

Singapore Diary

(July 1990)

Some impressions and musings from a long ago island visit:

The first hint of the place is not long in coming. The disembarkation card handed to us in the plane is quite blunt about it: DEATH TO DRUG DEALERS IN SINGAPORE (although not to all drug *users*; the possession of more than 15 grams of heroin carries a mandatory death sentence; lesser drugs such as ganja and marijuana carry prison terms and fines). Changi airport is a spectacular creation, and a stark contrast with the Tokyo and Hong Kong airports. By many measures, this is one of the best airports in the world—large, spacious, aesthetic, hummingly efficient. The Government boasts that it can process incoming passengers in 15 seconds or less, returning Singaporeans in less than that. Given that they had taken ten days to give me a visa, I was skeptical; however, they were true to their word.

The taxi into town is cool and clean. It is a COMFORT cab—Caring, Observant, Mindful, Friendly, Obliging, Responsible, Tactful. The sign says, "I am the best person for the job and no one else can provide this service better because I am a Comfort cabby." The driver is clearly a civic booster, pointing out sights and attractions with obvious pride. The six lane highway is beautiful, lined with tropical trees and an enormous number of plants in wooden planters. As our speed crossed 80 km/hour (50 mph), the car started chiming loudly. The driver explained that all taxis in Singapore are required to have this feature, to discourage driving above the speed limit. He must have been in a reckless mood that night, for the car chimed all the way to my destination. Even with a 50% surcharge for fares after midnight and a S\$3 airport fee, the 20 mile trip only came to S\$27.

Singapore officially and strongly discourages smoking by its citizens. The fine for smoking in public areas (including taxis) is S\$500. The traditional duty free cigarette allowance of one carton has been done away with. Unwitting tourists must now pay a duty of S\$17 per carton; the Government will, however, sell you duty free cigarettes as you leave the country. Vices do not come cheap here; one can of American beer will cost you about S\$3.50.

The only place you can find American products, it seems, is in the supermarkets; there is lots of American candy, cookies, cereals, ice cream and so forth. You can even buy California grapes here, or about S\$9 a kilo. Sunkist oranges are individually stamped and priced—about 70 cents per orange. In the Japanese department store SOGO, some American brands bravely struggle along with the other world brands. Samsonite luggage, with its world-class design, appears to be popular, judging by its floor space. In the housewares section, CorningWare and Thermos are well represented, though they look rather dowdy in comparison to some of the products around them. The toys section contains a large number of American board games. Of course, music stores are packed with American music—rap music blares loudly from many stores. Callers to the numerous countdown programs on the radio here profess great admiration for Paula Abdul. Several local rap groups are now putting their own twist on this most peculiar 'musical' phenomenon.

Ronald McDonald and the Colonel are everywhere. It is not unusual to find two McDonalds

within a hundred yards of one another. KFC here has done away with the original recipe; only a spicy, crispy version is available, sold with a packet of chili sauce. (Ronald McDonald seems to be quite a prominent cultural icon; a Hong Kong superstar singer called Anita describes her own wig as a 'sort of Ronald McDonald look'). All the other fast food places are here, of course, including Burger King, A&W, Denny's and so on. There are two Toys R Us stores here, one IKEA, a Hard Rock Cafe, a Cheers bar (unrelated to the Boston one) dubbed 'the drinking place' and a Brannigan's.

[Incidentally, how many world's biggest McDonalds are there? I have now heard this dubious distinction claimed for Rome, Beijing, Hong Kong, Toronto, Athens and some other places. There was a report out of China in the paper here that said that several restaurants in Luoyang had been putting opium pods in their dishes to get people hooked. The unwitting customers found themselves mysteriously drawn back the same restaurants over and over! The government seized about 5000 kgs of opium pods from Luoyang food processors. I propose a detailed chemical analysis of McDonald's french fries to isolate the source of their addicting power.]

The American influence is thus quite pervasive. The global T-shirt culture is alive and well here; you will find old hawkers wearing an 'All-American Los Angeles' t-shirt, and students all over sporting American university insignias. The only movies playing locally which are not Mandarin soft porn are American—Robin Hood, Wild at Heart, Home Alone and so forth. CNN is broadcast here for two hours daily, which is a good chunk of all their airtime. Ford is the only American car nameplate to be seen; their models, called Telestar and actually do not look like Fords at all; I very much suspect that they are Japanese-made.

[National cars are an obsession with many countries around the world. Malaysia recently launched its national car, the Proton Saga, with great trumpeteering and fanfare. There was much speculation that the Prime Minister, the elaborately named Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, would arrive at the unveiling ceremony in a Proton, which would have been a magnificent symbolic gesture. However, he chose to arrive in his usual Rolls Royce. He proclaimed the car to be of outstanding quality and design, and worthy of eventual 'world dominance.' Malaysia's pride and joy, it turns out, is the result of a collaboration with Mitsubishi, and is actually a modified version of the Mitsubishi Galant. World dominance may have to wait a while.]

Roadside magazine stalls sell magazines individually wrapped in plastic; Singaporeans appear to be notorious browsers. A bookstore I visited had prominent signs, "Please do not browse" but was jam-packed with people who appeared to be systematically reading one magazine after another, seemingly cover-to-cover! Some even sit down comfortably in the aisles as they read. Several store clerks were frantically working with plastic sheets and scotch tape to wrap the magazines. You can buy a two-month old Star magazine (with articles about Cher and Michael Landon) or the very latest PC Magazine; this really reflects some very clear national priorities.

The local media is all Government-controlled; the three English papers are The Straits Times, Business Times and a far-from-racy tabloid called The New Paper. They are all published by the same company, which even runs the leading bookstore chain. There is very little television. The Singapore Broadcasting Corporation runs three channels; in addition, there are two Malaysian stations. However, broadcasting hours are very limited. Only one station has a morning telecast:

one hour of CNN, which includes 30 minutes of Moneyline and 30 minutes of Crossfire. After that, everything shuts down until the late afternoon. The three stations resume gradually; one at 3 PM, with mostly children's programming, one at 6 PM and the third at 7 PM. The evening schedule includes the inevitable CNN, local news in English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil, one or two American game shows (such as *The Price is Right* and *The New \$25,000 Pyramid*), some Mandarin soap operas (or drama series, as they are called), an American sitcom (such as *The Golden Girls* or *Murphy Brown*), drama series (*LA Law* and *Twin Peaks* are popular), programs on money and current affairs (including *the Wall Street Journal* report) and an occasional English movie. Around 11:30, things start to wind down; by 12:30, national songs have been played, and all is quiet.

Car Wars

Americans who think their cars are a financial burden don't know how the rest of the world is getting by. Take Singapore and Thailand.

A tiny island with a rapidly rising standard of living can soon get choked to a standstill. The government here has taken what would be regarded as very drastic steps. Import taxes on cars are extremely high; as a result, you can expect to pay about three times the U.S. price for most cars! Here are some asking prices for used cars (in Singapore dollars; 1 US\$ = 1.75 S\$):

1987 Nissan Stanza: \$41,500

1990 Toyota Corolla: \$59,500

1989 Volvo 240: \$90,000

1988 Mazda 323 hatchback: \$38,800

1987 Honda Accord: \$50,800

1988 Hyundai Excel: \$31,800

1991 BMW 325i: \$169,000 (There is a four month waiting list for this new model)

Mind boggling prices aren't all. To buy a new car, you must first bid (submit a tender) for a C.O.E. (Certificate of Entitlement). Since the high prices did not prove to be an adequate deterrent, the Government settled on a certain quota of new cars that can be purchased in any one month—typically about 4500. There are different numbers of COE's available for different categories of engine sizes. Sealed bids have to be submitted; if you are able to estimate the likely demand, you might get a COE for less. Of course, should you change your mind, you can always sell the COE; the classified section has a separate section heading for COEs; for example, a category 3 COE is offered at \$13,500.

Should you be of a superstitious bent, your expenses do not end with buying a COE and a car. "Prestigious" or "lucky" registration numbers are again bought and sold in the open market. The paper offers a prestigious "MB2W" license plate for your Mercedes Benz 200; "only one in Malaysia/Singapore!" Or you could get the following: ES2868 (which means "Easy to Prosper and Prosper Forever"; this can be bought with a scrap car for \$12,388, or without for \$1288); a prosperous number SM88D (for an astounding \$20,000 or \$48,000 with a scrap car); auspicious number EK6500S for \$1000; or various lucky numbers: SBA 666A ("highest offer secures"—this

looks like it might go for a bundle, even though Westerners might see the devil's hand in it) or EC2431A. One advertiser is looking for a car plate "SC" with a lucky number. Finally, we have a modest "nice number" being offered to the highest bidder: EH49J.

[The number '4' in Mandarin sounds like the word for death. Likewise, the number '8' sounds like the word for wealth. In Hong Kong, a car license plate with the number 8 sold for US\$400,000 a record which is now in the Guinness Book. Phone numbers with 3's and 8's are generally prized, while a run of 4's is dreaded. The government has started to cash in on this: the state-run Singapore Telecom now requires sealed tenders from the public (minimum bid of \$1000) for various auspicious phone numbers; often, these can go for upwards of \$10,000.]

Now that you have your COE, your car, your lucky number, the open road beckons, right? Not quite so fast. Gas is reasonably priced by world standards, though it would not be considered so by the spoiled U.S. consumer. A gallon of unleaded is S\$4.70 (\$2.70 U.S.). However, there is an annual tax to pay (40 cents per cc), high insurance rates and high parking fees. To drive into the downtown area, you must first stop at a booth and buy a \$3 permit. Most buildings have underground parking; there is usually an ATM-like machine in the lobby where you pay the hourly parking fee before heading back to your car.

The humblest car in Singapore boasts an expensive sound system; after the fortune spent on the car, fancy electronics seem dirt cheap.

If Singaporeans think they have it bad on the road, they can take some solace: in Thailand, where traffic jams and air pollution have become legendary, cars below 2300 cc were until recently subject to a 400% tariff plus various tees; cars above this size had about 600% added to their sticker prices. This gave enormous protection to the domestic car industry, which the government has now reduced by cutting the net tariffs on imported cars by about one-half.

Not surprisingly, the car portfolio is regarded as something of a "hot potato" in the Government. Last May, the Government introduced yet another "scheme" to further deal with the problem. They launched a "weekend car" scheme— these cars can only be used on weekends and between 7 PM and 7 AM on weekdays. Owners are required to pay a substantially lower tax; the penalties for violating the time periods are extremely heavy, up to several thousand dollars for larger cars for the first offense (half the yearly tax bill); the second offence draws double the penalty. It remains to be seen how successful this plan will be.

Home Sweet Home

Singapore is largely a free-wheeling capitalist economy, with some interesting twists. The HDB (Housing and Development Board) is a Government agency that has housed 87% of the population in enormous, 15-20 storeyed apartment buildings which are all over the island. The apartments are small but functional; most of all, they are cheap, ranging from about \$100,000 for three room flats to about \$200,000 for "executive maisonettes." Mortgage rates are low, around 5%. There is a four year waiting list, and you must be married or engaged before you can get on the list (you have to be married before you can occupy a flat). Young Singaporeans live with their

parents until they get a place of their own. For those who do not want to live in a "chicken coop," as one young professional wryly put it, there are private apartments and bungalows. The price premium is astounding; a typical, spacious (1500-2000 square foot) condominium goes for S\$450,000— \$600,000. Larger, luxury units can go for well over a million dollars. Semi-detached and detached bungalows are even more expensive, of course. Most of those properties are sold on 99-year or 999-year (!) bases. Monthly fees are additional. Not surprisingly, expatriates make up a large proportion of the tenants of these buildings.

Salaries in Singapore vary tremendously; for a 5 1/2 day week, less educated workers can expect to earn as little as S\$500 a month as office attendants or telephone operators. The more educated and trained the worker, the higher the salary, sometimes dramatically so. General Managers make upwards of S\$150,000 a year, plus a car.

Singapore has the highest saving rate in the world, though much of the saving is mandatory and government enforced. Required contributions to the Central Provident Fund (CPF) peaked at 50% in July 1985; the levels are adjusted every six months, the latest being 40%. Of this, employers contribute 16.5%, employees 23.5%. The amount is taxed as income, including the additional employer contribution. The interest rates on CPF savings are also adjusted twice a year; the most recent fixing lowered them from 4.85% to 4.54%. The money can be drawn upon by the taxpayer for various needs, though they are strongly encouraged to save it for retirement. A new scheme called EduCom sets up an account into which the Government makes an initial deposit. The money from the account can be borrowed against for educational purposes (at about 4.5% interest) or withdrawn for retirement purposes, after age 55. It can also be completely withdrawn if somebody leaves Singapore permanently.

Maids 'R Us

The "domestic help" category in the classified section contains numerous advertisements for maids, primarily Filipino, Indonesian (Javanese/Chinese) and Sri Lankan. The ads are placed by various agencies:

Special Filipino Package! Free AIDS test, hepatitis test, replacement. Salary \$200-250, more than 150 new weekly biodatas. All our maids are carefully screened, trained and video taped.

Pick of the Lankans.

Personally interviewed overseas and screened from provinces frequently. Select thru video.

Free replacement within six months. Free 6 monthly medical for 3 years.

Cut this advertisement to have \$50 discount.

Would you entrust your little treasure to just any maid?' (picture of child)

Our maids are trained to serve you like a king. (picture of family)

Special promotional package on Filipino Maids: \$388. Due to overwhelming response, we decided to extend the package until 31 July. Indonesian maid at \$1180 as usual.

Indonesians, hard working, \$200, no off days.

There is a definite pecking order here. Filipino maids are the cheapest, followed by Sri Lankan, Indian and the most expensive are Indonesian, presumably because of the absence of language barriers. The agencies have names like "Maid-Power," "Maid-Force," "Further Creation," "Career Girl Employment Services," and "Human Dynamics Management Centre." Getting a foreign maid is an involved process; the government-run online service Teleview has a whole section on it. In addition to airfare, hirers are required to pay the government a monthly levy of \$250; they also have to put in a security deposit with the government of \$5000 for two years.

Mandarin Soft Porn

On July 1 1991, the first ever R-rated movies started showing in Singapore. A new rating system, with G, PG and R ratings went into effect. Three Mandarin soft-porn movies opened simultaneously—*Erotic Nights*, *Stooges in Tokyo* ("Cheeky look into Business Trips of sorts!") and *Erotic Ghost Story* ("Explicitly Erotic! Undoubtedly Sensational!"). Coming next: *The Holy Virgin and the Evil Dead* ("A Horror film with girls galore; Strictly for Adults' enjoyment only; with Miss Hong Kong").

Talk about pent up demand, and your masses yearning to breathe free. Just about every theater in town was showing these movies (actually 46 out of 55), and long lines were everywhere. Advance ticket sales were booming. Even movie theaters showing 'normal' movies such as Edward Scissorhands and Robin Hood were holding special midnight screenings of R rated movies. Malaysian youth were crossing the border into Johor Baru in great numbers to partake in the previously forbidden fruit.

The David Lynch film *Wild at Heart* also opened at the same time. The newspaper carried daily, breathless briefings on the movies. People were sneaking away from offices and classrooms, and lying to their spouses about their destination. The audiences, mostly older men, but with a fair sprinkling of women and couples, were sheepish—and somewhat disappointed. Apparently, the action was less than enthralling, and reality failed to live up to the almost palpating expectations.

A non-Mandarin speaker, when asked how he could understand the movie, said, "Action needs no language." A passionate letter writer to the *Straits Times* put it thus: "We prefer smut to art and that is all there is to it."

Purely in my capacity as an objective, dispassionate reporter, I went to see *Erotic Nights*. Ticket prices had been adjusted (i.e., raised) for these movies. Movie tickets in Singapore, as in many places outside the U.S., are sold by seat number. The theater was packed. I was pleasantly surprised to find the movie subtitled; I had expected to have to grapple unassisted with the intricacies of Mandarin body language. It is always amusing to read the phrasing in such rough

and ready subtitling; every movie unwittingly becomes a comedy:

"You have the figures, so why not go for it?" (to an attractive woman, on the advisability of posing nude for a movie of "artistic merit")

"Looking trouble? You find it!"

"And my lady is you. All care is about you now."

"I'm painful! Give me any medicine, OK?"

"He's so concern me!"

"Gold prize is a gold medal made by pure gold."

"Don't try to set a variance between us."

"Truth! Truth!"

"Though you're as ugly as before, now you're the idol of me."

The movie was a pleasant surprise, perhaps because I was anticipating a horrendous, slapdash affair. It was about a charismatic artist named John (also called Jean and Chun during the movie), who mesmerizes and seduces three women (all close friends), one after the other. There is much frenetic gasping and quivering; there is frontal nudity for the women), but nothing real explicit. One of the girls is Ann (also called Yan Yan); her father is a philandering type in white suits, whose name is Casanova The second girl is a determined actress who resolves to sleep her way to fame and fortune. After our artist 'liberates' her, she takes up with an elderly movie producer, known only as Proprietor, who promises to cast her in a movie called "The Temptation of Lisa." She assures her friends that Proprietor has good intentions; he has told her to "Go to Europe, get some brand names, open boutique." The third girl is a spectacled "plain Jane" type who, of course, gets transformed by our John into a creature of ravishing beauty simply by removing her glasses and untying her hair.

An abstract and brooding painter, John is given to experimenting with well-known modern art techniques, such as using frogs dipped in paint to create his paintings. He also pours paint on the body of the third girl, and then has her writhe all over a canvas, while he flings further strategic quantities of paint on her. Soon, he too is overcome with the urge to express himself and throws himself down on the canvas. Repeatedly emptying entire cans of paint over himself and his lover, John achieves a rather efficient blending of his two primary pursuits, though at considerable cost in terms of paint. The next day, he displays his handiwork at an art gallery, to the accompaniment of knowing glances with and among the three friends.

The lead figures in this movie have very non-Asiatic features, something that reflects perhaps their conceptualization of physical beauty in more Western terms.

The Social Development Unit

Set up in 1984, the SDU was intended to solve a problem: Singapore had a large number of single graduate men and women, and they weren't getting together! SDU has helped put that situation right. Its membership is now about 11,000.

Concerned that educated women professionals were increasingly shunning or delaying marriage and childbirth, the government swung into action. In order for Singapore's population to ultimately reach the target of 4 million (from 2.7 million today), the birth rate has to climb back above 2.1. The fertility rate had fallen to a historic low of 1.4 in 1986; the New Population Policy introduced in 1987 brought it up to 2.0 in 1988. This was a "Dragon" year, "when a convergence of factors combined to make it possibly the best year for mothers to have babies." The government is concerned that if the birth rate did not reach the desired 2.1 and above even in such a year, it may fall far short in a 'normal' year.

The new policy is this: more people should marry, do so earlier, and have three children or more if—and only if—they can afford it. This is very important; the government does not provide maternity leave for a third child, since this would encourage people who really could not afford children to have them. On the other hand, well-off Singaporeans would have them anyway - hopefully.

The SDU does not believe in half-measures. Recently, an upwardly mobile, British-educated civil servant was sent on a one-month, all expenses paid trip to Japan, along with 23 other eligible and single civil servants. While the ostensible purpose was to tour and study the Japanese civil service, all the participants knew the real purpose. The outcome? For this civil servant, "nothing happened," he said, without any seeming regret.

SDU recently appealed for its members to come forward and appear in its magazine. Most SDU members are very camera shy. The search is on for those with "good looks and presence" to be featured in publicity materials. The organization puts together numerous programs, including Tea Dances (Discos) and Tea Talks. For S\$50, it also provides a computerized matchmaking service.

The primary factor driving all of this is that women in Singapore now make up more than 60% of university enrollment. Financial success in Singapore is more strongly correlated with educational attainment than in most other places. Increasingly, then, there are large cohorts of highly educated women and poorly educated men. Approximately 30% of such women are unmarried. The government has been trying to convince such women that "marrying down" is a better alternative than not marrying at all.

A glossy women's magazine, Singapore's equivalent of Cosmopolitan (which is banned here), regularly carries articles about the apparently hopeless 'SDU man.' The articles discuss such topics as their prowess as lovers and what one must do to make them suitable for bringing home to meet Mother.

Eating in Singapore

Here's an astounding fact: 80% of Singaporeans eat out on any given day! This is partly due to a hectic lifestyle in which both spouses typically work; it is also due to the amazingly cheap hawker food that is available just about anywhere. A typical family of two adults and a child can eat their fill for about S\$6.

The durian fruit, which has a strong, distinctive odor, is not allowed to be carried in the trains. The paper carried a longish story about a durian seller who was twice arrested for selling the fruit without a license. A melon-sized durian sells for about \$5. Most fruits here are quite expensive: grapes are about \$9 a kilo, mangoes about \$1.50 each, oranges about 65 cents each, small apples about 60 cents each, milk is about \$10 a gallon. With every trip to a supermarket, I can readily see why Singaporeans eat out most of the time; it simply isn't worth the time and trouble to cook, and it is probably more expensive to feed a family at home than it is to eat out (or take out—hawkers will ingeniously package food in seconds; drinks are packaged in plastic bags with straws sticking out).

Serangoon Road leads you into Little India. Almost immediately, I see a huge gold jewelry store, called Tamil Nadu Gold Emporium, or something along those lines. The store is completely run by Chinese owners and salespeople—a well-targeted business! I don't think the sales clerks speak Tamil, though. Walking further into Little India immediately transports you, it seems, about fifty years back in time and a couple of thousand miles to the West. You are suddenly in small town in Tamil Nadu (as I imagine such a town would appear); men in white t-shirts and lungis, with their foreheads smeared with white ash, carrying incense, money-lender stores, the inevitable slew of restaurants. On a parallel street, Race Track Road, are several excellent eateries. The Banana Leaf Apollo has to be one of the best taste treats in Singapore, as well as an authentic cultural experience. As soon as you enter, you are led to a formica-covered table; a banana leaf is spread out in front of you, and a large mound of steaming rice is heaped on to it. Spicy fish gravy is ladled on to it, as well as a large helping of a vegetable curry (such as eggplant or ladyfinger). All of this within a minute. Since I was alone, I didn't order the fish-head curry, which is a specialty; it is simply enormous, a huge reddish fish head sitting in a large bowl of fiery curry. Many restaurants will advise you not to order it if you are alone (one hawker stand actually refused to sell it to me). I ordered a plate of mutton curry. With a soft drink and several papadam, the whole meal came to \$6.50; I could have eaten my fill for \$2.50 if I didn't have the drink and the mutton. The restaurant is very popular with tourists; however, if you cannot eat hot and spicy food, you will suffer here. There are no dessert items on the menu to relieve your misery.

Family Planning, Chinese-Style

The Chinese community here, much like its counterpart in Hong Kong, is incredibly superstitious. The Chinese believe that children should be born in the Year of the Dragon, followed by the Year of the Goat. As a result, there is a dramatic surge in births in Dragon Years, and many Chinese couples even plan their marriage dates accordingly. An English-educated marketing executive (woman) says, "We don't generally believe in horoscopes, but why leave it to luck when it comes to children?" The government makes what are for it uncharacteristically feeble attempts to wean

the population from such reliance on horoscopes. Education officials are already concerned about how they will accommodate the cohort of Dragon babies born in 1988 when they become of school-going age in a few years.

Mr. Chan, 30, a financial analyst, planned for a Goat baby "because it would not clash with our horoscopes." He is an Ox, his wife a Rabbit. "We married last year, and since we were already too late to try for a Horse baby, we decided we wanted a Goat, because we didn't want to start the family with a Monkey." All of this was said with a straight face.

This is the year of the Golden Goat, which only comes once in 60 years, and Singapore is experiencing an unforeseen baby boom this year, exceeding even the numbers from the last Dragon year in 1988. "A child born in the Year of the Golden Goat is supposed to be determined and courageous. If we are lucky, we may even have a Dragon child in the year 2000." For now, though, the sanguine Mr. Chan and his wife will try for a Goat baby.

Walter, We Hardly Knew Ye

Mr. Walter Woon, a senior lecturer in law at NUS, has achieved worldwide notoriety for expressing some decidedly antigovernment views. Mr. Woon, first in an interview with the government-controlled Straits Times and then in an interview with the BBC, suggested that the government had beaten politics' out of the people. It had ruled with an 'iron fist and iron gloves.' He also suggested that Singapore did not really have a constitution, since the government could change it at will, given its absolute dominance of the parliament. He did strike a conciliatory tone at the end, suggesting that the government has started to liberalize considerably in the post-Lee Kuan Yew era, and had stopped treating even university intellectuals as 'idiot children.' Mr. Woon's statements drew a swift response from the Prime Minister, who dismissed his comment about the constitution as nonsensical. There appears to be a degree of intimidation in the calculated response, but it has not yet subdued the 'brave' Mr. Woon, nor has it quelled continuing coverage of his view by the Straits Times.

The government refers to people such as Mr. Woon as "Channel 5 voters." They are "English-educated Singaporeans (who) are more liberal, want more decentralization of government and can vote with their feet if frustrated. There are 140,000 such professionals between the ages of 25 and 39—about 10% of the work force. Their counterparts are Channel 8 voters, who are more conservative, Chinese educated, and who would probably support the government as long as it continued to deliver 'material prosperity.'

Politicians in this region make the kind of speeches that would be highly unusual in the U.S. The speeches are full of advice and guidance; listeners are told, for example, "You should spend your time and energy to build up relationships with your university peers." "Put your best face forward, keep calm and try to help at all times"—advice (from a Minister) to front-line staff on dealing with difficult customers.

Malaysian Malaise

The Malays here appear to exist in a state of malaise (pun intended). The entire community appears to have missed the bus when it comes to Singapore's economic boom. You will not find many Malays in positions of authority and status here. The community remains a very conservative one, and one that is distinctly removed from the mainstream of Singaporean life. (The Indians, on the other hand, appear well integrated into the predominantly Chinese community.) Malay women are easily distinguished by their elaborate dress, in which they are completely covered except for their faces. Even little girls are thus attired. The men are harder to tell apart, though they are darker and more swarthy than the Chinese majority.

Many married Malay men from Singapore have apparently been secretly taking second wives in Batam. These are Indonesian women who come to Batam specifically in the hope of finding a husband who will support them so they won't have to work. Many are divorced, with kids. One was quoted in the Straits Times as saying, "Many Singapore women work. They have lots of money. This makes them very arrogant towards their men." Most are quite aware of the first wives, but are willing nonetheless.

Malaysia has an ongoing feud with Australia; a TV series running there called "Embassy" portrays and ridicules a fictitious country believed to be Malaysia. Australia has described some Malaysian practices, such as hanging drug offenders, as "barbaric." Recently, a ruling party-controlled TV station in Malaysia has started airing documentaries about Australia's treatment of its aboriginal people. The PM believes Western reporters have an attitude of superiority; that "some white people still think that we do not know how to administer our own country... they must show us how as though they are more knowledgeable than us."

Malaysia organizes an annual Mass Media Treasure Hunt to promote itself as a tourist destination. This year, foreign journalists who wish to come will be asked to sign a special form which forbids them from writing negative reports! The government said this was needed because journalists who had come in previous years had gone home and written reports "tarnishing the country's image."

Malaysia recently announced its next 5-year plan. The Sixth Malaysia Plan (SMP), which succeeds the New Economic Policy (NEP) in effect from 1971-1990, lays down the objective of Malaysia becoming a 'developed' nation by 2020. (All the countries in this region speak of such an objective; what exactly does it mean to be a developed country?). The NEP had been replaced by the National Development Policy (NDP), which provided the framework for SMP.

What are the planning horizons around here? The SMP calls for Malaysia's population to reach 20.26 million in 1995, from 18 million in 1990. The government wants a population of 70 million by the year 2100! The PM warned that at the present rate of increase, Malaysia would reach that level by 2050. "There is no necessity for people to hurry," he said, in apparent seriousness.

Kent Ridge Blues

There is genuine bitterness among several faculty members at NUS who I talked with, regarding

Singapore's image versus reality. This is especially true of the several expatriates I spoke with. One who joined a month ago is already looking for another job in some other country. Most complained about how things here are not quite what they might appear to be, how things they were led to expect turned out differently or did not happen at all—from the cost and quality of their faculty housing, to things such as mail and phone services. Faculty members must pay for their long distance phone calls and faxes, even if work related. The postal budget for the entire marketing department (about 15 people) is S\$400 a year! Everything else has to be paid for by the faculty. Even more surprisingly, in this country with cutting edge information technology, some new faculty members have to wait months for a computer. They are not given local printers. Mainframe printing sounds like a nightmare; they are at the mercy of the widely loathed Madame Chen, who spends the entire day on the phone. It can take weeks (!) to get a printout. Overseas trips are only supported once every two years—certainly not enough to stay in the mainstream of research. There is apparently little pressure to do high quality research. Faculty interests are the lowest priority, below students, administration etc.

When I tell some faculty members of my purpose, they smile knowingly. "The Government," they say mysteriously, "is very good at creating the right image." While I am convinced that the essence of what I have seen of the information technology revolution here is correct, it is disconcerting to find so many doubters right here. The young technocrats and engineers I have met were genuinely enthusiastic about their projects and their country's ambitions; their work is substantive and potentially far-reaching. The government has clearly failed, however, in keeping its burgeoning intelligentsia on board as it has gone forward.

What about students at NUS? They don't seem much happier with the place. Students fees went up by 35-50% last July, with increases ranging from \$900-\$3600 a year (similar increases in Malaysia resulted in hundreds of no-shows to campuses.) The degree of discontent is quite startling. One graduate of the place said in a newspaper interview that every time he drove past the place, he want(s) to spit. Others complain about the university's lack of character and identity. At best, students voice indifference about the place, while others vow never to set foot here again after graduating. The university is touted as Singapore's own Ivy League, as a world class institution. Its preoccupation with excellence has led students to label it single-minded and rigid.

Perhaps it is a sense of constriction and confinement, even as their mental horizons are being broadened by their education, that causes such angst in local students. While being equipped to think freely and creatively in some areas, they are asked to accept their government at face value. If they want to go overseas for further studies, the government will send them to the best universities—provided they sign an ironclad 'bond' for up to eight years to work for the government for that long.

Something is brewing in Singapore, and the government may be in for a rude shock in the next election. The media, especially the newspaper, appear to be gingerly testing the limits of the government's new liberalism. This trend (it is not really a movement yet) could cascade and grow steadily; it could also be abruptly reversed through a change in the country's direction. One scenario is that if the ruling party does poorly in the next election, Lee Kuan Yew could come storming back to prevent the undoing of his hand-built Republic. His son, Brigadier General Lee (known to all here as BG Lee), is a cabinet minister currently, and given to making frequent

speeches of the exhorting variety more favored by old-line ministers here. He is brilliant, seemingly ruthless, and clearly the heir apparent. It was thus rather surprising to read an interview his father recently gave to the Economist, in which he discussed Japan's political system. He pointed out the large proportion of Diet members who are sons of previous Diet members; the country, he said, was more of a feudal one than a true democracy.

The Miss India-Singapore Pageant (or What am I Doing Here?)

Generally speaking, I look askance at pageants. My jaundiced outlook is not something I have affected to convey an impression of great depth and gravity to my shallow and more frivolous acquaintances. However, I am not hidebound about it. And my curiosity got the better of me one warm July Sunday in Singapore.

Actually, what got me interested was an absolutely stunning picture in the *Straits Times* of one Ms. Moon Moon Sen, erstwhile sex-kitten Hindi actress and now a mature sex-cat, the mother of two and the co-hostess of the Third Miss India-Singapore Pageant. Since we Indians have now taken over the Universe, a series of twenty Miss India-XXXX Pageants are held around the world each year. At the end of the process, a Miss India-Universe Pageant is held in New York City (where else?), after which the newly crowned beauty is pretty much ignored by the rest of the world. Ah, but the journey up to that point is exhilarating. Let me take you to the crowded starting gate.

Having been enticed by the picture of Ms. Sen, I made my dignified way to the World Trade Center auditorium and plunked down my \$15 for a peanut-gallery ticket (I was not about to spring for the \$40 seats; they were reserved for the truly deranged.) Foolishly, I arrived at 7:20 for the 7:30 show, thinking that perhaps that some of the Singapore efficiency may have rubbed off on my local compatriots. Of course, it was around 8:00 by the time the milling crowd made it in to the large auditorium.

As milling crowds go, this one would have to be rated pretty highly. It was quite well-dressed and polished-looking, the sort of crowd you could take someplace and expect that it would not embarrass you. Let me qualify that. There were several local Sikhs who were much in evidence; these are very different-looking Sikhs that those I have seen elsewhere. They were all tall, lanky, and had small angled turbans which pointed forward, rather like the lights on miners' helmets. They all had very closely trimmed and shaped beards, which is clearly a giveaway. The Sikhs looked very much to be in the mood for some serious heckling; given that about one-third of the contestants were names Something Kaur, it was apparent that they were out to impress them.

The vast majority of Indians in Singapore are Tamils; however, only a small percentage of the audience and two of the twenty-six contestants were Tamil. The rest were all north Indian. No wonder south Indians resent the social and cultural hegemony of the north.

Rather than make a long treatise out of this, I will cut quickly to the chase. The program was filled with numerous musical numbers, most of which were actually quite well performed. After the late start, the program was fairly professionally run. Since I had to leave after three and a half

hours, I can't tell you who won. However, there were some very interesting moments, especially during the talent segment. While most of the girls did the standard Hindi movie dance to the standard recorded song, one intrepid soul did a belly-dance, (un)dressed in full Arabic attire and possessing all the oomph and verve that particular dance demands. The audience was shocked into silence, except for the Sikhs, who loved it. One of the two Tamil girls, Uma Devi (!), was clearly out to out-vamp all the others. Dressed in a leather miniskirt outfit, she did a rap-dance (much of it with her back to the audience) that looked as authentic as anything you would see in a Spike Lee movie. Once again, it went over big with the Sikhs, while the few remaining Tamils tried their hardest to look like Bengalis.

Each of the girls was asked one question and, unfortunately, each one spoiled the entire positive effect she might have created as soon as she opened her mouth:

Should swimsuits be allowed in next year's pageant (remember, this was an Indian beauty pageant)?

"No, I don't think my parents would approve."

What is an R-rated movie and what would you do if the person next to you in the theater started acting funny?

"I would give him one cold hard stare, and that would put him in his place, no?"

What would you do if your husband had an affair?

"I would search his pockets, yeah? I would look for lipstick on his shirt, yeah? Then I would ask him, what about it? Then I would divorce him or something."

Of all the singers, the most flamboyant (in white pants, gold jewelry and a wide open printed shirt) was Mr. Haresh. His advertisement in the printed program listed him as "Mr. Haresh Gulabrai Buxani (Mukesh of Singapore): Businessman cum Singer; Haresh Brothers (*Importers, Exporters, Wholesalers and Confirmers*)."

Mr. Haresh must have Imported and Confirmed a whole bunch of stuff that day, for he sang like an Exporter/Wholesaler possessed. Twirling the microphone cord with one hand, shooting his finger up in the air with the other, quivering and standing head down with his broad back to the audience, his was an electrifying (if not quite high-voltage) performance. It was almost exhausting to see him perform; this was obviously like heavy lifting for him. Even the Sikhs were subdued into quietly twirling their moustaches. At the end, the audience applauded him heartily, seemingly more in relief than in approbation.

What brought the house down was a delightful Hindi duet performed by a Chinese man and a Filipino woman, neither of whom understood any Hindi whatsoever. Their performance was so endearing that even Ms. Sen slinked out of the darkness to link arms with them and sway graciously for a few minutes.

Ah yes, you must be wondering about Ms. Sen. Well, I could barely see her from where I sat initially, so I soon got up and took a vacant seat in the third row, right in with the Nabobs, wholesalers and forwarders. Looking rather unlike her picture, Ms. Sen nonetheless was a sight for sore eyes, and one of the more appealing mature sex-cats you are likely to find. (I did manage to take a picture of her during the intermission.) However, she was also too cutesy and demure for words. Her insistence on speaking in an affected British-accented English rather than Hindi ("But I'm Bengali!") did not go over well with a rather vocal minority in the audience, including the Sikhs. Peeved, she exited stage left, and did not reappear until much later.

Her cohost, on the other hand, proved to be a thoroughly likeable actor called simply Mayur. Mayur, who is now acting as Krishna in some movie, and who played Abhimanyu in the TV serialization of the Mahabharata, was actually shorter than many of the contestants. However, he showed a ready wit, and brought the house down with a series of impersonations of Hindi film actors from Rajesh Khanna to Dharmendra to Dilip Kumar.

Alas, I left before the conclusion, so the winner will have to remain a mystery. But if you're willing to travel to New York in October, you'll find out.

Eyebrow Low-Brow

Apparently, many people around here suffer from a distinct lack of eyebrows (not that I'd noticed myself). However, they need not distress (as a Mandarin-to-English sub-titler would put it): all they need to do is to make an appointment to see.... "Internationally Renowned Eye-brow Tattooist Miss Lisa Wong, President, Singapore Chapter of the Association of International Eye-brow Tattoo Institute."

As Dave Barry would say, I'm not making this up. Further, not only are many women lacking in eye-brows, some of them need to get their EYELIDS and LIPS tattooed as well! And who could resist the advertisements:

"Free! A 22K gold goat for every customer who comes for tattoo of the brow, eye-liner and lip-liner."

"By clients' popular demand, Miss Lisa Wong will attend personally. Offer restricted to only six customers a day."

At only \$300 a shot, not a bad living for Miss Wong.

This Just In

Child care is a major problem Singapore, and couples are making rather drastic choices. Many parents have their babies raised by foster mothers during the week, becoming effectively 'weekend parents.' One pregnant stockbroker (who earns \$100,000 a year, as does her husband) plans to nurse her baby for two months; she then plans to take the baby to her mother in Kuala Lumpur,

and fly up every three weeks or so to see the baby. When the baby is three, she plans to bring him/her back to Singapore. "Would you give up this kind of salary?" Many young Singaporeans express such an attitude: "Who wants to be bothered with a crying baby all night? Kids, they fret a lot, you know." Social scientists there warn that such practices are very harmful to the young child; the lack of bonding means that kids feel no obligation to look after their parents in their old age.

Asia has the most Rolls Royces, especially Hong Kong— there are 1000 there.

Magnetic cups from China being sold in Singapore for \$45, promise to cure various diseases, improve blood circulation. The Ministry of Health has rejected the claim; the distributor has offered to fund local research into the benefits. He has already sold 7000 of them—\$315,000 worth in a tiny island with just 2.7 million people.

Colgate toothpaste here contains "Triclocard," which fights gum problems. What I want to know is—why the heck am I not getting the same protection back home?

The Straits Times did a two-week study of the local beaches, and found a generally deplorable state of affairs. In stark contrast to the rest of the island, beaches are described as filthy: covered with cans, bottles, wrappers, and various flotsam (industrial drift) and jetsam. They also have a lot of oil slicks, which come from the thousands of ships that are anchored offshore. One person commented, "Singaporeans are always complaining about the many rules and regulations we have. But looking at this mess, you can see that Singaporeans really need to be controlled. As long as the culprits are not slapped with a fine, they won't learn anything." Combined with some swirling and unexpected undercurrents (five people drowned at one beach alone last year), and the tendency for the water to suddenly become deep at some man-made beaches, going to the beach should not be high on your agenda here. The one outstanding beach is on Sentosa Island.

All underground MRT stations are air-conditioned. To keep the air in as well as to enhance safety, platforms are enclosed in steel and glass walls, with sliding doors. When a train pulls in to a station, it aligns itself closely with the doors, and then both its doors and the station's doors open simultaneously. Trains are uncannily silent; if you don't look up, you wouldn't know that a train had come and gone.

Elevators in many newer buildings talk (usually in a clipped British accent), saying what floor it is and what's on that floor. Most are made by Toshiba and Mitsubishi, once again demonstrating the astonishing range of products Japanese companies make. There is a strong move towards "intelligent buildings;" several interesting approaches to energy management are used. In my room at the National University Visitor Lodge, the room key has to be plugged into a wall socket to switch on all the lights and the air-conditioner. This ensures that I cannot leave the room while the lights are still on. In most public bathrooms, lights are automatically activated when the door is opened, and shut down when you leave.

Singapore used to be prone to extensive flooding; about 10% of the land was susceptible. The government has spent about S\$800 million to correct this problem, to the extent that there is now virtually no danger of flooding. This has been accomplished through an extensive network of

drainage canals throughout the island. Many of the canals do, however, represent a threat to the unwary pedestrian.

The language most widely spoken here is called Mandarin. It is essentially the same Chinese that is spoken in Taiwan and parts of the Chinese mainland, though with some local touches. (In Hong Kong, Cantonese is spoken, which is a completely different spoken language yet shares a script with Mandarin. The only way for individuals to communicate is thus in writing!) The language cannot be *called* Chinese in Singapore, since the word literally means "national language." Singapore's national language, surprisingly, is Malay, though it is only spoken by a small minority. The language, like some others in Southeast Asia, uses the Roman script, and is phonetic. Even Chinese is sometimes used with the Roman script.

The government has had an ongoing courtesy campaign for 12 years. They have now started using puppets to convey the message; at a show in Raffles City, Australian puppeteers put on a show with Singha, the Courtesy Lion (a long-standing symbol). Is the campaign working? I'm not sure. It would seem Singaporeans are not very friendly or courteous with one another. For instance, no one greets bus drivers on getting on or off buses. People never acknowledge strangers in the street, as one often does in the U.S. I never saw anyone offer seats to the elderly in buses or trains, even though signs asking them to do just that are everywhere. Buses have painted signs saying "You are riding with your friendly driver" and a place for a nameplate; I have yet to see a name there. One gets the sense of restrained chaos— of some downright rude stuff right under the surface! There is considerable and unneeded jostling to get into even uncrowded trains; nobody waits for passengers to get off, as signs ask them to do.

Hotels in this part of the world are already renowned for outstanding service. To counter the worldwide recession in tourist traffic, Singapore's top hotels are pulling out all the stops. Most offer a personalized check-in service in the guest's room. They also offer complimentary food, drinks and laundry services. Most meet their business guests at the airport. The Marina Mandarin offers guests a daily credit of S\$75 for use on food and beverage purchases. Valet and secretarial services are provided free. Guests using the Mandarin Club package get chauffeur-driven airport transfers, personalized stationery, a personal butler, and a TV monitor flashing stock market prices.

Somebody with a warped sense of humor has been quietly releasing "dangerous predators" into the Botanic Gardens lake. The giant snakehead fish have been swallowing baby swans and biting the tails off silver carps. Turtles released by people have also been attacking baby swans by nibbling on their feet. All in all, it has not been a good year for baby swans at the Botanic Gardens.

Starting in 1994, all secondary school students in Singapore, including boys, will be required to learn home economics (now required for girls). Similarly, girls will be required to take design and technology, which is now compulsory only for boys. Says Mr. Chan, a senior executive, "It's high time men learnt to share equal responsibility with women... When (my son) grows up, it'll be a plus for his wife!"

A phenomenon not exclusive to Singapore but one that has swept all of the Far East is the

Karaoke lounge. Singapore alone has over 200 of these places, where people come to sing along with music soundtracks in Mandarin and English. As one local wryly put it, 'You actually have to pay to listen to these people; they should be paying you instead!' Electronic stores are full of fancy karaoke equipment, including hi-fi systems, laser disc players and video recorders. The government is planning to start exercising tighter control over the lounges, as they have started to become a social nuisance. Many have become the scene of drunken brawls. Last month, a man was killed when his group was attacked by another—apparently, his group had jeered a woman singer from the other group.

Crickets are prized as pets in Japan, and are used for fighting. They are sold in little bamboo baskets, and are judged by the sound they make.

A new craze in Japan is using blood types to describe personalities. Magazines have special sections on them. It is estimated that a third of all Japanese businessmen consider blood type in making personnel decisions. Sports magazines carry articles analyzing baseball players by blood type. There are special soft drinks sold for A and O types. "The B's and AB's are welcome to drink the sodas for A's and O's."