding as the sea levels rise or typhoons blow in. The consequences can be the loss of lives, the devastation of buildings and infrastructure, the displacement of the population, and a fatal blow to the economy. The effects of the 2004 tsunami continue to be felt by the various countries, with many affected villages still in disrepair and livelihoods and local economies not yet returned to the levels they were at before the disaster. In extreme cases, the state itself could collapse if the people's suffering is not addressed and their discontent with the government results in a rebellion or the overthrow of the government.

FOR MANY COUNTRIES, PHYSICAL FEATURES HAVE BROUGHT GOOD NEWS AND EVEN THOSE COUNTRIES WITH BAD NEWS DO NOT SUBJECT THEMSELVES WHOLLY TO THE FORCES OF NATURE AND GEOGRAPHY.

Seen from the above, physical features do greatly determine a country's development whether for good or for bad. We should however, take care not to adopt an overly deterministic stance by not considering how governments, through effective leadership and management, can defy physical constraints and re-orientate and chart progress and development for a country. A country small in physical size, like Singapore, has been able to grow her economy primarily because of a highly stable political environment that is conducive for foreign investment and business. The lack of natural resources has not deterred the leadership from growing the economy by tapping on human resource, and exporting soft skills such as management skills overseas. In stark contrast, many African states are today embroiled in civil strife and political chaos, derailing economic growth and consequently social progress and development, whether for the individual African state or the region. In fact, states that suffer from a lack of political stability could throw their economic locomotive off course, regardless of their physical size, or the type of natural resource the land may be endowed with.

We should also not dismiss how engineering and technological knowhow in our day and age can be effectively employed to circumvent the limitations imposed by geography. Physically small countries like Singapore have long embarked on land reclamation to extend their land area, and the ensuing result is urban development through the creation of more residential, commercial and leisure space. Earthquake-prone countries, like Japan, have also made use of engineering knowhow to improve safety standards of buildings in a bid to minimise fatalities and devastation both in the social and economic sense. Climate forecast applications have also been adopted by the agricultural sector in Bangladesh so as to enable farmers to plan their farming activities according to climatic changes. While these measures all have their limitations, their contribution to making the most of the physical features each country has to deal with is notable.

David Landes, the author of "The Wealth and Poverty of Nations" argues, "geography...brings bad tidings." For many countries, physical features have brought good news and even those countries with bad news do not subject themselves wholly to the forces of nature and geography. Much still lies in whether we have the will to defy geographical constraints and do what is possible politically and technologically to mitigate the negative effects and maximise the benefits that can be drawn from the geography of the land. 99

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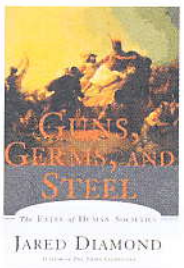

GUNS, GERMS AND STEEL
By Jared Diamond

Watch the documentary on Jared Diamond's book about how physical geography determines a nation's destiny. He begins on the island of Papua New Guinea. There, in 1974, a local named Yali asked Diamond a deceptively simple question: "Why is it that you white people developed so much cargo, but we black people had little cargo of our own?"

http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-4008293090480628280#

Does not determine.

BY TONG YEE

Ever

since the early civilisations, man has invested vast amounts of resources in understanding and overcoming the determining role that geography plays in the progress of their communities. While the vast amounts of existing data that show that advantageous physical features of early nations or civilisations were critical to their success, there is emerging new data that shows otherwise. Although physical features remain the primary source of capital and resource for any country that wishes to progress today, modern nation states have learnt that progressive governance can do much more. States that have overcome their geographical destiny proudly claim that their growth has moved beyond a dependence on the advantages of physical features through the harnessing of technology, investing in education and progressive policy, just to name a few, to ensure their success. Physical features will always play a crucial role in boosting a country's wealth and standing but both a nation's ingenuity and wisdom in using resources are what makes a country great.

It is no coincidence that the most powerful countries in the world today are those that have extensive access to natural resources made available from their advantageous geography. Oil-producing countries like Saudi Arabia and Russia are major players in the world because they reap huge profits from the export of their naturally endowed resource. Yet, believing that this blessed endowment is the be-all and end-all of progress is indeed naive. In fact, an abundance of natural resources can paradoxically be a curse, for it takes away the urgency for a country to invest and diversify its economy to ensure sustainable progress. The small nation state of Nauru illustrates this perfectly as its now deplorable economic state is a long way from its glory days of economic boom brought about by the prosperous but ultimately unsustainable phosphorous export trade. Conversely, Singapore showcases how a small nation with next to no natural resources was forced to develop its now revered competitive advantage by educating its people, and diversifying its economy beyond being a port of call to include

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This is The Republic of Nauru. All of it. by Tatters:)
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manufacturing and services. The physical feature of a country in terms of its resource endowment is certainly a welcome advantage but a country's sustainable progress is very much more determined by the wise use of these resources and effective leadership.

Yet, effective leadership alone cannot circumvent the sometimes debilitating effects of geography. The tropical climate of equatorial countries encourages the breeding of germs and the spread of diseases due to its warm and moist environment; the soil fertility of a country can affect its agricultural productivity; countries located along fault lines are prone to natural disasters which interrupt economic development; hilly terrain makes transport difficult and settlements unfavourable, and the list goes on. These physical features all have the potential of placing enormous constraints on the development of a country, but they by no means dictate the progress of a country, as these disadvantageous features may be overcome through the use of technology and innovative research. Soil fertility, for example, may be increased with the use of fertilisers or high-yield seeds; hilly terrains may be terraced for agriculture; early-warning systems can be installed to predict and prepare for catastrophe; sound hygiene and medical standards may be used to curb the spread of diseases like malaria. The disadvantageous physical features of a country are definitely not a chronic predicament for a country's progress in a world of ever advancing technological and scientific innovations where man has harnessed his ingenuity to alter his environment.

Whether boon or bane, physical features become an increasingly determinant factor for progress when the ignorance of people or lack of access to information goes unaddressed. Most geographical and ecological features culminate in a formidable deciding factor for progress when people do not have the knowledge to understand the complexity of these forces and how they affect human endeavour. We have seen that even with reasonably good geographical institutions or research agencies in place, physical features have crippled a country's progress like in the instance of Panama and Chilean agriculture, where climate change altered soil acridity levels causing increased occurrences of failed crops. Despite having access to fertilisers and technical knowhow to handle this, farmers did not receive timely information about how their environment had changed. Problems like this are thankfully circumvented when governments pay attention to geographical challenges. Armed with empowering information, municipalities and even individual communities, such as the ones in El Salvador, can not only protect their crop yield but increase it, despite being subject to similar geographical constraints. Physical features of a country affect its progress less when there is strong investment in education and effective information dissemination between the authorities and the general public.

WHETHER BOON OR BANE, PHYSICAL FEATURES BECOME AN INCREASINGLY DETERMINANT FACTOR FOR PROGRESS WHEN THE IGNORANCE OF PEOPLE OR LACK OF ACCESS TO INFORMATION GOES UNADDRESSED.

Finally, one of the more fascinating things about debilitating physical features is how people can ultimately come to believe that they dictate destiny. In the 1980s, the United Nations passed a resolution calling for special measures to help land-locked or distant island economies, which suffer from severe transport disadvantages. It seemed that both import and export markets were presumably crippled by lack of access to cheaper and more efficient sea routes. Another major problem was that bringing infrastructure, such as electricity and roads, to isolated areas was very expensive, leading to a general belief that these countries were hopeless. Yet, there were a few exceptions that did not subscribe to such geographical predestination. In Africa, the biggest successes are land-locked Botswana and the distant island of Mauritius. Land-locked Switzerland and Austria are amongst the richest in Europe. Land-locked Bangalore and Hyderabad have become the software capitals of India. In each case, the political leadership harnessed the transport and communications revolution, committed to building strategic infrastructure and earned investor confidence. These were all determined initiatives to reject the belief that physical features would define their progress.

While geography matters, it does not compel future success or disaster, any more than a child's genetic endowment determines the course of his future development. Geographical conditions certainly do not have to translate into predictable socio-economic outcomes. Once physical features, whether beneficial or not, are clearly identified and put into context, they can be largely harnessed or their detriments overcome by adopting good policies and employing sound technologies. The many countries that have flourished by being masters of their physical environments confirm the fact that the influences of geography act in concert with other factors, such as political institutions, education and technological development. The better a society understands its geographical constraints, the better it will be able to devise strategies to overcome them, ensuring its continued progress for a long time to come. ""

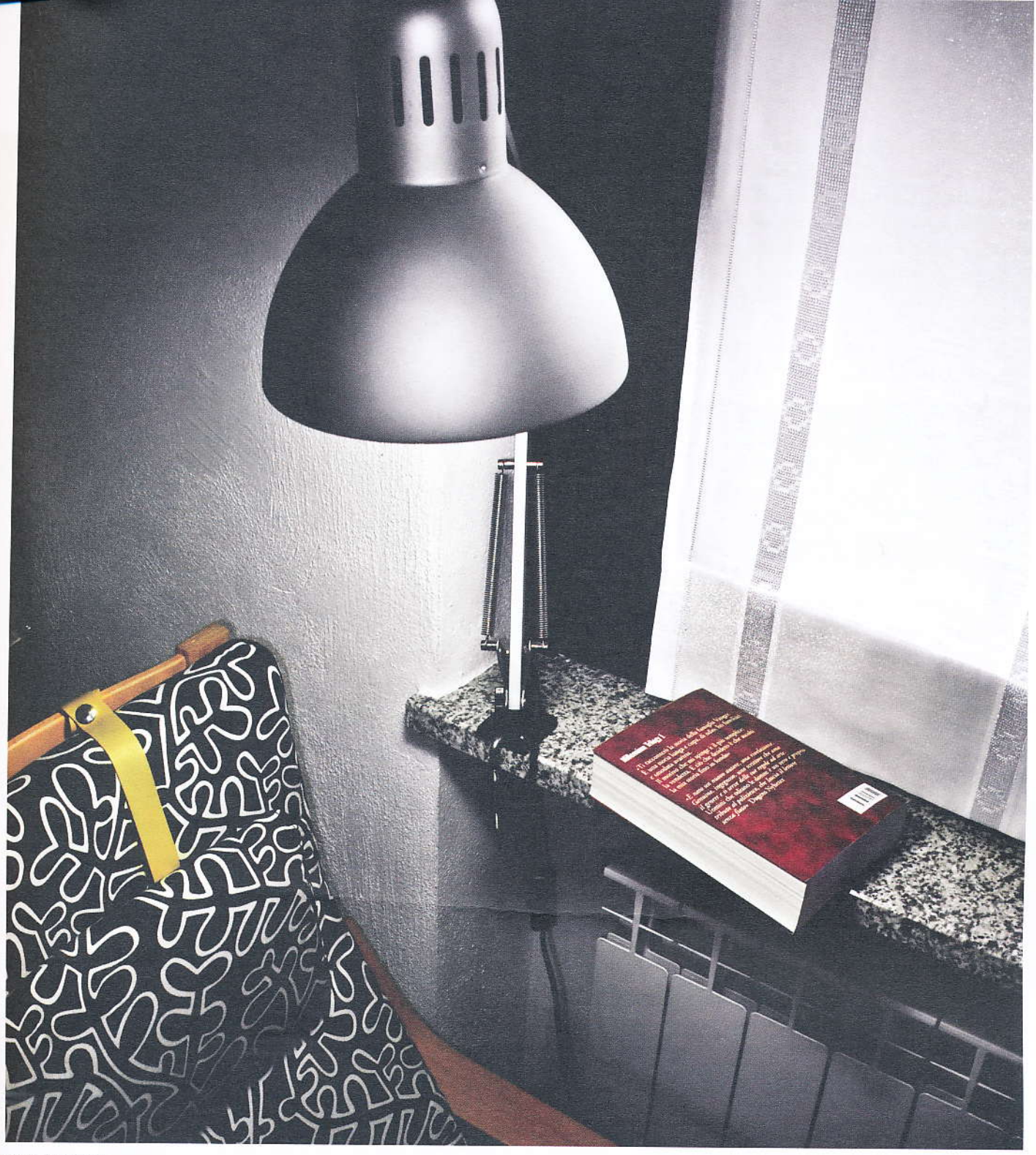


IMAGE CREDITS *delphaber, Flickr Creative Commons*

'NOWADAYS, THE PLEASURES OF READING CAN NEVER COMPETE WITH THE PLEASURES OF VISUAL ENTERTAINMENT.' TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE?

Agree

BY ELIZABETH KON

The printed word, the go-to source for knowledge, sustenance and enjoyment, has existed mostly bound in paper form relatively unchanged for centuries. It has endured through dire warnings of its irrelevance and lived through the inventions of new technology that threaten to overtake its ability to give pleasure. Yet at this particular epoch of time, we live in an age like no other. We live in an information age that is also at the same time an age of entertainment where the confluence of a multitude of electronic and visual mediums forms a perfect storm of pleasure, distraction and engagement. While millions of books have been published since the invention of the Gutenberg press, the explosion of digital television to handheld devices to the vast web that is the internet has caused each new and succeeding generation to drift further and further from reading for simple delight in this modern and fast-paced society. Like it or not, this is a time when books are waging the battle of Sisyphus against the unrelenting force of visual heavyweights like MySpace, YouTube, Flickr and "American Idol". Old rites of passage of *To Kill A Mockingbird* or *Jane Eyre* as childhood discovery are facing their demise as more people spurn them for season 2 of "Gossip Girl" or yet another Disney star's music video. The notion that conventional acts of reading can or will convert a generation that comprehends the world mostly through electronic media tools to a devouring and equally competing passion for reading seems sadly far-fetched.

One of the main reasons why reading is increasingly and rapidly losing ground to the visual is because technological advances have changed how we live our lives and accordingly hardwired us to demand our entertainment differently. The accessibility and affordability of new technology is such that people spend most of their work and social lives on media platforms and the most popular activities there involve less prolonged engagement over linear text. What encompasses entertainment now privileges the visual more than print in a bid to engage more viewers successfully and its organisation and navigation is the antithesis of how we get through a book. Also, technology has geared society towards leading a fast-paced lifestyle; everything must be quick and prompt, within reach of our fingertips. Hence, such built-in time constraints push us more in the direction of visual mediums. Visual entertainment often comes in bite-sized chunks that are easily and conveniently digested. This is a godsend for our fast food generation that buys time by consuming in the least amount of time or on the go. In the tenth of the time taken to read a few hundred pages of a book, a person could have consumed a new television episode of the hottest

IMAGE CREDITS

270 / 365 - January 29. 2009 by meddygarnet, Flickr Creative Commons

SURF THIS

Do you know about Amazon's reading machine that claims to revolutionise the way we read? Read two opposing views of the Kindle Revolution.

THE KINDLE PROBLEM
www.theatlantic.com/doc/200909u/amazon-kindle

BOOK END:
HOW KINDLE WILL CHANGE THE WORLD
www.theatlantic.com/doc/200909u/amazon-kindle

drama, watched the latest viral campaign of a favourite brand and squeezed in a YouTube animated synopsis of said book. New generations of mobile phones and handheld devices also enable us to access a streaming media of news, sports and film clips anywhere we go. Such immediate and effortlessly accessible doses of visual gratification best panders to today's masses of the busy and the tired, and to the attention that is easily lost or distracted. Conventional forms of reading are a lot more taxing and thus, escape and relaxation through visual mediums are more instinctively sought after as all we have to do is sit back and let the visual bring us there.

Bibliophiles maintain that the primacy and span of the personal imagination that comes with reading still offers the most satisfactory engagement that the visual can never fulfil. This argument is becoming a misnomer as visual mediums have caught up with and are even surpassing the ability of the imagination to evoke the senses and explore other worlds. Producers of such entertainment have become experts at melding visuals, music and the spoken word together in a total sensorial experience that envelopes the perceptual, emotional and cognitive faculties all at once. This has enabled them to successfully engage and hold the attentions of an incredibly diverse mass audience, ranging from jaded teenagers, bored housewives and curious intellectuals. Not only is there a bigger pool of content being produced, the quality of programming has also gone up, with more money and effort poured into improving production values, acting, writing, editing and directing. The result is that visual entertainment has become more sophisticated and more creative, more intriguing and more intellectual, no longer condemned to be the dumb jock to the brainy sibling of the book. Slick and sexy programming that appeal to our primal needs of action, humour and happy endings can have surprising depth. And more potently, visual entertainment can also meld the informative, the intellectual and the social together in a neat package. The capacity of the visual in fleshing out and grounding the imagination demonstrates its power and its allure in ways that puts reading down for the count.

Also, the delight and enjoyment evoked by reading is usually enjoyed in solitude and such private introspective reflection is increasingly being passed over for a more interactive and social component as people look for more than the one way path from author to reader. Visual entertainment today is supported by a rapidly growing array of web services and tools that are all seeking to exploit new media's power to bring people together. This combination of the image with interconnectivity is further solidifying visual entertainment's credentials in starting conversations and offering companionship across geographical distances and social divides. This back and forth exchange offers an immediacy of connection that is more satisfying as people interact on different levels every time content is generated, characters walk around a virtual reality, photos are shared, videos uploaded, pictures tagged and databases searched. Even theatre and concert experiences are more interactive, offering more opportunities for feedback and participation that is more congenial.

It does not help that reading is increasingly associated with functionality, and less with the romantic ideal of a lifelong habit of love. When asked by international reading inspectors why they read, children tellingly said that it was to help them do well in tests or to get a good job. Though books may be used to entertain and please, they are not primarily geared for fun alone. Reading is most commonly associated with academia and research especially during one's schooling years. Therefore when educators harangue people about the pleasures of reading, they seem elitist and out-of-touch. Worse, people tend to be directed to a canon of great books with such high barriers of entry that even more are turned off reading. And even when certain books become a sensation – like the Harry Potter series or books recommended by Oprah Winfrey's book club – more often than not, people merely wait for the accompanying movie or DVD instead. Books may be trying to fight back by creating tie-ins with movies and toys, but ironically, it also makes it easier to never have to read in the first place. Reading simply cannot compete for permanent and lasting attention anymore when it comes to the pleasure stakes.

In the end, no one is denying the value of books or the pleasure that people can derive from reading. The printed word will not disappear but its ability in transmitting pleasure and delight will be overtaken by visual mediums. Reading will have a declining and more specialised audience as new media transforms our lives and society. This change will be transformative as visual entertainment and its technological evolutions continue to take on the end functions of reading and diminish the sole standing of the written word. The proliferation of video games, virtual reality sites, social networking sites, and the many, many apps that accompany our internet browsers, our televisions, our Blackberrys and our iPhones have come to dominate the whole gamut of emotional and intellectual rewards that we traditionally associate with reading and more, and will continue to change current and future generations' modes of expectations and apprehensions of the world. "

Disagree.

BY LORRAINE CHNG

The most common answer to the question "What 3 things would you bring with you if you were stranded on a deserted island?" is a book, whether a religious tome or a classic, suggesting that one of the most treasured (and portable) pastimes of civilised society is reading. In fact, curling up with a good book has long been the image of leisure and the means of acquiring knowledge. Yet today's multimedia-saturated world raises the question of whether words can compete with images, particularly moving images. Educationists remark on how little the younger generation reads nowadays given the beguiling delights of computer games, television programmes and online activities. Yet to conclude that the pleasures of reading cannot compete with those of visual entertainment is too premature. Media tie-ups, innovations in putting reading material online, and the use of technology to make reading more enjoyable allow reading to hold its own against visual media. Beyond these adaptations to the challenges of visual media and the Internet, reading is a pleasure that continues to be relevant and unrivalled in the stimulation and learning it affords.

The onslaught of television and the cinema has marked a change in story-telling with everything fleshed out before one's eyes as compared to the use of words to create pictures in readers' minds. While people today are very taken by visual stimulation and the enjoyment of watching a game or movie in sharp detail, the pleasures of reading continue to offer something valuable: control and room for the imagination to open to. Readers enjoy the ability to envision in their heads the scenes and characters rather than to have someone else's interpretation forced upon them. In addition, the richness of what can be imagined often beats any 3-D or High Definition celluloid version. Even with the movie-making wizardry offered by special effects and animation technology today, movies like those of the Harry Potter series and the Lord of the Rings are limited in their ability to bring to life the books. Readers often experience a sense of disappointment because things were not as they imagined or parts of the books they had enjoyed were

IMAGE CREDITS

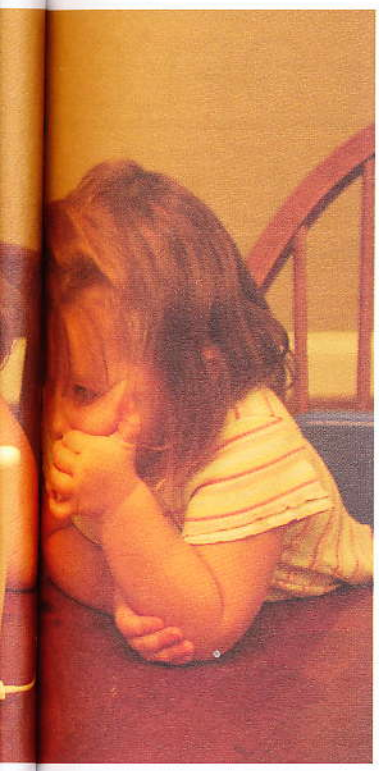
Hersman Girls - Already on computers...by whiteafrican, Flickr Creative Commons

SURF THIS

BBC's THE BIG READ
In 2003, BBC gets its audience to nominate UK's favourite books.
www.bbc.co.uk/arts/bigread/top100.shtml

TIME MAGAZINE'S TOP 100
Time's critics pick the 100 best English language novels from 1923 to present day.
www.time.com/time/2005/100books/the_complete_list.html

21 BEST-SELLERS OF ALL TIME
Which books have sold the most all over the world? Clue: Harry Potter and the Bible are in there.
entertainment.howstuffworks.com/21-best-selling-books-of-all-time.htm



left out or downplayed. In fact, fan fiction sites that offer pieces of creative writing based on movies, comics, and television shows have become very popular, showing how satisfying the written word can be. The boundless nature of our imaginations and the depth and evocative power of language make for pleasures that visual entertainment with all its technological improvements has yet to match.

TV programmes, video games and movies are also increasing in number and variety, with cable TV and the Internet providing 24/7 access to visual entertainment. The result has been an increase in the time spent on visual entertainment instead of reading for leisure. A recent study in the U.S. estimates that an average American spends 58 hours a week watching TV, compared to just 10 hours in 1990. Yet, for all its volume and variety, visual entertainment cannot provide the pleasures and benefits of learning and mental stimulation. Given that much of visual entertainment is often sensationalistic, simplified or formulaic to cater to a larger audience, the enjoyment derived usually does not engage the intellect or provide much personal benefit. Popular reality TV and game shows like "The Amazing Race", "Survivor", "American Idol", and "America's Next Top Model" may provide some insight into human nature or snippets of useful information about foreign countries or the skills needed for a particular industry, but the focus on human melodrama and extreme situations cheapens the enjoyment. In contrast, reading holds greater pleasure for the wealth of human experience and wisdom found in books and periodicals. The availability of reading material from various cultures and periods in history trumps the Americanised and mainstream visual entertainment options, and until there is better representation of voices from around the world and more nuanced content, reading will provide greater pleasure intellectually.

The advent of technology in modern society may seem to have the most impact on bettering the quality of visual entertainment, but it has also helped to up the pleasure quotient for reading through increased accessibility and interconnectivity for the written word. There are e-books that can be borrowed from libraries online or purchased and downloaded onto portable readers, classic works of literature posted as e-texts, online newspapers and magazines, and even well-written blog posts on a wide array of topics forming part of people's reading diet, allowing for enrichment and intellectual engagement. Portable readers like the Kindle are modernising the book, reducing the resources involved in printing so readers can feel less guilty about the environmental cost, and increasing the portability and ease of storage so readers can have as many books as they wish and read them when and where they want. The Internet has also enabled people to share their joy in reading by creating virtual bookshelves or lists that allow others to see what they are reading, rating and reviewing books, and also allowing for a lively exchange of views and opinions through online forums for discussion. Thus, it should be argued that rather than declining, the pleasures of reading are continuing to expand through technology despite the competition from visual entertainment.

The pleasures of reading and visual entertainment derive from the nature of the mediums and while both involve the eye, words and pictures have a different relationship with the mind. Still, for all the quiet and intellectual pleasures of reading, there are some times when visual entertainment is more engaging for the impact and the dynamic, immersive experience it can create. One can hardly imagine that reading a play-by-play description of a tennis match or a soccer game would compare to the pleasure of watching it. At times, watching a process can also be more beneficial and pleasurable than reading about it, like through cooking shows and "expert" how-to videos on Youtube. These categories tend to be specifically catered to the informational though and do not outweigh the many ways and times when words speak volumes and provide more sustained engagement.

The head start that writing has had historically is evidenced in the rich literary tradition and levels of craft and excellence attained in wordplay which visual entertainment has not rivalled. However, there remains a possibility that visual entertainment will one day surpass writing as more talents choose the video camera over the pen and more money is spent on film rather than print. Likewise, if younger generations grow up disliking reading or doing very little of it, the pleasures of reading will clearly fade because exposure and reading skills do factor in the level of pleasure gained from words. Thus in many senses, the competition between reading and visual entertainment will continue and will eventually be decided by society's choices, although for now at least, even when one is not on a deserted island, the pleasures of reading continue to hold their own. ❝❞

TO WHAT EXTENT DOES THE MIGRATION OF PEOPLE HAVE A POSITIVE EFFECT?

Positive.

BY ELIZABETH KON

It is an important sign of the times that most politicians today cannot get elected without making their stand on immigration clear. A rising influx of economic migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, eco-migrants are sharpening old xenophobic fears and causing widespread anti-migrant sentiment. The belief that migrants are a detriment to society and a threat to everything they hold dear is leading voters in recent times to reward politicians who promise to raise barriers to immigrants and punish politicians who embrace foreign labour. While it is disturbing that some political parties are getting away with more racist innuendo as part of their election propaganda, it is more troubling that emotionally cheap rhetoric and woolly thinking have affected even moderate and liberal parties. Doubters with reactionary attitudes towards globalisation refuse to believe that recipient and donor nations can still benefit from migration today, thinking that the answer to today's conflicted world is to retreat behind raised national borders. However, this is short-sighted and turning a blind eye to reality. It is a shame that people will not see how centuries of migrant movements are responsible for the world's prosperity, and acknowledge that the verve and diversity of migrants have made our world culturally and socially richer.

History has long revealed that migration promotes wealth and success, bringing outsized economic gains for the recipient country. This fact resonates even more in today's economy. Migrants help expand fast-changing and growing economies which increasingly demand a bigger labour pool and highly skilled workers. Developed nations have ageing and shrinking workforces that rely more and more on younger migrants to alleviate labour shortages and fulfil needs for certain skill sets. Countries that welcome immigrants – like Ireland and America – have better economic records than those that are leery of them, like Germany which has perennial shortages of engineers, scientists and programmers. In addition, migrants are consumers too: they buy houses and goods and services and contribute to tax revenue, boosting the national economy. Capping this off, the worry that migrants will take away jobs from locals and put a strain on public services is unwarranted. The truth is that immigrants tend to complement rather than compete with domestic workers, enlarging the talent pool and enabling more to be done. Even low-skilled immigrants fill job gaps in areas like farming, sanitation, child and elderly care, jobs that few locals covet. Social welfare expenses also balance out in the long term when second generation migrants are educated and contribute to the economy.

Migrants also add a crucial element of innovation and dynamism to recipient nations. Seeking a better life, migrants have skills, determination and entrepreneurial drive that mark them out as special people. One third of all Americans who have won the Nobel Prize in the last century were immigrants. One third of Silicon Valley companies were started by Indian and Chinese immigrants. Skilled and risk-taking migrants can drive job creation in new and creative industries and revitalise stagnating cities. The great and vital cities of the world are what they are today precisely because they have such a dynamic workforce through migration.

IMAGE CREDITS

(on this page) Thousands of protesters gathered for this Migrant March at Los Angeles rafael amado deras; Flickr Creative Commons

The extent to which home nations benefit from migration also cannot be understated. Economists calculate that the benefit to developing nations exceeds that of foreign aid and debt relief together, reaching $260 billion in 2006, and making up as much as a quarter of GDP of certain countries. Sent directly to families, remittances are less likely to be stolen by officials and go directly to food, housing, education and health. Another 2007 World Bank study found that when international remittances rose by 10%, absolute poverty fell by 3.5%. Remittances are also less volatile or controlled by political considerations like foreign aid and can go on for generations past the first migration. More importantly, remittances can open access to banking services which include insurance and loans. India has special funds so that PIO (people of Indian origin) can invest in the country and help its development.

Migration also brings up concerns of brain drain for donor nations where badly needed skilled workers and graduates leave all too promptly for other nations. However, this is not a problem that has no solution. The need to attract back its citizens gives poor countries incentives to build infrastructure, new schools and services. Ghana lured their doctors and nurses back by raising wages and offering incentives like allowing them to work abroad for short stints. An important trend in recent years can also offset the issue of brain drain. Overseas immigrants, second and third generation immigrants in particular, have begun trickling back into their home nations, in search for a connection with their home culture, because they are intrigued by the booming economies and opportunities that the home country is offering or to spend their final years in their homeland, bringing with them retirement money to spend. Returning émigrés used to living in democracies or richer economies also bring back with them ideas, technology and capital to transform their nation and become a potent force for liberalisation. Taiwan, Shanghai and India's equivalents of the Silicon Valley were built from such returning migrants and their networks.

But this essay grants that the growing estrangement and ambivalence of recent migrants to their host nations are a growing concern. As the bombings in Europe and the burning of Paris's banlieues show, social integration of new arrivals is crucial. The advent of terrorist attacks in recipient nations and increasing incidences of social strife have raised concerns that migrants are trouble because they do not adopt the basic values of the host country. Affecting this are migration patterns that bring more and more distant cultures into contact with one another, and technology and communication tools slowing the rate at which assimilation of the host country's language and values occurs. Tackling this complex problem is fraught with difficulty. Cultural gains and greater diversity may unfortunately mean a short-term decline in trust and shared values and this may be a price that locals are unwilling to pay as it may take a few decades for real integration to happen.

> GOOD FENCES MAKE GOOD NEIGHBOURS...BEFORE I BUILD A WALL I'D ASK TO KNOW WHAT I WAS WALLING IN OR WALLING OUT.
>
> ROBERT FROST

This is why non-partisan immigration reform is needed more than ever, to mitigate these ill effects and continue to accentuate migration's positive effects. The lesson from countries that successfully integrate their migrants is that skilled people settle in very quickly and the lower-skilled are able to catch up. The problem is that governments are failing to manage these increasing numbers of migrants properly. We have to accept that migration in today's globalised world is changing our understanding of citizenship and nationhood. Politicians pander to fears of strangers and change rather than explain the clear benefits of immigration to them and the country. The basics of ensuring decent education, affordable housing, language training and enforcing anti-discrimination laws to ensure equal access to jobs are all within the easy purview of governments and a good way to inculcate the common values of citizenship and belonging.

At the end of the day, the clearest incontrovertible positive effect is felt by the migrant himself. The moral imperative for opening borders is incontestable: it greatly lessens human misery for people fleeing political repression and religious persecution, and seeking to enrich themselves and their children. It is hypocritical to enjoy the benefits migration has offered to businesses and countries so far and close the doors once things do not go as well. So before we exhibit any kneejerk prejudicial reaction against immigrants, we should remember Robert Frost's musing in his poem "Good fences make good neighbours...before I build a wall I'd ask to know what I was walling in or walling out". Fences treat migrants like an invading army and deny people access to their right to seek a better life and enjoy freedoms the rest of us take for granted.

LINKS TO FOLLOW

LEARNING FROM MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES
www.attachmentacrosscultures.org/

YOUTUBE THIS

Discover the plight of migrant workers in Singapore

THE TAGORE LANE CONTROVERSY
www.youtube.com/user/WildPoppies2009

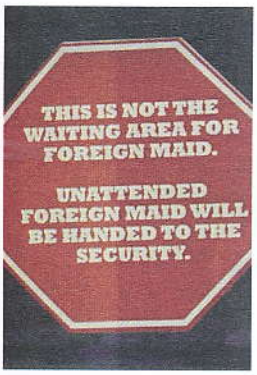
THE MAID TRADE
www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6kqvZx1Bzw

Negative.

BY VIVIENNE CHUA

People

have always moved across national and geographical borders to improve their standard of living, to provide their children better opportunities to get ahead, or to escape from poverty, war or famine. Yet for nations and the 192 million people today who live outside their place of birth, the search for greener pastures does not always yield unequivocal good. While there is increasing recognition that migration is an essential and inevitable aspect of the economic and social life of any state, less attention has been paid to the fact that the migration of people is fraught with tensions and difficulties.



The following sign was spotted outside the food court at Raeburn Park (at the former Gan Eng Seng School close to the Tanjong Pagar Railway station) in December 2008.

Proponents of migration frequently dwell upon the economic and entrepreneurial benefits to the host nations. For countries faced with dwindling birth rates or a rapidly ageing population, foreign workers inject much needed dynamism into mature economies by expanding shrinking labour pools. Typically, foreigners occupy positions shunned by the native population, in industries such as healthcare, sanitation and service. At the other end of the job spectrum, better qualified foreigners are assiduously courted to add value to sectors of the economy driven by expertise and innovation like finance, research and development and IT. These migrants often infuse a vitality that increases the allure of global cities like London, New York and Paris, making them vibrant and exciting places to work, live and play in. Regardless of the type of immigrant labour utilised, the advantages accrued enable the host nations to expand their tax and consumer bases, which are the keys to maintaining healthy fiscal balances and increased economic growth.

IMAGE CREDITS

(on this page) migrants arriving on the island of lampedusa in august 2007. pictures taken by Sara Prestianni and taken from storie migrante. noborder; Flickr Creative Commons

Where home nations are concerned, migration provides a financial lifeline to sluggish developing economies. In addition, it is a socially expedient solution to relieve crippling poverty and political pressures created by the large cohorts of unemployed and restless youth in the developing world, estimated to soar from 5.6 billion to 7.9 billion by 2050. World-wide remittances from foreign workers accounted for a staggering $375 billion in 2008, of which $283 billion went to developing nations, enabling families back home to ride out weak domestic economies, weather uncertain agricultural seasons, build homes, start

NATIONAL IDENTITIES ALSO BECOME INCREASINGLY MORE "DILUTED" AND AMBIGUOUS AS COMPARED TO HOW THEY WERE TRADITIONALLY, MUCH TO THE DISCONCERTMENT OF LOCALS WHO PLACE A HIGH VALUE ON THE COUNTRY'S ETHNIC AND CULTURAL UNIQUENESS.

businesses or invest in education. For such nations, revenue from people who have left to work overseas can provide important balance of payments help and direct investments. For instance, Filipino workers abroad contributed a significant 13% to the Philippines' GDP in 2007. Beyond the obvious inflows to its national income, countries like the Philippines have historically relied on the export of labour to ease domestic unemployment, low job creation rates and wages. Thus migration has a significant positive effect on the economies of countries of origin.

Yet, the rewards of migration often belie the long term social problems it creates. Firstly, the influx of immigrant labour can strain social welfare, health and education services in the host countries. In the U.S. for instance, immigrant households have more children and hence consume more educational services. Secondly, such households tend to be poorer than native households and therefore receive more state and locally funded subsidies. In actual fact, the average immigrant does not pay enough in taxes to cover his consumption of public services during his lifetime. In recessionary times, the initial enthusiasm for migrant workers quickly subsides and these migrant populations pose a greater strain on social services and give rise to higher crime and social unrest when migrant workers are retrenched in order to protect native interests and jobs.

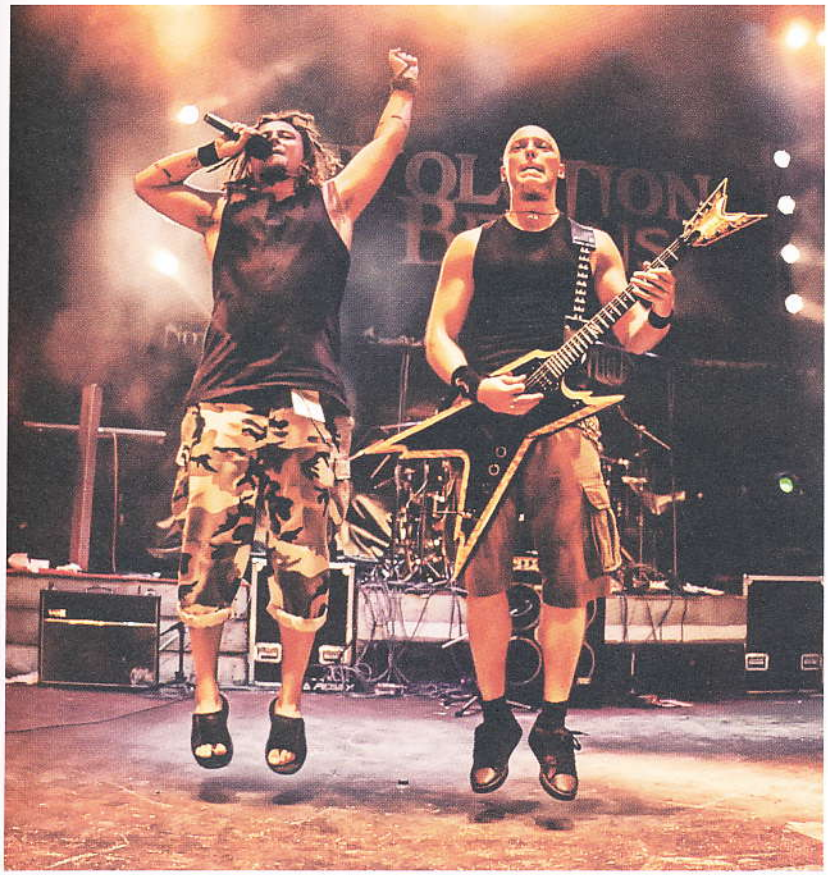
In addition, the ideological dissimilarities of these foreigners challenge the political tolerance of nations that have had little experience of ethnic or religious diversity. Take for instance French legislation prohibiting the display of conspicuous religious symbols in schools. The furore that led up to its enforcement in 2004 highlighted the deep tensions within a society with a growing migrant population that is intent on protecting its traditional identity. Resentment arises over what locals perceive as special demands for change and accommodation by immigrants such as those concerning food preferences and religious practices. National identities also become increasingly more "diluted" and ambiguous as compared to how they were traditionally, much to the disconcertment of locals who place a high value on the country's ethnic and cultural uniqueness.

The fault does not only lie with locals, often dissatisfaction and unrest can grow in migrant populations when they feel that they have not been treated fairly or helped along enough to compensate for the disadvantages they might face. International events like clashes between the Western powers and Middle Eastern, African or Asian countries have made race and ethnic differences more conspicuous, creating more volatile conditions that manifest in incidents of riots, expulsions, belligerent political rhetoric, protests and crackdowns. Local factors also contribute to the problem, with racial enclaves, language barriers, and differences in religion and social status creating tensions. Some blame the unwillingness of immigrants to integrate into the local culture, and the reality is that advanced transport and communication technologies often serve to facilitate access to their countries and cultures of origin, thus discouraging full integration.

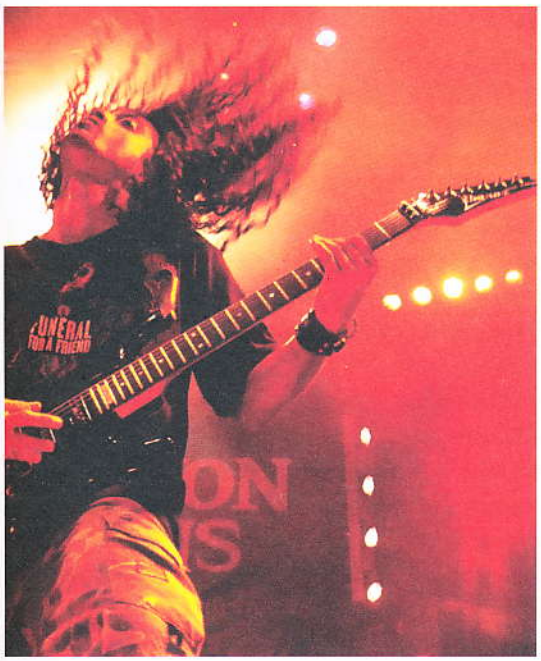
For immigrants, particularly the low-skilled workers, there are great oft-hidden mental and emotional costs of migration. Impressive remittance amounts often conceal the mental and physical stress of being alone without family, the impact on the families left behind, the various types of discrimination in the workplace in the host country, the risk of sexual harassment and abuses experienced by women workers and finally, the poor living and working conditions that less qualified immigrant workers endure in eking out a living.

What about the effects on migrant home nations? A long term problem is brain drain. Ethiopia, for instance produces excellent doctors, but there are more Ethiopian doctors in Chicago than there are in Ethiopia. India loses $2 billion a year because of the emigration of computer experts to the U.S. Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, an astounding 500,000 Russian scientists and computer programmers have left the country in search of more conducive environments that advance and reward their marketable skills. In a world dependent on the generation of new knowledge and its application to continually advance, the exodus of human capital cripples the development of solutions that would ameliorate the social, political and economic problems in these countries.

In the final analysis, the migration of people does not always ensure positive outcomes. Given the competition over scarce resources, deep-seated fears and insecurities tend to manifest in the suspicion of all things foreign. Migration's stop-gap nature also discourages nations from a genuine, perhaps more radical search for solutions that would deal with the inherent causes and conditions that prompt migration in the first place. Until such fundamental issues are resolved, migration will continue to present serious challenges for both sending and receiving nations. ❝❞



‘CONTEMPORARY MUSIC HAS NO ARTISTIC VALUE.’ IS THIS A FAIR COMMENT?



Yes, it is fair.

BY SHIAO-YIN KUIK

You

can argue that it is clearly unfair to label all contemporary music as having no artistic merit because the value of art is so subjective. Michael Jackson has been heaped with posthumous accolade after accolade: "visionary", "a master of his art", "cutting edge", "a real artiste". Yet, some dismiss him as a pretentious pop star who lucked out with a few slick dance moves. Is it fair to put Wacko Jacko in the same category as Wolfgang Mozart or even the Beatles? The dictionary defines art as any work that is produced with a conscious use of skill and creative imagination. By this definition, even puerile lyrics like "Don't cha wish your girlfriend was hot like me?" qualifies as art because surely even the most nitpicky of critics can credit The Pussycat Dolls with some microscopic level of skill. Most people define art the same way they define pornography: "I know it when I see it". For most of us laymen, there are no objective or universally agreed upon standards when it comes to critiquing the cultural goods we consume beyond that age-old rule of "whether I like it or not".

Of course, you can also point out the sheer snobbishness of sneering at contemporary music as a lower art-form because the "common masses" like it. Classic music and opera snobs snub the likes of Paul Potts and Il Divo because they sit in that insulting category of pop classical. More people may be stirred by a top 40 hit like Britney's "Womaniser" then a classic like Bach's "Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring" or an avant-garde piano piece by Phillip Glass. Wildly popular contemporary jazz saxophonist Kenny G has been the musician jazz critics love to hate. Jazz fanatics get livid at any innocent suggestion that Mr. G be included in the hallowed canon of jazz greats like Louis Armstrong or Duke Ellington. Though Kenny G is a fine player, he does not improvise much and sticks mostly to predictable melody statements - a style that puts his music outside the definition of jazz according to music critics. But why should the popular vote not be taken into consideration as a vote of artistic value? Surely, the fact that contemporary music has mass appeal shows that it has achieved some minimum level of artistic merit: the ability to cut through boundaries and connect with the audience's soul.

IMAGE CREDITS

(overleaf) rockstars by notsogoodphotography; (on this page) Madonna mannequin at Las Vegas Madame Tussands museum by cliff1066; Flickr Creative Commons

MOST PEOPLE DEFINE ART THE SAME WAY THEY DEFINE PORNOGRAPHY: "I KNOW IT WHEN I SEE IT".

Over the years, we have definitely witnessed contemporary musicians who comfortably straddle the realms of commercial success and artistic originality. Though Michael Jackson's post-millennium music career was in the doldrums, his albums throughout the '80s and '90s broke the American music industry's stereotypical perceptions of what kind of music a black man could sell in a white market. His 1982 album "Thriller" was a creative tour de force because it introduced that postmodern sound full of eclectic aural cross-references we have become so used to in today's music. "Thriller" fused multiple genres from soul to spoken word to rock and referenced risky topics like teen pregnancy, gang violence, erotic obsession and racism. His peer Madonna also bested her critics who once trashed her as a provocative bimbo with a bad voice. With albums like "Ray of Light" and "Like a Prayer", the Queen of Pop has made her mark as an artist provocateur, infusing different musical genres with fashion, spirituality and biting socio-political commentary. No wonder *Rolling Stone* magazine declared her music "as close to art as pop music gets".

But musical standards have been dropping because most of today's pop songs are not born from the creative fire of artistes but profit-driven music moguls heading soulless hit factories. Most chart-toppers are systematically created with the most infectious hooks, accessible lyrics and paired up with the most acceptably beautiful singers with just the right amount of scandal to ensure mass appeal. Music svengalis like 19 Entertainment's Simon Fuller have perfected the art of creating the musical flavour of the month. It was Fuller who helped the Spice Girls sell 375 million records and who conceived of the American Idol hit factory where fan following is literally prioritised over originality in the "creative process". Sure, Adam Lambert radiates artistic insight in his musical arrangements but Idols like Jordin Sparks, Carrie Underwood, Chris Daughtry and David Archuleta are really more glorified karaoke singers than ground-breaking artistes.

A MUSICIAN MAY HAVE PERFORMED A PIECE WITH GREAT TECHNICAL SKILL, ENJOYED THE PROCESS IMMENSELY, DELIGHTED HIS FANS AND MADE HIS LOVED ONES FEEL ALL WARM AND FUZZY INSIDE – AND STILL NOT CREATED WHAT HISTORY WOULD JUDGE AS ART. ALL HE HAS CREATED WAS ENTERTAINMENT ONLY FOR THE MOMENT.

Ultimately, we should judge all art by how much significance it has added to the world and how well its message can endure through time - and most contemporary music is just too popularist and trivial to be meaningful. Anyone recall even one of Victoria Beckham's four Top Ten singles or willing to bet that Beyonce's "Single Ladies" will be considered for archiving in the U.S. Library of Congress as Aretha Franklin's "Respect" was? Artistic value centres around three main areas: the awakening of new thoughts and emotions in an audience, the complexity of the aesthetic form itself and the honesty of observations about the artist or the world. A musician may have performed a piece with great technical skill, enjoyed the process immensely, delighted his fans and made his loved ones feel all warm and fuzzy inside – and still not created what history would judge as art. All he has created was entertainment only for the moment.

Going by the strictest principles of art criticism to judge, it is clear that most "artistes" in the contemporary music scene are pleasant at best and shamelessly mediocre at worst. Great music cannot be about music that wins the popularity stakes (like Britney). But neither is it about alienating soundscapes understood only by its stand-offish creator (like Yoko Ono). Somewhere in between those two poles is the sweet spot where contemporary music needs to be to achieve greatness but is sadly not: accessible enough to be loved by the lowest yet profound enough to be honoured by the best. Deny it if you like but time will reveal the difference between Suzanne Vega and Susan Boyle, Madonna and Shakira, The Rolling Stones and The Arctic Monkeys. "

LINKS TO FOLLOW

Rolling Stone Magazine's Top 500 Songs of All Time
www.rollingstone.com/news/coverstory/500songs

1. *Like a Rolling Stone*, Bob Dylan
2. *Satisfaction*, The Rolling Stones
3. *Imagine*, John Lennon
4. *What's Going On*, Marvin Gaye
5. *Respect*, Aretha Franklin
6. *Good Vibrations*, The Beach Boys
7. *Johnny B. Goode*, Chuck Berry
8. *Hey Jude*, The Beatles
9. *Smells Like Teen Spirit*, Nirvana
10. *What'd I Say*, Ray Charles

No, it is not fair.

BY BAEY SHI CHEN

At first glance, the contemporary music scene certainly appears to be suffering from a dearth of real talent, with the airwaves littered with forgettable pop ditties with ubiquitous melodies and banal lyrics that hold little artistic value. Coupled with the cult of celebrity that fuels the industry, where an endless assembly line of pop sensations are churned out at a relentless pace to satiate a public that appears more interested in the latest flavour of the month than any enduring talent or artistry, the situation seems dire indeed. However, while this is a discouraging phenomenon, the assertion that all contemporary music has no artistic value is debatable, especially when the industry also teems with talents who demonstrate artistic integrity in their work.

Admittedly, the aggressive marketing of commercial bubblegum pop manufactured mainly to appeal to pre-teens and teenagers has led to a certain lack of credibility in contemporary music. Moreover, with the heavy-handed use of technology such as Auto-Tune correction to enhance singers' voices, there seems to be little authenticity to speak of. Furthermore, the widespread downloading of music has led the industry to respond by focusing more on producing artistes whose works have a higher and quicker "hit rate" rather than helping them build a respectable body of work that would reflect deeper thought and a strong creative style. This approach not only leads to a lack of longevity for these recording artistes, but also tends to compromise the artistic value of their music.

Nonetheless, while these developments have thrown contemporary music's lack of artistic value into sharper relief, it is perhaps too hasty to conclude that all its forms are devoid of it. Music remains a potent form of creative expression today, and musicians are important chroniclers of major societal shifts and influential agents of change. They invent concepts and evoke compelling emotions with their instruments and lyrics while offering the idea of hope and possibility. These include contemporary musicians such as Radiohead, U2 and Bob Dylan, who have remained vital and relevant while continuing to retain the artistic integrity of their work, successfully melding shrewd societal commentaries with incredible melodies. For example, Irish band U2 has written numerous songs that deal with social and political injustices in their 33-year oeuvre – the Irish Civil War, Burmese pro-democracy activist Aung San Suu Kyi and the Middle East crisis have been but a few of their subjects. The equal-

IMAGE CREDITS

(on this page) Mick Jagger mannequin at Las Vegas Madame Tussands museum by cliff1066; Flickr Creative Commons

MUSIC REMAINS A POTENT FORM OF CREATIVE EXPRESSION TODAY, AND MUSICIANS ARE IMPORTANT CHRONICLERS OF MAJOR SOCIETAL SHIFTS AND INFLUENTIAL AGENTS OF CHANGE.

ly prolific Dylan, who is still releasing albums and performing his music, and whose songs not only defined a generation but were also anthems for America's Civil Rights Movement and the protests against the Vietnam War, was awarded a Special Citation by the Pulitzer Prize jury in 2008 for "his profound impact on popular music and American culture, marked by lyrical compositions of extraordinary poetic power." The artistry of words and music used to creatively and powerfully express issues reflective of generations show that contemporary music is not devoid of artistic value.

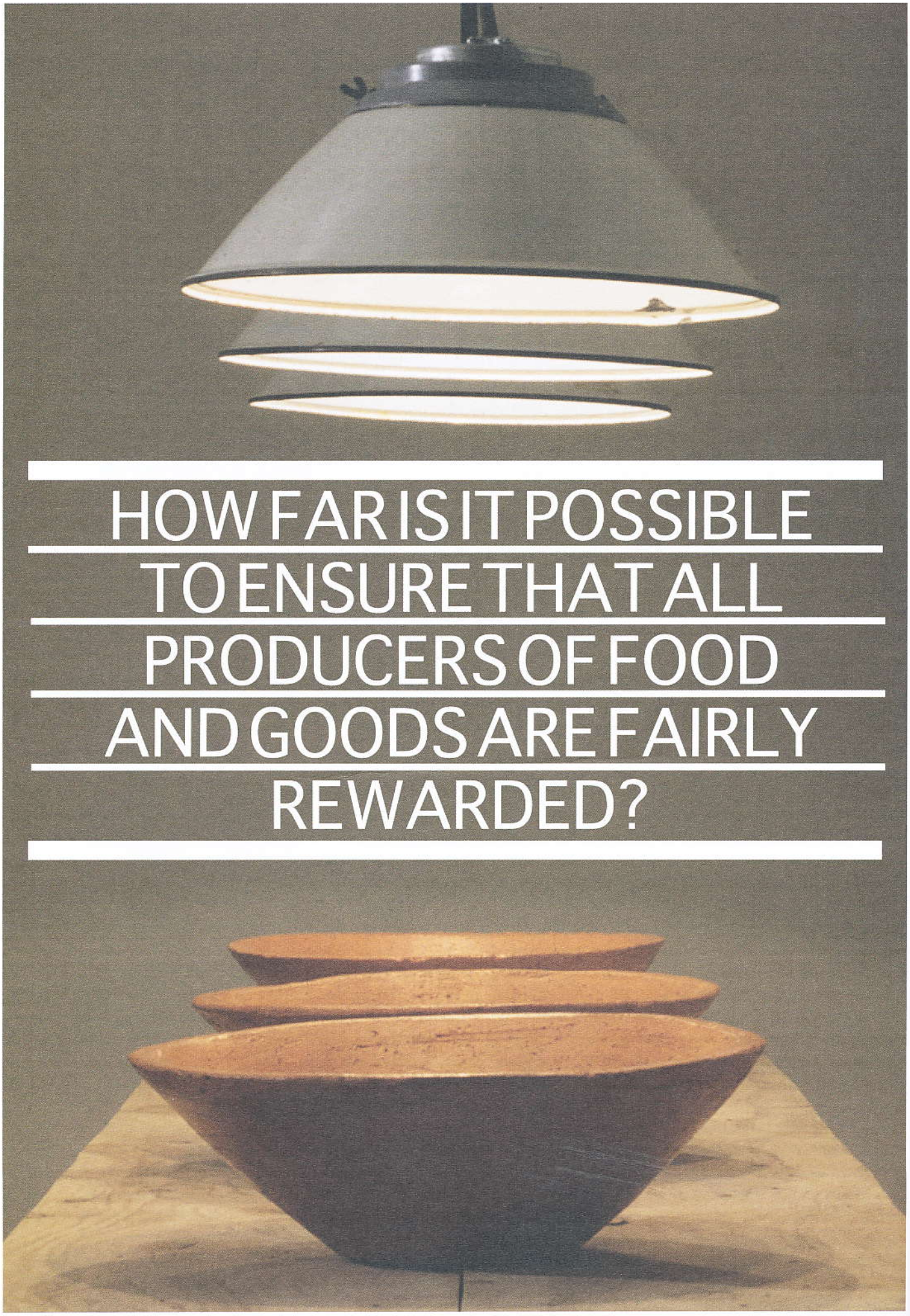
Furthermore, musicians such as Joni Mitchell, Tori Amos, PJ Harvey and Björk have not only created a strong female presence in a predominantly male industry, but have also distinguished themselves through the artistic risks they take in their music, consistently producing original works that document the female perspective. Björk in particular is not only known for a wide repertoire consisting of an amalgamation of alternative rock, jazz, electronica, classical music and trip hop, she is also famous for her eccentric costumes and groundbreaking music videos. Tori Amos, meanwhile, is renowned for her musical prowess and thematically dense compositions, and the highly respected Joni Mitchell, whose ruminative folk songs have influenced musicians in genres as diverse as rock and R&B, has been dubbed "one of the greatest songwriters ever" by *Rolling Stone* magazine. Originality and the blending of genres in contemporary music continue to add value and create interest in music as an art form.

Also, while the genre of rap music has often been singled out for criticism and dismissed for its misogynistic and violent content, it is essentially an incredibly inventive genre that entails improvisation and the rhythmic flair of powerful verbal wordsmiths. Derived from the Black oral tradition, rap music encapsulates a particular aspect of the African-American experience today, not unlike how 20th century jazz musicians such as Miles Davis and John Coltrane came to typify a particular brand of "Black music" through the indisputable artistry and emotional depth of a genre that has endured to the present. While rap music's significance is undoubtedly linked to its historical origins as a rhetoric of resistance, its spontaneity and often lyrical quality has led it to become an innovative means of creative expression for musicians worldwide.

Also striving to realise new musical potentials and push creative boundaries are the experimental musicians. In the last decade, emergent genres such as ambient and post-rock music have taken off, and the artistic endeavours of indie groups such as Sigur Rós, Mogwai, Tortoise and electronic musicians Aphex Twin and Autechre have also received critical acclaim and developed massive followings for their uniquely textured soundscapes, taking music into new directions never before imagined. The larger audiences made available through globalisation and the Internet has created room for new forms of music to be heard and included in the contemporary music scene, increasing its artistic value.

Furthermore, while talent shows and social networking platforms are often accused of attracting mediocre talents more interested in enjoying their fifteen minutes of fame, they have nonetheless presented an unprecedented outlet and platform for talented artists to capture the public imagination, who would not have the resources themselves to launch their work on such a large scale. Indeed, sites like MySpace are now making a greater effort to reach out to underground artists and music labels so as to unearth more deserving talents, and while the outcome is at present uncertain, it appears to bode well for the artistic future of contemporary music. The artistic value of contemporary music cannot be written off when technology is creating the opportunity for many more talents to be unearthed and heard. The synergy of collaborations through online communities and musicians being influenced by the variety of music available and listening to one another also means that contemporary music is likely to become more mature and creative in the future.

In conclusion, while certain categories of contemporary music undoubtedly leave much to be desired, this does not apply to all its various forms, as evidenced by the many musicians who display consummate artistry and offer new perspectives through their work. Their creative expressions inspire us while reinforcing deep truths about the nature of life and the human condition, inciting us towards change where we are found wanting. Despite its lacks, mainstream pop nevertheless serves as a record of the prevailing moods and the reigning preoccupations of our social milieu, and perhaps therein lies its real value. While its inherent lack of artistic quality may not be an intended end in its creation, contemporary music may encourage alternate and better forms of musical expression, and given its history and the promise of a brighter future with the empowerment of technology, its artistic value can only be expected to increase. "



HOW FAR IS IT POSSIBLE TO ENSURE THAT ALL PRODUCERS OF FOOD AND GOODS ARE FAIRLY REWARDED?

Possible.

BY SHIAO-YIN KUIK

In 2002, as coffee bean prices plunged to historic lows and reports emerged about small-scale coffee farmers earning only a few miserable cents a day, fans of $7 designer lattes discovered that their innocent daily caffeine fix was cause for guilt. Since then, coffee bearing the Fair Trade label has become increasingly fashionable thanks to support from heavyweights like Marks & Spencer and Starbucks. The Fair Trade movement founded in the 1940s was a reaction against an exploitative economic reality many were too happy to leech off. Yet, this movement has been criticised: some academics feel that Fair Trade is nothing more than a well-intentioned fantasy created by idealistic NGOs that ultimately paper over market realities. However, Fair Trade fans continue to hope that by paying a premium for fair-trade organic products, we can really make a difference in alleviating the economic injustices faced by producers and farmers from Peru to Tanzania.

At first, fair trade may look impossible in a world that has long been built on vast, deep-set inequalities between nations. Rich nations already command an immense productivity advantage in technology, due to the tremendous wealth accumulated over previous generations through colonialism, slavery, and military interventions. With technological advantage on their side, producers in richer nations can churn out the same product more efficiently and sell the product more profitably than producers from poorer nations. The technologically inferior producer is forced to invest more labour time to create the same product but still charge the same price as that set by the most efficient producer and make much less profit. Also, once the technologically advantaged nation achieves productive advantage over the majority of other nations, it tends to exert its political influence in key organisations like the UN and the WTO to draw up rules of trade that favour their dominance. And thus, technologically advanced and politically dominant countries continue to undercut and out-compete less advantaged countries in the most strategic markets and political arenas of the world.

Also, if you subscribe to capitalism as the most sustainable economic model, you must accept that you cannot have fair trade that ensures equitable reward – for that we need to adopt the Communist command economy model. The "invisible hand of the market" is an amoral Darwinian force that squashes out suppliers who are unable to compete efficiently to meet demand. Like affirmative action policies and farm subsidies, by artificially introducing equal reward to the oppressed into the system, you can ironically end up introducing more inequality. The Adam Smith Institute believes that once you set a price floor for a good that is above the market

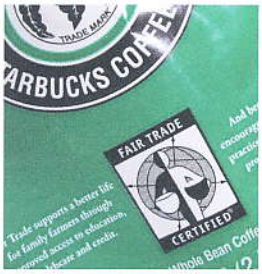
FROM THE BUSH TO THE BARISTA, COFFEE BEANS CHANGE HANDS AS MANY AS 150 TIMES AND THE PRICE JUMPS WITH EACH EXCHANGE: THE US$0.26/LB OF GREEN COFFEE IN ETHIOPIA WILL BE WORTH US$25/LB BY THE TIME IT BECOMES A CAN OF INSTANT VANILLA CAPPUCCINO IN BRITAIN.

price, you send false signals to people of a demand that does not naturally exist. Under this system, even if some producers benefit from more equitable rewards in the short term, in the long run, you may only end up encouraging unproductive activities, hurting long term growth – and thus hurting everybody's chance to be fairly rewarded. Existing producers will produce more, optimistic new producers enter the market and soon there is an excess supply which leads inevitably to lower prices in the non-Fair Trade market. Spare the market's rod and spoil the producer. If we let coffee farmers in Central America feel the bite of low coffee prices on their coffers, they learn to make better decisions in the long run. They would receive a clear signal to supply a higher-value product, diversify or exit the market rather than persist in their inefficiency, propped up artificially by Fair Trade activists.

Still, despite the Herculean task of making trade fair, it is possible as long as corporations and governments can be convinced of the truth that fair trade makes business and moral sense. More corporations are realising that everybody loves a hero – especially today's finicky well-educated, well-heeled consumer who needs to be assuaged of their First World guilt. When GAP's shares fell after media exposés about the poor working conditions and paltry financial renumeration of their factory workers, GAP worked with Oxfam and the Ethical Trade Initiative to adopt fairer labour practices. This ensured that workers are paid a living wage (a minimum hourly rate sufficient to attain a specified quality of life) and are thus more fairly rewarded in terms of better hours of work, healthcare and worker rights. GAP believes that such social responsibility will pay off in the long term in terms of better quality output and better brand loyalty.

Small local producers remain at the bottom of the economic totem pole. They may not receive fair remuneration relative to those higher on the supply chain but we can still ensure that they receive a fairer remuneration relative to what they had before. Take the quandary faced by the 25 million coffee farmers in the developing world. From the bush to the barista, coffee beans change hands as many as 150 times and the price jumps with each exchange: the US$0.26/lb of green coffee in Ethiopia will be worth US$25/lb by the time it becomes a can of instant Vanilla cappuccino in Britain. By leaving the processing, transport, export, roasting and marketing of the green coffee beans in the hands of others, the unwitting farmer gets paid only 1-3% of the market value of your pricey latte compared to the 90% that goes to retailers, roasters and importers and 7% that goes to shippers, exporters and local traders. Without capital, insight into how global markets work and negotiating power to steer the market to their benefit, most small producers cannot claim a proportional share of the world market price for themselves. But with transnational corporations like Starbucks negotiating directly with producers or NGOs like Ten Thousand Villages providing a platform for producers to bypass middlemen to sell directly to wealthy consumers, small producers can get a fairer cut of the price tag. The Body Shop pioneered fairer trade in the cosmetics industry through their Community Trade purchasing programme. By buying directly from native producers, The Body Shop has overcome immense economic barriers to entry faced by Ghanian shea nut butter makers, Namibian marula oil pressers and Honduras loofah makers that would have otherwise kept them in the same position faced by coffee farmers.

Truthfully, the present-day status quo renders the noble ideal of fair trade impossible. But so long as socially responsible corporations and NGOs keep showing the world it is still possible and practical to turn a profit without exploitation, we can maintain fairer trade – at least – as a realistic goal. And ordinary consumers, major transnational corporations, NGOs and intergovernmental agencies need not and should never give up on trying to make sure everyone has an opportunity at a better life. "



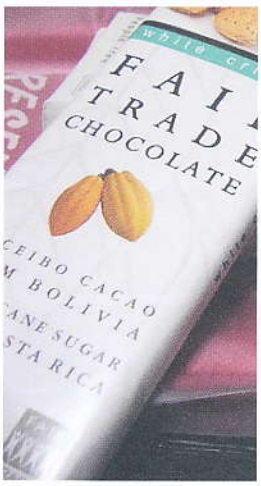


IMAGE CREDITS

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Impossible.

BY LEE NIAN TJIE

As globalisation links international markets, products from remote places can now find potential customers in city dwellers all around the world. Large corporations in developed countries can also lower their operating costs by tapping on cheaper labour abroad. Ideally, such expansion of markets promises greater benefits for everyone, from large international companies to the factory worker and farmers from less developed countries. However, without intervention, small-time farmers and factory workers are often at the mercy of their powerful new employers, who take a lion's share of the revenues and profits leaving the far-removed employees in financial circumstances that are not very different from before. Reports of child labour and exploitation of workers in developing countries have exacerbated this situation, sparking off various activist movements that attempt to prevent such inhumane practices and ensure that profits are shared in a reasonable manner. Legislators have also made efforts to create laws to raise industrial standards and safeguard the interests of their working populations. Indeed these efforts have begun to alleviate the plight of many producers from developing countries. However, the extent of success is subject to numerous factors, making the total eradication of exploitation a tantalisingly unreachable dream.

Most broadly, labour laws dictate the minimum working conditions and remuneration of workers to ensure that some money is channelled towards improving their well-being. However, such legislation can only be effective if it is enforced consistently. It is not surprising that in many developing economies around the world, factories and farms in remote places are operating way below the required legal standards. Authorities in China last year discovered numerous kilns in remote areas which were manned by chained workers who had been kidnapped, enslaved and subjected to abuse since childhood. For these individuals, the labour laws written for their protection had failed as the abuses went undetected for years. Even in developed countries, enforcement of legislation depends on companies making truthful declarations of their remuneration packages and on occasional on-site checks. In the United Kingdom and Singapore, dodgy paperwork is not uncommon as firms try illegally to reduce operating costs. Human smuggling and illegal labour continue to pose severe challenges to law enforcement agencies since there continue to be many who are willing to work for less than the legal minimum and many unscrupulous middle men and job agencies who exploit such people. Using legislative instruments to curb unfair treatment of workers is only as effective as our ability to enforce these laws and sadly many countries do not have the resources and systems to back up their laws.

IMAGE CREDITS *RILHAS project in Vargem Grande 12, jerryzurek, Flickr Creative Commons*

Efforts at educating and empowering workers have also been largely unsuccessful. With basic education not guaranteed and crushing living conditions still in place in many areas in developing countries and some parts of developed countries, abuses are rampant and unlikely to end. When it is a matter of survival and the prospect of being out of a job is far more threatening than being in a job that pays a pittance or has poor working conditions, workers have little choice especially since competition for jobs is stiff. Even where labour activists have taken up the cause and social entrepreneurs have sought to create opportunities for micro-financing projects and handicrafts cooperatives or farms owned and run by the locals themselves, these have had limited impact and uneven results, usually operating on a small scale and affecting only pocket or select communities. Farmer markets in developed countries are an example of how producers of food have managed to bypass middlemen and establish a presence that allows them to counteract the challenge posed by big companies that can offer lower prices and supply supermarkets and restaurants in large quantities. However, such initiatives are unsustainable in poorer countries and do not solve the issues of workers employed by the corporations. Until the impact of poverty is dealt with more effectively and people are educated and organised to demand fair treatment from employers and corporations, not all producers of food and goods will be fairly rewarded.

THE ONLY RELIABLE CAVEAT WE CAN OFFER IN THIS GLOOMY SITUATION IS THE HOPE THAT THE PROLIFERATION OF TECHNOLOGY WILL INDEED CHANGE ALL THIS.

Granted, international interest groups have tried to encourage greater wealth sharing using a market-based approach through the identification and labelling of products which meet the standards of equitable profit sharing. By shifting the burden of ensuring fair treatment of producers to consumers who vote with their spending, such programmes hope to harness market forces to produce the greatest motivation for companies to comply with labour standards – profit. Fair Trade is one such system that certify and label products which conform to acceptable standards, including wages and working conditions. While such products are more costly than others, there has been some success in educating consumers in developed countries and speaking to their consciences. Chains like Starbucks and The Body Shop have successfully made Fair Trade part of their branding. One concern is that labelling is increasingly common in the food industries but not in others like textiles. Efforts are underway to expand the information available on all sorts of products and to make it accessible through the Internet and mobile phones, but at the moment, consumer ignorance and the limited market presence of Fair Trade products will continue to undermine the effectiveness and sustainability of the movement to reward such producers fairly.

The only reliable caveat we can offer in this gloomy situation is the hope that the proliferation of technology will indeed change all this. With technology, workers can become whistleblowers and the means of enforcement to improve the effectiveness of the law. Interestingly enough, there have been emerging cases of how technology has aided in tighter surveillance in developing economies. With the use of small mobile camera technology, bought cheaply in second-hand markets, workers in Honduras have been recording their working conditions and slipping footage out to NGO activists keen on alleviating their situation. This evidence has allowed legislators to prosecute companies and bring tangible improvements in wage and working conditions of textile and agricultural industries in Honduras. At present this is still an exceptional trend, but we can hope that more of this kind of grass-root activism will emerge as surveillance technology becomes available to more and more people.

In conclusion, while a combination of government and non-government measures and movements will improve the treatment of producers, it has so far been difficult to ensure that all workers and farmers are rewarded fairly for their labour. It is a sad fact that many will continue to work under unsafe and abusive working conditions for a mere pittance until we find practical and resolute ways to bring change. The truth is that we will always face injustice in this world as long as people continue to operate from attitudes that are self-serving and therefore detrimental to the healthy growth of fair and just industries. What we need to be aware of is that at each juncture of the production line are people who are complicit in the unfair treatment of the exploited: the worker's own silence, the inaction of the community, the uncaring consumer, all exacerbate this situation. Technology that brings awareness for consumers to make more informed choices, introduce much needed surveillance, and open up new markets for dislocated producers, can contribute to justice. So till the day these new options become the standard, we would need to conclude that fair treatment for all producers is just not something we can guarantee.

TO WHAT EXTENT IS DESIGN IMPORTANT IN YOUR SOCIETY?

IMAGE CREDITS *art exhibit at the 2008 Singapore Biennale, yeowatzup, Flickr Creative Commons*

Important.

IMAGE CREDITS

(this page) Esplanade, Eustaquio Santimano, Flickr Creative Commons
(next page) merlion, yummiecookies, Flickr Creative Commons

BY ELIZABETH MESENAS

Many Singaporeans would not consider design something fundamental to the well-being of our society. Indeed, design – the idea of a deliberate form and structure – may be anathema to those who wish Singaporeans could break out of their fixed, rigid ways of thinking to become more creative and imaginative. However, upon careful analysis, we may come to realise that design is indeed important to Singapore's society. Urban and resource planning is a must if we want to make maximum use of our scarce resources. Much as critics slight our ways as being strait-jacketed, the careful, deliberate designing of our social and economic policies allows our government leaders to chart with greater certainty our country's long-term success. In addition, if we define design also to be the features of a building or an edifice or a picture, design becomes ever more important in helping us erect structures that can serve as a visible reminder of our cultural heritage. Even for businesses, design is also important in helping the consumer associate the business with certain values, thereby generating loyalty to the brand. All in all, design plays a very important role in Singapore's today.

One of the strongest arguments for why design in the form of deliberate planning is fundamental to Singapore lies in the fact that we have limited land and limited resources. If we accept the Darwinian principle that it is inevitable for living beings to compete and even fight over resources to ensure their survival, then it is imperative that we manage these scarce resources well so that we ensure our own survival and the smooth functioning of our society. All cities around the world engage in some form of urban planning to reduce traffic congestion, slums and other physical and social problems that would make city living nightmarish. Singapore is no different. Indeed, with a burgeoning population – we are already at 4.6 million – jostling for space on a limited land area no larger than 580 square kilometres, meticulous urban design in the form of road and rail networks and strategic allocation of land use is crucial if we want to optimise our living space. More importantly, managing key resources like water resources, from creating catchment areas for rainwater to processing drinking water from sewage water to possible desalination of sea water, ensures our continued survival and prosperity.

Moreover, design in the form of economic and social engineering is also critical for Singapore to maintain its economic competitiveness and social cohesion. Critics often lament the intrusion of national policies into our private lives – be they encouraging families to have more babies or mandating the racial quota in public housing. However, what these critics fail to realise is that personal decisions regarding one's marriage and family or where one lives have an impact on the overall health of the nation. Take how we deliberately structure and design the way our population grows for example. Singapore already suffers from a low birth rate of 1.08 babies per couple - well below the fertility replacement rate of 2.1 babies per couple. If Singaporeans are not nudged towards the 'family way' with monetary incentives and pro-family policies, Singapore will indeed suffer from a lack of economically productive persons. In the long term, this translates to lower economic competitiveness. On the social front, Singapore's social cohesiveness depends largely on our leaders' careful social planning. Critics may frown on the racial quota in our public housing policy, but it is precisely such

ADDITIONALLY, ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN IS IMPORTANT IN THE CREATION OF LANDMARKS THAT CAN SERVE AS POWERFUL VISUAL SYMBOLS OF OUR CULTURAL HERITAGE. WE HUMANS ARE SENSORY CREATURES, AND FIND IT EASIER TO FORM A STRONG EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT TO NEBULOUS CONCEPTS LIKE 'CULTURE' AND 'IDENTITY' IF WE CAN SEE, HEAR, TASTE, TOUCH OR FEEL THEIR MANIFESTATIONS.

conscious decisions that provide opportunities for interaction and integration among the races. Left on our own, we tend to make decisions based on what benefits us, rather than the overall good for society, therein overlooking what could be a much more beneficial design for our society. Seen in this light, deliberate social and economic planning is fundamental to the growth of our society.

On a less contentious note, design has also opened up for Singapore new areas of growth. Economists who have long looked to our manufacturing and construction industries as engines of growth are beginning to realise the potential of design as an industry that can be developed as a new economic niche. We are making forays into the world of IT and animation, multi-media design and the like, due to Singapore being one of the most wired places in the world, and our youth's passion for anime and expertise in gaming. . That Lucasfilm Animation, a high-profile player in this industry, has chosen to locate its studio here attests to the increasing talent pool of designers that can be found in Singapore. Even for ordinary businesses in Singapore, a new focus on design has enabled run-of-the-mill companies and retail shops to update their image in response to the increasingly sophisticated tastes of well-travelled Singaporeans. Even typical neighbourhood eateries, like cafes or bakeries in suburban housing estates have contracted designers to change their image, with designer frontages to boot. In these ways, design has become a key element of our economic activity and development, bringing a new sense of vibrancy and progress.

Additionally, architectural design is important in the creation of landmarks that can serve as powerful visual symbols of our cultural heritage. We humans are sensory creatures, and find it easier to form a strong emotional attachment to nebulous concepts like 'culture' and 'identity' if we can see, hear, taste, touch or feel their manifestations. Hence, our temples, mosques, and churches with their distinctive architecture, are important design structures that we identify with Hindu, Muslim and Christian religious cultures, reminding us of Singapore's multi-religious groundings. Orchard Road is witnessing its first makeover in years, with new buildings built and new facades put on old buildings to update and modernise our main shopping avenue. This however has led to criticism over the modern "monstrosities" and bland glass and metal structures that have emerged lacking real meaning or resonance with Singaporeans. Seen in this light, there is a need for architectural design to help Singaporeans create iconic landmarks that symbolise our Singapore identity. True, we have our Merlion and our Esplanade – the 'Durian' as we affectionately call it – but they fail to measure up to the stature of the Statue of Liberty, or London Bridge or Sydney's Opera House. As our world gets ever more globalised and cosmopolitan, it is important that design be used to this end to help Singapore mark its distinctive multi-cultural heritage with buildings or monuments that we can truly call our own.

All in all, design plays an important role in Singapore society. It helps urban planners maximise resources to make the most of our living spaces; it helps our government create policies that enhance our economic competitiveness and social cohesion; it serves as a new engine of growth, and holds the key to a deeper appreciation of and identification with our unique historical and cultural background. Far from critics' fears that too much emphasis on structured design can impede creativity and innovation, the process of design actually requires much imagination and creativity while coupling it with discipline and care so as to bring about the best results for our society. "

Not that important.

BY SHIAO-YIN KUIK

The Japanese believe that in order to create a high quality product or service, you need to create it with two types of quality in mind: the first is *atarimae hinshitsu* ("taken-for-granted quality") where things work as they are intended; the second is *miryokuteki hinshitsu* ("enchanting quality") where things possess an aesthetic quality that appeals to a person's sense of beauty. In other words, the Japanese will not be satisfied with creating the perfect ball of tasty mochi, they are compelled to tint them in matching pastels, and embed them with military precision in a box lined with hand-painted tissue. This pursuit of an elegant functionality from start to finish sets apart Japanese products from Singaporean ones and sets the benchmark of how far our Little Red Dot has to go in the design stakes. Taking design to mean more than just the pursuit of prettiness, it is inarguable that design has always been important to Singapore's future. But we have a long way to go in overcoming our cultural peculiarities that conspire to make design insignificant in our eyes.

Market leaders in Singapore are adopting a more design-focused strategy to differentiate their products, create brand loyalty and gain international presence. Toy maker STIKFAS, traditional chinese medicine corporation Eu Yan Seng, massage equipment maker Osim create vastly different products but share the same approach of melding functionality with compelling aesthetics. Forward-looking Singaporean companies know that the competitive edge for our products and services can no longer be centred purely on cost efficiency and functionality for these are areas that our neighbours China, India and Vietnam are clearly able to match (or trounce) us at. It was a lesson local company Creative Technologies learnt painfully: though they pioneered the MP3 player, they lost their first mover advantage and thus the lucrative global market to Apple due to their failure to understand how important design was to consumers. From start to end, Apple designed the iPod for maximum desirability. The iPod was a piece of great technology that happened to be sleek, minimalist, paired with stylish advertisements and the hottest music of the moment. Though Creative's Zen MP3 player is logically the superior piece of technology, its clunky (ironically un-Zen) design failed to appeal to consumer's emotions. Moreover, without a core design strategy, the Zen was marketed in a haphazard and tacky manner: not only were the Zens marketed under a bizarre array of names (Zen Jukebox, Zen Touch, Zen Nano, MuVo Slim etc), its special edition was signed by Creative's CEO Sim Wong Hoo to rival the special edition iPod that was endorsed by U2! The Zen's failure to outsell the iPod is not just a loss for Creative, it is a warning to Singapore not to keep betting on functionality alone for its success.

At the upper echelons of government, plans have been made to steer Singapore towards more design-minded thinking and a more design-sensitive society to ensure our city's survival in the new millennium. Forced to move away from old engines of economic growth and urban development, the government is hedging its bets on Singapore's ability to position itself as a leading centre of design in the world. In 2003, The Design Singapore Council was set up by the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts to promote design-oriented thinking in business and education. This is different from encouraging artistic talent which focuses on encouraging you to create wherever your whims lead you. Design thinking is always aware of the end user: "Can people afford this?", "Is it accessible?", "Is it useful?". Good design is about creating a solution sensitive to practical needs, people's desires and big picture aspirations. In this way, good design (as opposed to good art) is about definitely improving people's lives in big and small ways. In a small and resource-limited country like Singapore, design-minded thinking has always been important and the very reason why we have leapt from Third World to First in three decades. Our transport system, our public housing projects, our controlled "clean and green" urban development, our water management system may not look flashy but they reflect principles of successful design thinking and are inspiring to developing countries looking for solutions.

A CULTURE THAT IS FIXATED ON GRUMBLING, THAT PRIZES STABILITY AND PREDICTABILITY OVER CHANGE AND THAT IS ALWAYS AWAITING ORDERS WILL NEVER BECOME A DESIGN-FORWARD CULTURE.

However, it has been difficult for visionary government officials and key market leaders to convince the ground (and middle management) that design matters. Essentially, we are battling with decades of inbred pragmatism from the stubborn Singapore soul. Singaporeans have been weaned on years of belief that pragmatism is the holiest virtue that holds up this economic miracle that we call home. All our decision-making centres around the need to achieve a tangible set of results and to maximise utility. While pragmatism in itself is not a terrible thing, we have elevated it into a negative art-form. Every Singaporean knows what it looks like in its everyday form: it is the student who is more concerned about memorising a series of formulae without any care for the why or how the formulae came about because "it is not tested"; it is the office worker who is content to do what is "good enough" and is not interested in pushing a project beyond what's necessary; it is the civil servant who will not grant funding to an unusual enterprise because it does not perform within a rigid set of KPIs (Key Performance Indicators). Prizing results at the expense of risky imagination and curiosity has not and will not encourage design-mindfulness in Singapore.

Our consumerist and money-minded approach to life also means that design is not as important in our eyes as brands are. Singaporeans tend to overvalue the power of a big name and undervalue the power of a brave idea - it explains why although Singaporeans like wearing branded clothes, they are not known for their fashion savvy. Nowhere is this more obvious than in our cityscape. Most of the major landmarks in Singapore are not designed by Singaporeans for Singaporeans but are designs tacked on our land by foreign architects. Though not said explicitly, many clients and developers still believe paying for a foreign, "branded" architect is all we need to create a quality building. This has not panned out in reality: for out of all the big-name, "branded" designs we purchased, not one is counted as a noteworthy architectural masterpiece. This may not be because the foreign architects were incompetent. It could be because clients and developers were ultimately more interested in hiring them for their name rather than for their ingenuity. Impositions of budget and loss of nerve could have constrained Briton Michael Wilford's creativity and caused his Esplanade to end up patchy as opposed to powerful.

Though pragmatic Singaporeans are toeing the government's line to pay attention to design because it makes practical economic sense to do so, this lack of heart and independent thinking does not bode well for the quality of our design thinking. We may be pursuing design because we are convinced by the state's endorsement of the link between creative cities and commercial success. We may be depending on the government's million-dollar investments in new design schools, museums, design education programmes and arts festivals to help us become a design-forward city. But great design is not a product of great hardware alone – it is software as well. Great design comes out from a culture that is thoughtful and critical about its surroundings, sensitive about needs and driven to solve problems independently. A culture that is fixated on grumbling, that prizes stability and predictability over change and that is always awaiting orders will never become a design-forward culture.

In the end, Singapore can conscientiously adopt the glamourous trappings of design-mindful cities all it wants, but we may still end up being just good imitators rather than true innovators. Is design important in Singapore? It is and always has been to a visionary minority that hopes to convert more to the cause. For now, most of us remain blissfully unconverted, happy to play it safe and bland and desiring others to solve our problems for us. Why aspire to *miryokuteki hinshitsu* when *atarimae hinshitsu* has been good enough?

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

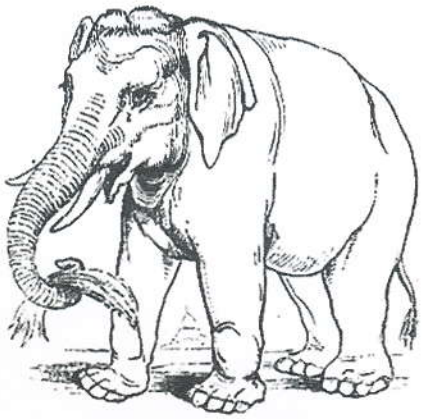
EVERYBODY EVALUATES. WHEN WE ARE JUDGING PEOPLE, BUILDING TEAMS, CHOOSING CARS, VOTING. IN EVERY CHOICE WE MAKE AS INDIVIDUALS, WE ARE ALWAYS EVALUATING IN ORDER TO REACH OUR CONCLUSION. SO WHY IS IT THAT WHEN IT COMES DOWN TO ESSAY WRITING, THESE NATURAL EVALUATION SKILLS WE POSSESS LARGELY DISAPPEAR?

BY TONG YEE

In my whole career as a teacher, nothing has struck me more deeply as what I am about to share in this article. This revelation is very simple to understand but its impact in the understanding and teaching of GP is, I believe, profound. Teachers may have used similar concepts in their classrooms but the existence of multiple terminologies for one very simple unifying idea has made this confusing for students and contradictory teaching practices have made it less appreciated or understood. What I am about to introduce is more than an insight into skills; it is an overarching understanding on how we learn, how we assess and why we argue.

It struck me that every single GP question that has been set since the onset of this century has asked us to assign or determine the value of the subject matter given. Whether it is a question of relevancy, importance, practicality, promotion or utility – the possibilities can go on and on – it can all be pinned down to thinking about whether the subject matter has value or not. And the successful execution of that assessment/argument depends mainly on how we have mastered the understanding of context. The further intricacies of this revelation would be something that I would be keen on exploring more deeply in future articles or workshops but for now I will share the most salient insights.

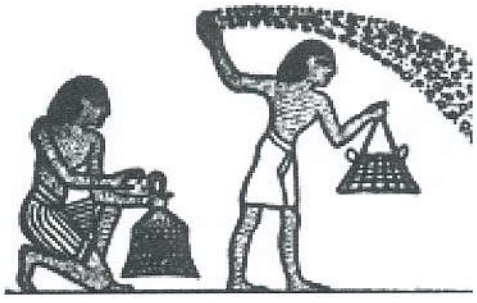
IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO ASSIGN VALUE WITHOUT FIRST ASSIGNING CONTEXT.

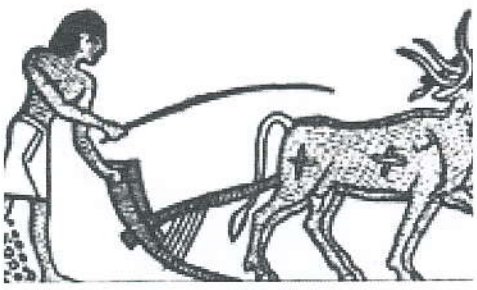


Let us start by thinking of a big elephant. I will then ask you to consider whether the elephant's size is an advantage or disadvantage. If your answer is immediate, then I would say that you are unconsciously adding context to your assessment to reach that conclusion. If you find that you cannot reach a conclusion then simply imagine this elephant in any given context and you will be able to make an assessment. The elephant's size, for example, is a disadvantage if it is trapped in a small room that restricts its movement. For those that said its size was an advantage, they probably pictured the elephant either working for rural communities or wild in its natural habitat. And finally, his size is irrelevant in a modern machine-driven environment.

It is impossible to assign value to anything without first assigning context. And the sooner we start being aware of this, the more we will realise that writing good points that are credited by the marker require us not only to talk about the subject matter and give an example but to also frame our assessment in a sensible context so that the marker is able to fully agree with what we say. The point is to be aware when we **ADOPT A CONTEXT AND ADD CLAUSES TO INDICATE THAT THIS IS HOW WE ARE REACHING OUR CONCLUSION,** and more importantly to broaden or shift our context if we find that we have adopted a context that is not relevant to the question.

WE CAN ONLY BE ACCURATE IN WHAT WE SAY WHEN WE FIRST ASSIGN CONTEXT.





The exact same principle therefore applies to all topics in GP. Let us take a very commonly accepted belief that hard work pays off. I would suggest to you that if you simply wrote that idea in your essay, many markers would find it hard to be completely convinced by what it is you say. This is because your statement lacks context. Saying alternatively, that in early agrarian societies, hard work paid off, gives a much better avenue by which a marker can assess the validity of what you say. Once you are aware of context you will naturally start to add qualifiers like how the weather or soil composition would indeed have affected the farmer's result but hard work was an essential component that pays off in a harvest.

That same statement when brought forward into today's very complicated economy becomes harder to accept. Many people, especially those from an older generation, still believe that hard work pays off because they still live in their old context. Since accuracy in what we say depends so much on context, then our assessment will change if the question asks us to determine the value of hard work in the modern world. Framed in the intricacy of the modern economy, it seems naive to say that hard work alone will pay off. Certainly it remains a component of success but many more determinant factors are now involved.

Being accurate in our assessment of any subject matter, be it science and technology or media or the success of our fight to save the environment, depends on us applying it to a context. So the next question we need to ask ourselves is what context we should apply this to.

ARGUMENT CAN THEREFORE BE BUILT FROM CONTEXT.

Certainly we are aware of the fact that GP questions will sometimes assign a context for us. If we know what we are looking for, these contexts are indeed very easy to find and they are necessary if one is to do well. So to help you understand better, I will place all contexts into two broad categories: contexts of time and contexts of space.

CONTEXTS OF SPACE involve the familiar use of terms like 'the world today', 'the modern world', 'poorer countries', 'your society', 'Singapore' etc. They require you to frame your thoughts in a particular space and therein make assessments of the subject matter within this mental frame. Going out of this frame makes the point invalid and irrelevant to the question. Asking whether the supernatural can be sustained in today's modern world, for example, requires us to think as much about the modern world as we do about the supernatural and discuss the relationship between the two.

CONTEXTS OF TIME can tend to be a bit more difficult to spot. Questions which feature keywords like, 'still', 'no longer', 'ever', etc. all require us to consider the context of the past, present and at times future, and may demand that we consistently compare our understanding of the subject matter between the past and present, or future, contexts.

What is interesting to note however is that stipulated contexts of space can also be seen over time, and stipulated contexts of time can be seen over space. For example, if a question stipulates that we adopt a Singapore context, we can bring in points into present day Singapore, her past as well as future. A question defining the context to be 'Singapore today' would however offer far less options.

QUESTIONS WITH NO STIPULATED CONTEXTS are however open for you to consider both broad contexts of time and space thereby allowing you to generate several points simply by moving the subject matter through different contexts. I was amazed in a recent class when I witnessed students form an argument for an essay on whether the majority is always right, simply by applying context. Their broad argument consisted of an opening point establishing a historical background of 'the majority' and explaining how past monarchies affected notions of the majority. They then transitioned into the modern day context, giving three points why the majority thrives in the modern world. They also conceded that not all parts of today's world (context of space) extended this privilege and then began to discuss current day theocracies or dictatorships. They ended their argument by expressing hope that current day authoritarian exceptions would come to an end in the future given the trends of political development today. Thoughout the essay, each paragraph also determined whether and why the majority may be right/wrong.

The only qualification I would add to this is that although this attempt at the essay provided scope, it had little depth. The stronger students explored the concept of the majority and were able to offer key reasons why the majority was right, and then went on to evaluate whether this was always the case by applying their reasons to stipulated contexts. However, weaker students had no idea why the majority was right, and simply ran their points via context. This resulted in them scoring worse than the previous group.

UNDERSTANDING OF CONTEXT MUST BE MATURE TO GAIN FURTHER ACCURACY.

So it becomes clear that understanding of context is crucial for us to execute a successful evaluation. We also need to recognise that a mature understanding of context helps us to be sharper and more accurate in what we say. Too often our understanding of context is based on some vague notion that we have gained from **TELEVISION** or what brief encounters we have in **LECTURES**. People who have **TRAVELLED, OR EVEN RESIDED IN OTHER COUNTRIES**, certainly understand foreign contexts best. The next best alternative is gaining insights from the **INTERNET** OR **BOOKS**.

Poverty for instance, is gravely misunderstood, as most people immediately picture the abject poverty of Ethiopia or Somalia. Poverty can in fact be better understood by also examining countries like Columbia or Laos and even developed nations. Investing time in gaining a broader mental picture of any given context, be it the past, the modern world, poverty, theocracy or the future is wise and will pay good returns, in both GP as well as in life.

It would be wise to **INVEST TIME** to do this for yourself for it marks maturity of thought. The thing with children is that they operate from a very small context. We understand that children merely comprehend and assess things from their immediate surroundings. They do not have the capacity to extend their understanding to other contexts and therefore see broader consequences. The sad thing is that some adults still operate that way. If any student wants to stop being accused of being immature or shallow, then they need to invest time in understanding broader contexts, appreciating how each context integrates or clashes with one another and thus extends their understanding. And if your heart so chooses, bring that desire to learn into the **CONTEXT OF ETERNITY**...suddenly what you may think is very important will suddenly become very trivial, and other things, like family, will start to matter more than anything else.

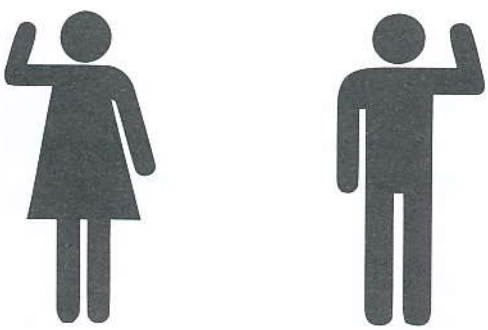
ARGUMENTS BUILT ON CONTEXT DO HOWEVER SUGGEST THAT EVERYTHING IS RELATIVE.

I do have to run one very important caveat though. One of the most troubling things that I have discovered is how our current teaching of GP has in fact built a foundation for relativity. This manifests itself in the very common instruction that absolutes are never true (notice the irony), and that the best way to argue successfully against an absolute is to refute it and show scenarios that demonstrate how the statement is false. If we are indeed teaching students to always refute absolute statements, then what of the values that we teach them from young to cherish and never let go of? Certainly value systems are not relative but are in themselves absolute truths. I am not talking about cultural beliefs which values can differ from context to context but to universal truths that we have all come to accept. Our reverence for love, truth, purity and faith for example have all been undermined by relativism, no doubt exacerbated by how students are taught in school.

The interesting thing is that **VALUES REMAIN RELATIVE AS LONG AS WE VIEW THEM FROM SMALLER PERSPECTIVES OR CONTEXTS.** However, the wider we extend our contexts, the more self-interest will fall away and the more relevant values suddenly become. I look around in my life and I notice that the most effectual people I know operate from both realms. They are people wise enough to set their rules for life in a broad and eternal context. They find rules which are true for all contexts and have invested time in discovering universal truths that have proven to be consistent in all situations. Yet, these people also have the empathy to understand where other people are coming from and have the amazing ability to help people resolve the struggles others might face within their smaller, more parochial contexts – not by judging, but by inviting them to join them in a higher context of understanding.

SO AS FAR AS GP IS CONCERNED, WHAT IS EVALUATION?

THE MOST COMMON PROBLEM WE SEE IN PARAGRAPH DEVELOPMENT IN THE WRITING OF GP ESSAYS IS HOW STUDENTS USE AN EXAMPLE OR AN EXTENSIVE EXPLANATION TO DRIVE THEIR POINT. Using an example to drive a point is certainly terrible, but what is less obvious to students is that driving a point via a lengthy explanation of the subject matter is only slightly better. In either scenario, the student is not offering real evaluation in their paragraphs, simply because they have not applied a context to begin with for their assessment. Evaluation and argumentation are crucial skills that need to be displayed in all good essays.



Evaluation is not at all a difficult skill. Everybody does it at all times. When we are judging people, building teams, choosing cars, voting...in every choice we make as individuals, we are always evaluating in order to reach our conclusion. The amazing thing is that once it comes down to essay writing, these natural evaluation skills we possess largely disappear. We may, in a GP essay, be evaluating larger and more important issues but essentially the skills are the same, even though the content may be more far removed from our everyday lives.

So the bottom line is to understand that e(value)ation simply requires us to assign a value to the topic that we have been asked to assess. And reaching the conclusion to whether it is positive or negative requires us to apply the subject matter into several relevant contexts to draw out perspectives and ultimately reach a suitable fair conclusion in our ultimate evaluation.

SAMPLE PARAGRAPHS

I have included three sample paragraphs below that demonstrate how context is used to introduce evaluation.

Is family relevant in today's society?

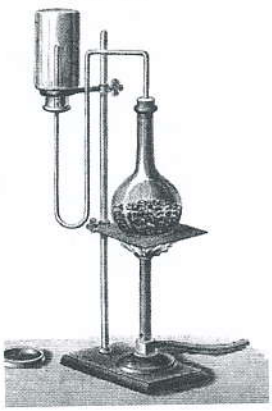
One of the functions of the family is to ensure that the existing power hierarchy is maintained such that younger members of the family unit mature into citizens who understand and respect the means by which we maintain and build power. Whether we traditionally associate power with males or seniority, the adequate inculcation of these values help society continue to stably operate the way it always has. The modern world has however greatly challenged the ability of the family to execute this function properly. Burgeoning political globalisation has given young people in any state greater degrees of freedom and experiences of egalitarianism, contrary to traditional notions of power that would otherwise have been taught to them. Families in Myanmar for instance have found it difficult to quell the apparent political rebellion of the younger generation despite their vain attempts at instilling cultures of subservience to political authority. The family certainly is still needed to impart established notions of power to the young but they are going to find that what they try to teach is increasingly irrelevant in a world that changes its power structures so dynamically.

Is family relevant in today's society?

Perhaps one of the most important functions for families is the transfer of values from one generation to another. Traditionally, core values as defined by key orthodox religions were believed to form the backbone of civilised society and adherence to these values was expected of all, despite one's class, age or gender. The modern world has however undermined the ability of families to convince younger generations that these values are indeed relevant, much less beneficial to their lives. Increased liberalisation in most modern societies has introduced a world where many previously revered norms are now merely dismissed as one's relative perspective. Traditional Jewish families and their long held values are perfect testament to this change as we see many Jewish youth marry outside of their faith, casually partake of hedonistic pleasures and fully embrace modern commercial values. The family remains one of the last key bastions of moral values and it is sadly a crumbling wreck in this instance.

Is science necessarily the solution to world problems?

FIG. 10.



Science is considered by many to be the main means to address the abject poverty that we see in the world today. The effective introduction of scientific strategies and technologies can increase the productivity levels of most agricultural communities and also help integrate backwater economies into global financial markets. This seemingly fail-proof solution is not however necessarily effective in all situations and can in some cases, even be a hindrance to development. Consider how the world's staunch theocratic states would throw a large spanner into the works as they hold the perception that the inclusion of any such empowering technologies would undermine the authority of God in their lives, or more insidiously, the authority of their own fundamentalist regime. Iran has vastly controlled and even limited the use of new communicative technologies for these very reasons. Despite the fact that these technologies could well propel many of their poor, but well-educated, people out of poverty, Iran denies them access nonetheless. We would very much like to think that science can be a solution to the problem of poverty but its effectiveness sadly depends on its receptiveness in the first place.

CONCLUSION

Even now as I write this, I am already receiving feedback from students and teachers on how liberating it is to understand GP from this point of view. I hope I have expressed the core ideas of this insight simply enough for everyone to understand but also deep enough for people to appreciate how useful this insight is for weaker and stronger students alike. So till next time...keep demanding a broader perspective. "

10 WAYS TO EXPAND YOUR PERSPECTIVES

BY SHIAO-YIN KUIK

1. READ EVERYTHING

Comics, newspapers, books, the backs of cereal boxes, advertisements - there is a nugget of information everywhere if you look hard enough.

2. ANALYSE HOLLYWOOD

Ask yourself big questions after each movie: What was the movie's focus? What was good about the show? What could have been better? What was real/unreal?

3. REST+RELAX

You need time to think. Give yourself a day in the week where all you do is rest and pursue the things you enjoy.

4. TAP THE INTERNET

Follow the trail of hyperlinks. Ask friends for their favourite portals of information that collect great links.

5. TRAVEL MORE

Whenever the opportunity comes, visit another country. Look at how other people live: what makes them happy, what works and does not work for them.

6. MAKE NEW FRIENDS

We usually stick to people who think like us and never challenge our perspectives. Be open to people who disagree with you - for good reason.

7. MIX WITH OLDER FOLK

Do not think that old people are boring. You will be surprised with their experiences and insights. Ask them the top ten questions that puzzle you about life.

8. PLAY WITH KIDS

Get an occasional reminder that life is not always about angst but joyful curiosity in the small and simple things.

9. VISIT EXHIBITS

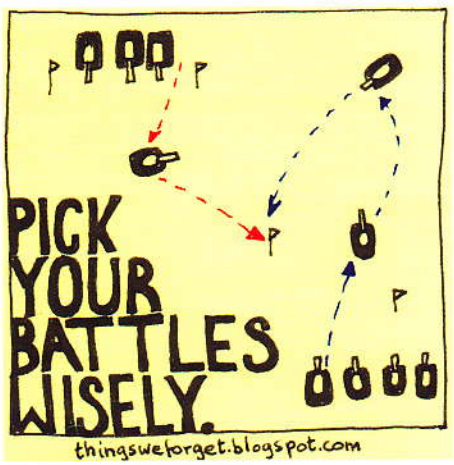
Your museums spend a lot of time and money putting them together. Go discover what the fuss is about.

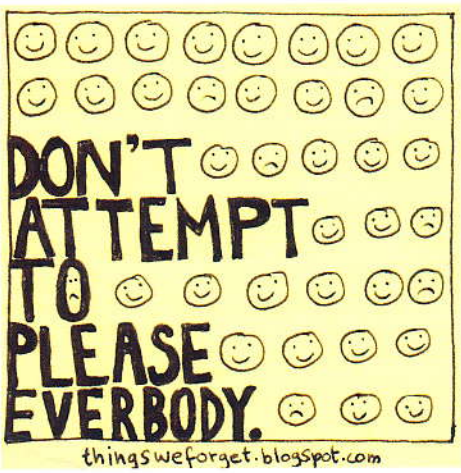
10. LOOK FOR GOD

Everybody worships something whether they admit it or not. Find believers of various religions and ask them about their faith and their answers to life's tough times.

THE WAY WE LIVE NOW #10

What simple truths do we already know?





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THOUGHT
demand a broader perspective

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