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Belly full of laughs and puffs

By KANTI BAJPAI

WHAT is it like to be a foreign academic in Singapore – an insider/outsider?

Singapore is famous for its leisure attractions, economic competitiveness and governance excellence. Much less is heard about its blossoming higher-education system. As an occasional academic visitor from the mid-1990s onwards, I was aware of the city's growing intellectual strengths. Dropping into Singapore for three or four days at a time, my time was spent not at the quays and cafes or with the economic and administrative leaders of the city, but rather in seminar rooms with foreign and Singaporean counterparts. Those rarefied visits gave me little sense, though, of what it was actually like to be an academic in the Little Red Dot.

Four years into a more permanent stay as a full-time academic here, let me share a part playful, part serious reflection on the question framing this essay.

Perhaps one of the first, and quite endearing, things I noticed is that whatever one's academic rank, ordinary Singaporeans refer to professors as "lecturers" – and this is said with some affection and reverence. Taxi drivers take me to the "lecturer condo in Clementi Road", not to the Kent Vale condominium. When I tell them to drive to "En-you-ess (NUS, the National University of Singapore) in Bukit Timah", they nod and ask "You lecturer at law – or policy?" (the law school and the public policy school share the campus).

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For students and the university staff, all academics are "Prof" with the first name suffixed – so I am "Prof Kanti". This is, of course, not just a Singaporean form of address; it is quite Asian, or at least South-east Asian. Here, too, there is a charming disregard for rank, quite refreshing and endearing in its blending of the formal ("Prof") with the informal ("Kanti") – and, it seems to me, evocative of the balanced style in which the university conducts its daily business.

Fairly early on, I also noticed the Singaporean love of meetings and everything that goes with them – agendas, minutes, reports, memos, PowerPoints, spreadsheets, organisation charts, and other such accoutrements. Even the lowliest assistant professor will find herself in meeting after meeting and will quickly have a stack of supporting papers on her desk.

Meetings are part of the Singapore governance model of kaizen managerialism dedicated to continual improvement; but they also leaven the day. Contrary to the general view, Singaporeans are not grim robotic administrators. At work, they congregate cheerily, gossip freely enough, laugh at their obsession with minutiae and order, and set about their business. Meetings mean a break from the monotonic, and they usually entail beverages and snacks. What could be more social – complaining good-naturedly about work, solving problems as you go, and downing tea and curry puffs?

So while everyone rolls their eyes about meetings, a good number of us, including the foreigners, secretly enjoy these appointments and revel in the bursts of laughter that mark them. Which brings me to the laughter: in India and at Oxford, we seldom laughed at meetings. We smirked and sniggered knowingly behind cupped hands; but belly laughing – no.

Another feature of Singapore university life to which the insider/outsider academic quickly acculturates is the swirl and eddy of numbers. Singapore's universities love to quantify, paying great attention to the ranking of universities, the number and quality of research publications, the expenditure per student, the professor-student ratio, the effectiveness of monies spent, and so on.

This is hardly unique to Singapore. The old management adage is if you can measure it, you can manage it. Measuring has its limits, to be sure. It is rather soulless, and can become a substitute for thoughtful, reasoned judgment; but at a moment in Singapore's history it served the university system well. I have no doubt that "playing the numbers game" is one of the reasons the NUS rose meteorically from a mere teaching college to 21st position in the world league tables. If you can measure it, you can improve it, at least up to a point.

A surprise for me was the powerful fascination with the West and Western learning that one encounters in the corridors and conference halls. For all the talk of Asian values and practices as well as the rise of Asia, Singaporeans measure pretty much everything intellectual in relation to the West and are far more knowledgeable about American and European than Chinese, Indian, or even neighbouring South-east Asian scholarship.

Part of the fascination with the West is, I believe, a post-colonial ambivalence and hybridity – rejection but also admiration of the imperium. Part of it, though, is Singapore's insistence on benchmarking against the gold standard. And Singapore not surprisingly has chosen the West, and the United States in particular, as its gold standard. This, too, is hardly unique to Singapore, but what is unique is the (largely) clear-eyed and self-conscious way in which the West has been constituted as the gold standard.

This brings me to another striking feature of the Singapore higher-education landscape, namely, its cosmopolitanism and easy traffic with foreigners. The word "university" has within it the Latin root, universitas ("a whole"), and surely a university campus must attract talent from all over the world if it has any pretense to global recognition. For Singapore, bringing in and retaining foreign talent is more or less inescapable. A cosmopolitan environment is therefore vital.

What is striking, though, is the comfortable integration of so many foreigners. The number of foreigners in Singapore's universities is not inconsiderable, yet there is little resentment at their presence, even when they hold positions of authority. As a foreigner you have to adapt to Singapore's rules, ambitions and work culture; but you are heard respectfully, there is "give" in the system, and allowances are made. By allowances I don't mean formal exceptions, but rather a social-psychological adjustment that Singaporeans fairly routinely make to allow for the confusion or awkwardness of foreigners.

As a foreign academic in Singapore, I have built my personal and professional life in a global city. Singapore provides wonderful amenities, world-class hospitals and schools, all the goods and services I could reasonably want, and communication in the English language. Most importantly, it offers an array of international cultural products and resources – cinema, classical music, theatre, the plastic arts, museums and galleries, fashion and sports, modern architecture, and congenial public spaces.

Foreign academics like me, and their families, want a rewarding material life but also a vibran cultural life, leisure opportunities but also aesthetic opportunities, and intellectual stimulation but also stimulation of the spirit. Singapore has understood that as a global city it must deliver a full and engaging urban life connected to the currents and flows beyond its shores – for its own citizens as well as for the foreigners in its midst. To be a foreign academic in Singapore is to live a satisfying life in this respect too, for Singaporeans have made sure that we can have our cake and our culture too.

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