MGS, Singapore and the World: Looking Back and Looking Ahead

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History

It is a great pleasure and honor for me to speak to you today, 130 years after my great-grandmother Siauw Mah Li was, according to Miss Sophia Blackmore, "brought to me by her father in 1887" from Medan, Sumatra, to become the first Chinese girl to study in our School. Mah Li later taught in both MGS Singapore and Ipoh, before and after marrying my great-grandfather Kung Tian Siong, an ACS boy who himself late in life became a lay preacher at Geylang Methodist Church.

Both my paternal and maternal grandmothers also studied at MGS. I myself entered MGS Primary One 60 years ago, in 1957, my two sisters joining me later. Our niece Joy-Marie Toh, and her daughter Astrid Virk, are respectively the fifth and sixth generations of my mother's family to study at MGS.

Today is also the first day of my retirement after 40 years as a university professor of economics and business, most of that time at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where the first Singaporean to graduate from did so in 1927. She was Yong Soong May, a student from MGS Kuala Lumpur who was born in 1901, and on May 1, 1928 married Reverend Edward S. Lau at a church in Ann Arbor. E.S., who was born in Madura in present-day Indonesia and educated at ACS Singapore, became the longtime pastor of Geylang Methodist Church, then of Kampong Kapur Methodist Church. E.S.' and Soong May's elder son, Earnest Lau, was my 'A' level history teacher in ACS, and Earnest's wife Kwa Geok Lian (Mrs. Lau) was our music teacher in MGS Primary School.

I cite these examples to illustrate the importance of history and geography to MGS' character during the time my family members have studied here (which is the School's entire history), to Singapore, and to both our pasts and our futures. My own career has been and still is dedicated to the study of economic development in Singapore and Southeast Asia, with subsidiary foci on labor markets, women's employment, Overseas Chinese business, and higher education. Based on my decades of professional and personal experience locally in Singapore, regionally in Southeast Asia, and globally mainly in the U.S., I will focus my remarks today on three themes that resonate in all these contexts: gender, race and religion.

Gender

You will recall from MGS' history that Miss Blackmore founded our School with "nine little Indian girls" because at the time Chinese families did not want their daughters to be educated. I do not know why Siauw Ma Li's father was so "progressive" that he sent his 6-year-old daughter all the way from Medan to Singapore to be "adopted" by Miss Blackmore and educated at MGS. It is possible he was just trying to "get rid of her" as her mother was ill (and soon died); her brothers remained in Medan.

T.S. Kung and Mah Li met in church and he proposed to her through Miss Blackmore, but their marriage did not last. They parted after my grandmother, their third daughter Edna, was born in 1910. One of several unverified family explanations is that, "because of her religion", Mah Li would not accept her husband taking a second wife or concubine in order to bear a son, as would have been the norm at the time for a prosperous businessman, particularly one obsessed, as great-grandfather Kung was, with his

72nd generation direct lineage from Confucius. Both divorce and remarriage would have been very unusual at the time among patriarchal Chinese families, but Mah Li did remarry.

What is striking about Mah Li and her three daughters Darling, Susie and Edna, is that they all worked outside the home both before and for a time after marriage, mostly as schoolteachers (Edna was a nurse and journalist). This too would have been unusual at the time (1910s to 1930s) and most likely would not have happened but for their MGS education and "westernized" Christian rather than "traditional Chinese" upbringing. Early female literacy was a major benefit that came from conversion to Christianity: for example, my paternal great-grandmother Sarah Goh Sat Liap who lived from 1868 to 1950, and her mother Tiong Lok Hway, were "Bible women" who ministered the Gospel, reading it in classical Chinese, spoken in Hokkien, to illiterate women in China and then in Singapore.

According to her son Earnest Lau whom I interviewed in 2009, Yong Soong May, the KL MGS girl who was the first Singaporean to graduate from the University of Michigan (where she had gone to study medicine but then switched to the liberal arts), "was something of a local pioneer in women's rights". She "spoke many Chinese dialects and Malay, actively assisted her husband in his ministry, mainly in women's affairs, including promoting education for daughters, family planning (contraception), and mediating in family disputes. She was also active in the Women's Society for Christian Service."

By the time I was in MGS in the 1950s and 1960s, my school-friends and I all expected to go to university and work outside the home, though most of our mothers did not--those who did were teachers, a social worker and a doctor. We mostly stuck to the same professions ourselves, with four doctors, three professors and a lecturer-educator among the dozen or so of us who have remained connected over the past 60 years. In the 1970s other careers were also opening out for women, including law and accountancy, two other professions that my MGS friends entered. Law was known to us because it was the profession of MGS alumna Kwa Geok Choo (Mrs. Lee Kuan Yew), the guest-of-honor who handed us our school-leaving certificates at a graduation ceremony in 1967. Nearly all of us continued working full-time, regardless of marriage or children, in Singapore or abroad, until we reached retirement age; some are still working.

I think our MGS experience contributed to our careers in a number of ways. First, we had some excellent teachers whom we looked up to, and who encouraged our academic progress. They also tolerated our exuberance which sometimes spilled over into "naughty" or "out-of-bounds" behavior. Second, having a large group of scholastic peers both spurred us to do our best academically, in friendly competition with each other, and to some extent demystified academic success, which I feel has become over-weighted in Singapore since our time.

Third, being in an all-girls' school meant that girls held all leadership positions in school activities, so that female leadership was "natural", and it was a bit of a shock to show up in ACS Pre-U and encounter a different environment. (For example, a girl in my class, from another school, said "The director of our class play for the drama competition should be a boy", and so he was.) There was also little if any sense that some activities or careers were gendered i.e. more suited to males or females. In fact, I recall some of us (who were not very good at it, myself included) grumbling that we had to "waste time" on domestic science (cooking and sewing) classes in secondary school, when boys did not have to.

Fourth, we were engaged not just in "studies" but in a range of extra-curricular activities, which at the time were entirely self-initiated and undertaken for fun, not ECA credit. This I believe unconsciously helped us to develop all-round interests and capabilities, including the so-called "soft skills" and

"intrinsic (vs extrinsic) motivation" that employers these days seek, as well as to enjoy life. Fifth, we acquired true and long-lasting friendships valued for their own sake, and not for any "transactional" benefit which so characterizes the "networking" culture of today. As one of my friends recently said, "We had a very happy and idyllic childhood and adolescence at MGS." This contrasts vividly with the "stressful" adolescence that most Singaporean students and their families now endure.

From what I can see over six decades of interaction with my MGS friends, we grew into (mostly) self-confident and independent women, unafraid of assuming or challenging authority, endowed with the "critical thinking skills" that employers seek, but also comfortable with and tolerant of diversity. Those who married have equal relationships with their spouses.

But as a social scientist, I also recognize that for most of us, the advantages of social class dominated any gender considerations that might otherwise have inhibited our individual development. This derived primarily from our English-educated parents who were successful professionals, and educated mothers, who valued and aspired for their daughters as much as they would for sons, and could afford supporting our education "as far as you want to go".

As an economist I know that this was not the situation of the vast majority of Singapore schoolgirls in our time. We in fact belonged to a thin "educated (more so than wealthy) elite" that over the years has grown and entrenched itself, its values, norms and economic hold, in Singapore society as a whole. Hence the concerns in recent years with rising economic inequality, diminishing social mobility, increased social divisions, and the constraints of a meritocracy founded on academic achievement, in hampering our nation's continued progress in today's fast-changing world.

Despite or because of this, gender remains a relevant social and economic construct in Singapore and the world today. In 1982 I published a paper on "Women in the Singapore Economy", and in 2015 an article entitled, "Beyond Gender: The Impact of Age, Ethnicity, Nationality and Economic Growth on Women in the Singapore Economy". I found that over that time period gender disparities in education, labor force participation, sectoral and occupational distribution, and wage incomes have substantially narrowed or disappeared. But gender inequalities remain, including the over-representation of women in low-income jobs and their under-representation at the highest levels of the labor force, despite educational attainment that equals or surpasses that of men.

Particularly disappointing to me is the severe under-representation of women in our political and economic leadership. Having just one or two women in an 18-person ministerial cabinet is probably the lowest ratio in any developed country, and lower than in many developing countries, including our Southeast Asian neighbors. Being from the business world, it is also shocking to me that in 2015 women accounted for only 6% of independent directors of public company boards in Singapore, half that of the U.S.' already low 12%, compared with the 15-40% in European countries, and below even Hong Kong (10%) and India (8%). Having served on the boards of two U.S. public companies myself, I wonder if this would have happened if I had remained in Singapore (I wonder if a lot of things would have happened to me if I had remained in Singapore).

Race and Religion

Having spent so much time on gender, I will condense and merge my remarks on race and religion. Ethnic, cultural and religious diversity has been a hallmark of Singapore's population composition and civic and national identity since even before the modern city's colonial founding as a cosmopolitan

global trading hub in 1819. We all know that MGS itself was founded in 1887 with "nine little Indian girls" and the cast of the Founder's Day pageant in 1957 when I joined included several of my Indian classmates and friends, many of them Hindus. Christians were a minority in our classes, but there were daily devotions read through the school intercom system every morning, and everyone—Hindu, Buddhist-Taoist-Confucianist and Muslim—attended Monday morning chapel where prayers were said, hymns sung, and "Amen" chorused by all.

Because I did not go to university in Singapore, my time in MGS (and to a lesser extent ACS) is where I learned to be a Singaporean—not a British colonial subject, or a Malaysian, two other identities I also briefly held. Then, as now, we prided ourselves on "racial harmony" and religious tolerance, and enjoyed learning something about our diverse cultures. It is this diversity which distinguishes us from other ethnic Chinese territories (though not from Malaysia), and which gave me the lifelong gift of feeling comfortable in other places and cultures, even if I am a member of a small minority by race or gender (which is usually the case).

Thus in my travels around the world, observing and even participating in non-Christian ceremonies, celebrations and rituals is an expected pleasure—whether in Tibetan-Buddhist Ladakh or animist Polynesia. But it is in nominally Christian-majority Ann Arbor, that I have had the most memorable such experiences—breaking fast at Ramadan with Muslims in the summer, when the sun does not set till 10 pm, celebrating a Rosh Hashanah feast (complete with ritual prayers) with Jews, enjoying a fireworks display at Diwali (Deepavali) with Indians or Chinese New Year at my home, attending a Theravada Buddhist house consecration by Burmese monks, and so on. One of my favorite photos is of two visiting artists, Javanese Christians from Solo in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim nation, dancing in a gamelan dance-drama of the Hindu epic the Mahabharata, on a stage back-dropped by a huge pipe-organ, usually associated with church music; the gamelan itself is decorated with a very Chinese dragon. And when my MBA students come to my house for a class party, the menu has to provide for no-pork, no-beef and no-meat religious dietary restrictions.

This, of course, is the nature of our world, into which Singapore is so integrated and on which we are so heavily dependent. Yet my sense when I am here is that race and religion—which are fundamental to human identity--remain somewhat taboo subjects in daily conversation and interaction, whether because of state language policy, lack of interest, political correctness, or fear of violating anti-sedition laws, I cannot tell. Somehow, racial and religious diversity appear to me to be sources of incipient tension and mutual segregation rather than of the relaxed melding-together that I imagine characterized my own schooldays—when we thought nothing of having the Indian girls play slaves in a history class skit about Abraham Lincoln, or having an Indian vs Chinese "tug-of-war" at recess during the 1962 India-China border war. Today we might still have harmony and more marriages across racial, religious and national lines than ever before. But I'm not sure we have as much social and cultural integration across these lines, as we did before.

And What Of The Future?

Why does this matter? To me, as an economist and business practitioner, how we deal with gender, race and religion matters for Singapore's economic future. During the past half-century we have prospered by functioning as an intermediary node in the multinational networks of a globalizing world economy centered on the Christian West, with a more recent partial shift to Confucianist-Buddhist East Asia (Japan, Korea, China) and an impending further shift to Hindu-Muslim South Asia (the Indian subcontinent).

But the winds of de-globalization are now upon us, for technological, market and public policy reasons that pre-date the recent rise of populist-nationalism in the West. At the same time, Western and Japanese multinationals, Chinese state-owned enterprises and Korean conglomerates, are increasing their business interest in Southeast Asia, the "natural hinterland" that literally fed Singapore's economic rise during the British colonial era and has underpinned it to this day. As regional if not national consolidation takes place worldwide, our destiny lies even more closely with Southeast Asia, which my longtime acquaintance Kishore Mahbubani, Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at NUS has called "the only multi-civilisational laboratory (of world cultures)….. (which) makes the extraordinary ignorance of Singaporeans about South-east Asia very depressing. Such ignorance is very dangerous. Geography is destiny. Ultimately, Singapore's fate will be determined by developments in South-east Asia. We ignore South-east Asia at our peril. At the same time, there are rich opportunities in Asean."

I went to the University of Michigan to study for my PhD, and returned to spend most of my working life there, because I was "chasing Southeast Asia", with which our University has been deeply engaged since the 1870s, and especially since the 1960s when our Center for Southeast Asian Studies became (and remains) a U.S.-government-funded National Resource Center. Among other things, we have the world's best university research museum on Southeast Asia, and one of the two best university-based Southeast Asia libraries in the U.S. We have taught beginning, intermediate and advanced Thai, Indonesian, Filipino and Vietnamese language for 25-65 years (depending on the language) and this year our Javanese gamelan celebrated its 50th anniversary. I myself served as Director of our Center for Southeast Asian Studies from 2005-2009, and have done research and travelled throughout the region, including frequently to Burma since 1984, during its "dark ages". My American MBA students who came to Ann Arbor to study one of our languages have worked in Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia in senior positions for multinational companies and their own enterprises. One even became a Singaporean.

Ironically, I doubt that I would have the deep knowledge of and extensive networks in Southeast Asia that I have, if I had returned to Singapore after my studies to develop my career here. Yet virtually none of the one thousand or so Singaporeans, many of them MGS girls, who have studied at the University of Michigan since I first went there as a PhD student in 1972 has taken advantage of our rich Southeast Asian Studies resources and program. As the faculty advisor of our Singapore Students' Association since its founding in 1984, I would advise students every year to study a Southeast Asian language. In the 33 years since, I know of only four who have done so, and none who majored or minored in Southeast Asian Studies. (Many years after graduating, some have told me they regretted not following my advice, mainly for career reasons.) Singaporean students at Michigan have studied Japanese, Korean, French and even Russian, but they have evinced little to no interest in our own neighborhood.

Kishore Mahbubani refers to this as "mental colonisation". In our generation, he says, Singaporeans believed that "we were trapped in a poor, backward region. Europe represented the future. South-east Asia represented the past. Now history has come full circle. Europe represents the past. South-east Asia represents the future. This should be an obvious point. Yet, I am prepared to take a bet that most of my fellow Singaporeans would disagree. Given a choice, they would rather visit London or Paris, not Jakarta or Ho Chi Minh City."

What can MGS—and you—do about this? Kishore calls for "a national effort to ramp up the knowledge and understanding of South-east Asia among Singaporeans". I believe this needs to start young, including with the study of Southeast Asian languages. MGS girls have done this before. My great-grandmother Siauw Ma Li spoke many Chinese dialects, and taught "Arabic" (probably *Jawi* Malay) at

MGS Ipoh, while Earnest Lau's mother Yong Soong May, also spoke many dialects and Malay, and both their husbands preached the gospel in English and Malay. Yet a young Singaporean at MIT told me recently that he believes "One cannot learn more than two languages—and for us in Singapore, those are English and Chinese (Mandarin)". But any number of Chinese Malaysians can, as a result of which they are highly-desired employees by corporations, including multinationals headquartered in Singapore, and are linguistically equipped to run their own entrepreneurial ventures throughout Southeast Asia, and also in China and India.

But language is only a key that can get you in the door. It alone cannot make you comfortable with the very different people you will meet and mingle with inside the room. I always tell my MBA students that there are only two rules for success in international business: (1) Everyone's a minority in international business. (2) Always see the world through the eyes of the other.

Being a minority or an outsider means that you lack the local knowledge, social networks and personal relationships that are necessary for the access and intangible understanding necessary in every business venture. You have to navigate at least two cultures—your home and the local host culture, perhaps that of your company that might come from a third country—from a position of structural disadvantage, something which Chinese Malaysians and other Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia are used to doing from a very young age.

Seeing the world through the eyes of the other requires knowledge, understanding and acceptance of the other party's history and culture, of which religion is a big part. As Kishore Mahbubani (and many others) have noted, Southeast Asia is a crucible of the world's great ancient civilizations and the religions that subtend them—Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam.

And this is where the MGS of today may be at a disadvantage in preparing students for their Southeast Asian future, given your emphasis on a Christian environment, which is bound to be homogeneous, unlike the heterogeneous MGS of my great-grandmother's day, and of mine. How do MGS girls today learn about other races and religions, and how to work and live with people of other races and religions, if they are not present in the School and validated by equal respect and treatment? How do they learn to survive and thrive in a multi-cultural rather than a mono-cultural world?

My own venture into Southeast Asia as a teacher rather than a tourist began in the summer of 1973, before I started on my PhD program. The then Bishop of the Methodist Church, Reverend Dr. Yap Kim Hao, invited me to be the "resource person" on a study-tour of Southeast Asia for a group of American Methodist youth, who had raised money for the project from their respective churches.

It was an eye-opening experience on many levels (including learning about the foibles of American teenagers). In addition to meeting with church members in cities, we visited communities of Methodist Orang Asli in Selangor, Dayaks in Sarawak, and Toba Batak in north Sumatra, where we also visited Medan, Siauw Mah Li's birth city, my first time there. My responsibility was to guide group discussions and analyses of economic development issues that we encountered in our travels, with no obligation to link them to religion per se, though some issues lent themselves naturally to such Biblical verses as "You cannot serve God and Mammon (Money)" and "The poor you will always have with you".

In 2014 Yale-NUS College announced the establishment of an endowed Yap Kim Hao Professorship of Comparative Religious Studies, recognizing Rev. Yap's lifelong advocacy of "the universal need to respect religious diversity, engage in dialogue and work together with people of diverse backgrounds". While

Rev. Yap himself cited the importance of reducing religious conflicts and promoting religious harmony, my emphasis today is more on the need to equip young Singaporeans, including MGS students, for our long-term economic future.

Conclusion

In summary, how do MGS' past and Singapore's future point us to MGS' future?

First, VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) is all the rage in business and leadership circles today. But it is nothing new, in both MGS' and Singapore's history. Our predecessors survived and even thrived through much more difficult circumstances, and with fewer resources, so we, much better endowed than they, should be able to too.

Second, history is identity but geography is destiny, and as in our past, our future lies in the Southeast Asian region, to which we must sojourn, again as our ancestors did, and as our global competitors are doing. This requires engaging with and even embracing those who are very different than we are, rather than retreating into what some have called "the Singapore bubble", which will only shrink.

Third, everyone needs to do their bit to develop our society as we face serious geopolitical, economic, demographic and technological challenges that will require the exercise of courage and imagination to overcome—again, as our history tells us, we have done before. From the MGS perspective, fortunately we know that girls can and should do anything. In my more innocent time at school, we were unaware that we could not or should not do anything, and it stood us in good stead throughout our lives and careers.

Fourth, as a consequence of these challenges, the steady high-earning professional occupations and stable "corporate jobs" to which surveys tell us most Singaporean university students aspire, will decline as they are competed or technologically disrupted away, making entrepreneurship—or creating your own job, not expecting someone else to hire you—the wave of the future, as it was of the past. Student- rather than teacher-initiated projects and extra-curricular activities are one way in which such entrepreneurial skills can be developed.

Fifth, in facing these challenges of the future, diversity is an asset and empathy a necessity as we work and play among people who are very different from us, and encourage rather than suppress the differences among ourselves. One of Singaporeans' disadvantages in our own labor market was articulated by one of my American MBA former students who worked here in a senior position in two global banks for ten years. He said, "Singaporeans all think alike, that's why we need to hire foreigners, and why we expats have job security."

Singaporeans' inclination toward conformity has also been noted by other Asians who have lived here. In a recent collection of SMU seniors' essays, an Indonesian who studied here since age 15 notes "The Singapore journey to meaning is one of a clear path—defined by good grades, good schools and eventually, a good job," resulting in a society that he found "myopic", "monotonic" and "monochromatic" compared with his home, which he acknowledged was chaotic but also colorful, exciting, stimulating—and much more entrepreneurial.

Along the same lines, one of my many Indian MBA students at Michigan who studied and worked here for as many as 12 years, and is now a McKinsey consultant in Chicago said, "I always knew that I couldn't

stay in Singapore for the long term. Had I stayed any longer I would have become very inflexible and unable to adapt to other locations." A woman MBA student who grew up in communist China, then worked here as a semiconductor engineer and is now at a Silicon valley tech company said, "Singaporeans have a predominantly strict attitude to life, marked by clear authority structures and distinct social status lines…..Singapore government managed so well that the local people are very lawful, strict and structural. Sometimes, I needed a breath though." Another Indian student used the word "claustrophobic".

This is not how I would describe the Singapore or the MGS of my youth. If indeed that is what we have become on our climb up the economic development ladder, we need to pause and take a look back. As for looking ahead, let me quote (as I often have) a senior executive from a Chinese state-owned bank, who at the wrap-up of an executive program I was directing said this, "I agree 100% with everything you have said. But you left out the most important thing. We must be brave enough to challenge authority." I would add to this, challenging ourselves, and challenging all the orthodoxies which govern our lives and work, which is required to spur the spirit of innovation and entrepreneurship that Singapore needs in the decades ahead. I wish you the best in this endeavor.