

By Invitation

In search of Singaporean idealism

A meeting with a young Dutchman spurs the writer to reflect on the deficit of this quality among Singapore youth.



One of the small privileges of my life is being invited, from time to time, to attend the annual Davos meetings of the World Economic Forum (WEF).

Hence, from Jan 19 to 23 this year, I found myself wandering through the corridors of the WEF Congress Centre. I learnt a lot.

I also got an opportunity to shake the hands of many globally renowned individuals, including Mr Kofi Annan, Mr Tony Blair, the Queen of the Netherlands, Mr Benjamin Netanyahu and Mr Fareed Zakaria, to name a few.

Yet, the most impressive individual I shook hands with is 21 years old. His name is Boyan Slat, a young Dutchman who has made it his life's mission to rid the oceans of plastic. Over the last 30 to 40 years, millions of tonnes of plastic have polluted the oceans. Most of it comes from land-based sources.

Mr Slat has been working on this life mission since the age of 16.

Initially, he was disappointed. He ran into a wall of rejections. He contacted hundreds of companies for sponsorship. All turned him down. But then, he had a breakthrough in 2013, after his TEDx talk went viral.

Suddenly, hundreds of thousands of people were clicking on his website. He set up a crowdfunding platform. It raised US\$80,000 (S\$113,000) in 15 days. His Ocean Cleanup project has now designed a V-shaped array of floating barriers that can passively capture plastic.

(Go to theoceancleanup.com to look at his plans.)

Mr Slat's idealistic venture has received the support of many powerful people, including Mr Marc Benioff, the head of Salesforce. Indeed, it was in the office of Salesforce where I met him, together with Mr Peter Schwartz, a well-known futurist who is an old friend of Singapore.

Mr Slat wanted to meet me because he also has a plan to clean up the Strait of Malacca. And he wanted me to approach some Singapore companies to support this project. (I plan to approach

them after writing this column.)

The big question that came to my mind after meeting Mr Slat was this: Why is a young Dutchman worrying about the Strait of Malacca? Why aren't there any Singaporean teenagers worrying about the dirty and polluted waters around Singapore?

The simple answer – which may be a painful truth for us – is that there is a deficit of idealism among Singapore's youth.

THE IDEALISM PARADOX

A column like this cannot possibly answer why our youth tend to be less idealistic. It could be due to the strong prevailing culture of pragmatism. It could be the overwhelming pressure from Singapore parents on their children to make sensible and practical life decisions, like focusing on good vocational training, whether it be in polytechnics or in practical courses in universities. Singapore parents believe that the best way to help their children is to encourage them to be sensible early.

Yet, one paradox of life is that idealism in youth can pay off handsomely in the long run. A good example of this is provided by Dr Henry Kissinger. I had always assumed that he was a pragmatic soul who was a disciple of Machiavelli and Metternich.

Yet, a distinguished Harvard historian, Professor Niall Ferguson, has produced a weighty volume on Dr Kissinger's early life (1923-1968) which is titled simply *The Idealist*.

Prof Ferguson challenges all the popular beliefs about Dr Kissinger as being a very cunning and manipulative statesman. Instead, he asserts that what drove Dr Kissinger was a deep sense of idealism. Instead of being inspired by Machiavelli and Metternich, Dr Kissinger was inspired by philosophers like Baruch Spinoza and Immanuel Kant.

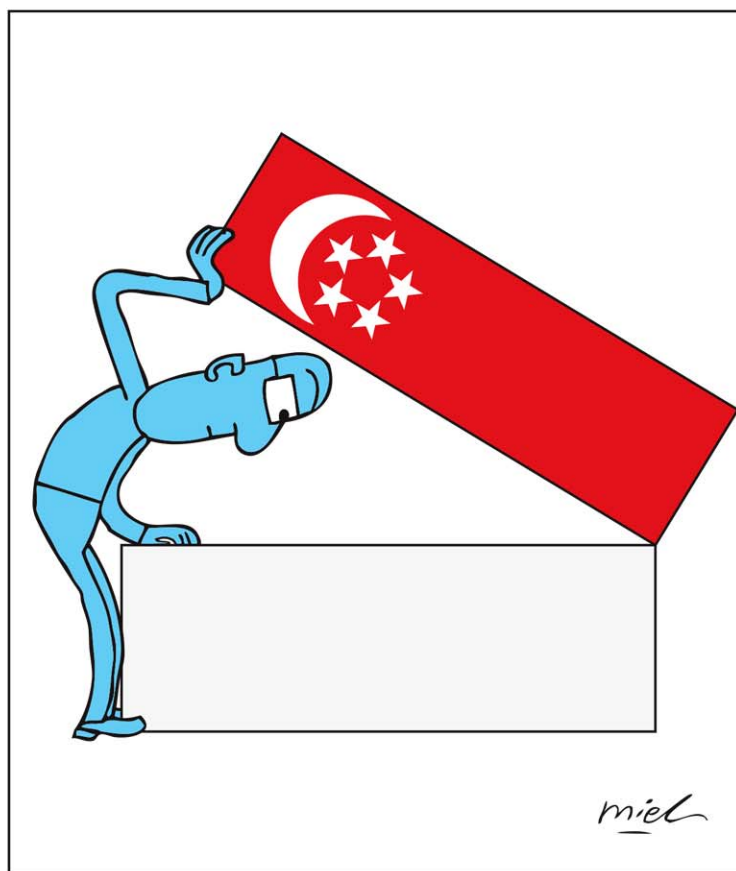
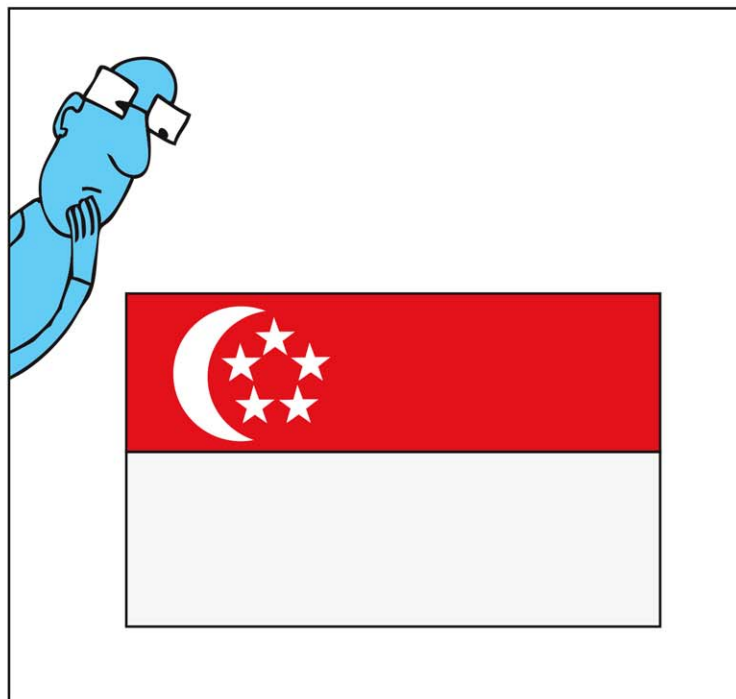
Prof Ferguson points out that in an address to the United Nations General Assembly on Sept 24, 1973, just two days after he was confirmed as Secretary of State, Dr Kissinger cited Kant in his address.

He said: "Two centuries ago, the philosopher Kant predicted that perpetual peace would come eventually, either as the creation of man's moral aspirations or as the consequence of physical necessity. What seemed utopian then loomed as tomorrow's reality; soon there will be no alternative."

Most cynics do not speak of "perpetual peace". Idealists do, and Dr Kissinger did so.

IDEALISM PAYS OFF

I have also learnt from my personal life that idealism pays off in the long run. When I enrolled in the National University of Singapore



(NUS) in July 1967, I did the sensible and practical thing and studied economics, sociology and philosophy. In my second year, for the first time, NUS allowed second-year Arts and Social Sciences students to do three subjects instead of majoring in one or two. I ended up as the only student to study three subjects, with a sensible allocation of four units to economics and two units each to sociology and philosophy.

Early in my second year, I

discovered that the economics courses were taught in a mechanical fashion. Instead of being asked to challenge major concepts, we were asked to memorise them. It was learning by rote. By contrast, in every philosophy class, we were asked to challenge everything.

Hence, each time I attended a philosophy class, I would feel sparks going off, metaphorically speaking, in my brain.

As a result, I did something

impractical. I asked NUS for permission to repeat my second year so that I could major only in philosophy and drop economics and sociology.

Fortunately, NUS agreed. My President's Scholarship was suspended for a year. Since my family could not afford to pay my fees, I taught night classes, known as *Lembaga*, to earn money to pay for one year of studying philosophy.

Did it pay off? It paid off handsomely. Many years later, when I had to defend Singapore's position in hostile fora (like the Non-Aligned Movement), I rediscovered the power of logic.

In one meeting, we fought against the Cuban delegation, which was then defending the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In response, I used simple logic. I said that by arguing in favour of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Cuban delegates supported the principle that a big neighbour could invade and occupy a small neighbour. If the Cuban delegates accepted this principle, they were creating a logical precedent which would justify an American invasion of Cuba.

Needless to say, the Cuban delegates were embarrassed. Logic is irrefutable. Of course, the hundreds of speeches I gave in the UN, as well as the past two decades of active writing (including five books), were also helped by the study of philosophy.

In short, an unwise, impractical and idealistic decision to study philosophy as a teenager proved to be a wise long-term decision.

In the same way, I do believe that if we can increase the idealism quotient of young Singaporeans, the lives of Singaporeans would become much richer. And Singapore as a society will have more than its fair share of great dreamers who will strive to make the world a better place.

Let me conclude with a simple suggestion to improve the idealism quotient of young Singaporeans.

The advantage of living in Singapore is that we live in a stable, well-ordered society.

Paradoxically, the disadvantage of living in Singapore is that we live in a stable, well-ordered society.

As a result, young Singaporeans are rarely exposed to more challenging environments where they have to deal with real challenges, including poverty.

There is an amazingly simple solution. Each class in a Singapore secondary school should be paired with an equivalent class in a poor district in South-east Asia, be it in Myanmar or the Maluku Islands.

Each year, once a year, the Singaporean children should visit the class they are paired with.

Each Singapore child should become a buddy of someone who comes from a really poor family.

I have absolutely no doubt that this simple experience will unleash the inherent moral sensibility of any young Singaporean and make him or her into a far more idealistic Singaporean. A Singapore with a surplus of idealism will end up as a far better society.

Of this, I have no doubt. The paradox of idealism is that it always pays off in the long run.

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