

What is the secret of Singapore's success?

There is not one but 50 ways a small country can overcome its limitations



Tommy Koh

For The Straits Times

As this is my first op-ed in the new solar and lunar year, I would like to take this opportunity to wish all the readers of The Straits Times a peaceful, healthy and successful new year.

I have a new year present for Singapore. The present is in the form of a new book I have edited. The title of the book is: 50 Secrets Of Singapore's Success. The book will be launched on Wednesday by Mr Eddie Teo, the chairman of the Council of Presidential Advisers.

STORIES BEHIND THE BOOK

There are two stories behind the book. The first story is a meeting with 28 university students from the state of Guanajuato of Mexico last year. Following the advice of the governor of their state, the students had spent a week in Singapore on a study trip. They asked to meet me before they returned to Mexico.

During our dialogue, one of the students asked me for the secret of Singapore's success. I told her that our success was not due to one secret but many secrets. She requested me to write a book on the secrets of Singapore's success. I promised her that I would think about it.

A few days after meeting the Mexican students, I received an unexpected gift from the outgoing Ambassador of Finland to Singapore Paula Parviainen.

She gave me a book, entitled: 100 Social Innovations From Finland. The book is an international bestseller and has been translated into 27 languages.

The success of the Finnish book gave me the courage to edit a book on the 50 Secrets Of Singapore's Success.

PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

It is not the purpose of my book to boast about Singapore's achievements. We are successful but we must remain humble and modest.

We live in a world which is dominated by bad news. The world is hungry for good news and for success stories. This is why the Finnish book is so well received by the world.

My hope is that the book on Singapore will be an inspiration to other developing countries. My message is that if your country is small and has no natural resources, do not despair. If you pursue sound policies and have good values, if you have competent and honest political leaders, a good public service and an industrious and adaptable population, you can overcome your limitations of size and the lack of natural resources.

Singapore is not a model but it is a source of solutions to many of the problems faced by the developing countries.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book has nine chapters: economic, social, educational, cultural, law and security, infrastructural, environmental, foreign policy and individual well-being.

Economic achievements

I have identified 10 important economic achievements. The lead essay is by Professor Tan Kong Yam of Nanyang Technological University (NTU). I have asked him to explain how we managed to go from a per capita income of US\$500 in 1965, to US\$64,000 (S\$87,000) last year, an increase of 128 times. It is probably the biggest growth story of the 20th century.

Many countries are faced with high unemployment, especially among its youth. I have therefore asked labour economist Hui Weng Tat from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy to explain how we have managed to achieve full employment.

Other essays in this chapter include essays on our policy of fiscal prudence by ST associate editor Vikram Khanna, sound



monetary policy by Singapore Management University (SMU) economist Peter Wilson, our sovereign wealth fund by the former president of GIC special investments Teh Kok Peng, the Economic Development Board by its former chairman Philip Yeo, Ms Melody Hong and Mr Tan Suan Swee, the National Wages Council by Professor Lim Chong Yah, the founding chairman of NWC, tripartism by NTUC president Mary Liew, free trade agreements by Centennial Asia Advisors' Manu Bhaskaran, and the Singapore Airlines by its chief executive Goh Choon Phong.

Social achievements

By coincidence, I have also identified 10 important social achievements. Dr Jon Quah has an essay on our successful fight against corruption. Dr Mathew Matthews from the Institute of Policy Studies explains how we have managed to maintain racial and religious harmony. Dr Cheong Koon Huan's essay is on the Housing Board and how the HDB has succeeded in providing every Singaporean with a home.

Other essays in this chapter include those on our hawker centres by Professor Lily Kong, the president of SMU, the

empowerment of women by Dr Kanwaljit Sooin and Ms Margaret Thomas, our healthcare system by health economist Phua Kai Hong, low infant and maternal mortality by Dr Jeremy Lim, the public service by Civil Service College dean Ong Toon Hui, the Central Provident Fund by Associate Professor Chia Ngee Choon, and the Inter-Religious Organisation by its former president K. Kesavapany.

Educational achievements

I have identified seven important achievements in the field of education. Professor S. Gopinathan and Mr V. Naidu explain how we have succeeded in building one of the best school systems in the world. Professor Leo Tan, the founding director of the National Institute of Education (NIE), has an essay on our much-admired NIE. Dr N. Varaprasad, founding principal of Temasek Polytechnic, has written on our excellent polytechnics, National University of Singapore president Tan Eng Chye on our world-class universities, Mrs Elaine Ng, former National Library Board chief executive, on our public libraries, and ST's senior education correspondent Sandra Davie on Singapore mathematics.

Cultural achievements

I have selected five cultural achievements for inclusion in the book. Dr Nigel Taylor has an essay on the Singapore Botanic Gardens. Dr Tan Wee Kiat, the founder of the Gardens By The Bay, writes about this achievement.

Mr Goh Yew Lin writes about the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, Mr Lee Tzu Yang on the Esplanade – Theatres By The Bay, and former CEO of the National Heritage Board Michael Koh on the transformation of our museums.

Law and security achievements

On law and security, I have selected four important achievements.

The first is our national service, by Mr Winston Choo, Singapore's first chief of defence force. The second is on our efficient and respected police force, by former police commissioner Khoo Boon Hui. The third is on the rule of law, by Professor Goh Yihan, the dean of SMU's law school.

The final achievement is the Singapore Convention on Mediation by Mrs Natalie Morris-Sharma, the chairman of the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law working group which negotiated the treaty.

Infrastructural achievements

On our infrastructure, I have selected five success stories. Mr Andrew Tan, the former CEO of the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore, writes about our seaport and maritime centre. Mr Liew Mun Leong, the chairman of the Changi Airport Group, explains how Changi Airport has become the best in the world. Mr Khoo Teng Chye, the former CEO of our Urban Redevelopment Authority, discusses the URA's role in the physical transformation of Singapore. Mr Gopinath Menon writes on our excellent transport system. ST's transport expert Christopher Tan discusses the merits and demerits of our electronic road pricing policy.

Environmental achievements

On the environment, I have identified five achievements. The first is our journey from being a dirty and smelly city to being one of the world's cleanest and greenest cities. Mr Kenneth Er tells this remarkable story. The second is our water story and the indispensable role which the PUB, the national water agency, has played in it, written by its chief executive Ng Joo Hee. The third is toilets for all, written by Mr Toilet Man himself, Mr Jack Sim. Fourth, National Parks Board's Lena Chan writes about the Singapore Index on Cities' Biodiversity and the role cities can play in the conservation of biodiversity. Finally, Professor Euston Quah, the head of economics at NTU, explains how Singapore has succeeded in balancing development and environment.

Foreign policy achievements

On our foreign policy achievements, I have selected only the three most important. First, Professor Chan Heng Chee writes about how we have managed to maintain good relations with all the major powers. Mr Ong Keng Yong writes about our successful Asean policy. Mr Burhan Gafoor explains how Singapore has been able to play a leadership role at the UN, in spite of our small size.

The well-being of Singapore

In the final essay of the book, I have requested Professor David Chan, director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute, to write on the social and psychological capital and the well-being of Singaporeans.

CONCLUSION

The book is graced by a foreword by President Halimah Yacob. In her foreword, the President wrote:

"Singapore takes pride in its diversity, openness and self-determination – values that shape our modern nation today. Our journey has not been easy, but we have always pulled through because we were determined to make something of ourselves. These traits are what have bonded us and defined our success stories... collectively, the essays illustrate the lessons behind Singapore's success over the past five decades.

"I hope they will enable Singaporeans to have a better appreciation of our nation's shared journey, and serve as useful case studies for other countries."

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Tommy Koh is a professor of law at the National University of Singapore and an Ambassador-at-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.