



A photograph from the book, *Hard At Work*, where working people were interviewed so they could tell their stories in their own words, to create a narrative of their working lives, and in the aggregate, a kind of "people's history". PHOTO: NG SHI WEN

# In the workers' own words

Gerard Sages

We work longer hours in Singapore than workers in any other Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development country, according to the Ministry of Manpower. And the results of all that hard work are visible around us every day, in Singapore's development and progress. But how do people feel about their jobs? How do they look forward to – or look back on – their working lives? Between 2014 and 2017, I worked with a group of students from the National University of Singapore to interview hundreds of working people, inviting them to tell their stories in their own words, to create a narrative of their working lives, and in the aggregate, a kind of "people's history". My co-editor Ng Shi Wen and I narrowed down some 60 interviews for publication in a new book. The interviews were conducted in many different languages, but mostly in English. Here are two interviews.

## Academic ghostwriter

I'm 23 years old and I'm currently an undergraduate at NUS. I used to work as a product manager for a local defence contractor, but currently I work as an academic ghostwriter.

As the name suggests, I write anonymously on behalf of academics, students and people generally in the university system. I've been ghostwriting for... let's see... five years now? Part of it is you write for people who are... people who contact you tend to be people who know you because there needs to be a high level of trust. So yeah, I have written for personal friends before.

Most of my clients tend to be very wealthy. They're mostly foreign students who come to Singapore to study in private universities, hoping to get the credentials, but they don't really want to work for it. In fact, they can barely speak passable English and they enrol in these private universities, like, well I won't name names but we all know who they are; and they essentially want to go back with a foreign sounding degree. University of London or... Greenwich... or some other English-sounding name, right? And when I say wealthy, it is really wealthy. It's the kind that, well... for one of my clients, for her 16th birthday, she got a Bentley, so I am talking about the top 1 per cent sort of wealthy; because, for my services, 2,500 words is \$250 – three essays cost you an iPhone! So especially the China Chinese community in Singapore, they tend to keep coming regularly. Another group that you see is Singaporeans who are desperate to get a good grade, you know, they're really stressed and they come to me for a quick fix.

What you are getting is original, but it's not yours so it's technically plagiarism. But it's impossible to catch – no amount of software can detect a ghostwriter. There are cases where some of my clients have been sort of, like, suspected by their supervisors or their lecturers but all the lecturer can do is kind of like, "Okay, it doesn't sound like you are capable of writing this, I reject it, I want you to submit a new one." But in the end he still has to accept it because there is no way to prove that it is not from the student. There is an entire shadow army of people like us, you know. In many universities, you shouldn't be surprised to find that many of your competitors on the bell curve aren't actually your classmates, but rather, us ghostwriters.

To date, I've written three honours dissertations. Their supervi-

sors had no idea what's going on, they think they're talking to their student when in reality, they're really talking to me, and the student just keeps track of the progress and makes it seem like he or she is the one who is doing all the work.

For me, the point came when a friend referred a client from a local university. He had forgotten he had two essays due that midnight and he came to me begging me to do it since he really doesn't study and goes out partying all night. I said okay I'll do it, I charged him double, of course, because the work was insane, and he actually got an A. It turns out that the module was actually a really difficult module and he was one of the top in the class for that paper. So my friend got really really upset, because he really worked really hard for his A, whereas this guy just paid for the service.

It kind of made me think for a moment that, okay, maybe I am kind of like killing what education means. But in another way, I realised that education is already dead, that in systematising education with standardised testing and tuition schools, we've made it easy to game. In Singapore, the tuition we've received just because our parents could pay for it, all the extra advantages we had that other kids may not have had, it's all part of a whole industry. And as long as you have a system like that, you will have wealthy elites who will game the system at the expense of others.

The ironic thing is, I got into ghostwriting because I really love learning. But at school all you've got is standardised tests, and I never did well on them. You know, my JC lecturer told me not to read outside the syllabus because it's not tested. I wanted education to be something more. Then when I didn't do well for my A levels, I just went into the army. So while I'm doing my NS, one of my friends, she was studying law at the University of Bristol, and she decided that okay, for one of her assignments she would let me have a go. What drove me to do it was the fact I refused to believe I wasn't good enough to enter a foreign university. By then, I had been rejected by 13 different scholarships and taking that assignment was my way of rebelling against the system. And I managed to pass four law modules at the University of Bristol. Okay, so maybe I didn't do exceptionally well, but the fact that I managed to pass four modules from one of the best law schools in the world, to me, showed that education was about more than doing well on standardised tests or getting into some famous university.

So, I guess, the moral dilemma is sort of like, not really there for me. Until you stop the army of bureaucrats who want to impose standardised testing, you will never stop this army of ghostwriters. But even if you pay your way through, ultimately it's what you get out of it that matters. So I consider myself an intellectual rebel, if you will, and ghostwriting is my way of saying education is about more than just a grade.

Interview by Ng Li Ying

## Funeral director

You not pantang (Malay: superstitious) one right? Because I just pang gang (Hokkien: got off work), haven't shower with huay zui (Hokkien: flower water, to remove bad luck).

You know right, after we ORD (operational ready date, the end of national service), I went to work at a design firm. It's a family business lah, small company, all family members but they all sibe ho (Hokkien: very good) one. So after working for four months ah, one day I just tell my boss, I quit, I want to be an undertaker. Because I always tell my boss my dream is to be an undertaker, because when you young you watch WWF, got the wrestler Undertaker and you want to chokeslam people and then put him into the coffin. No lah, joking, joking.

But yah lah, I always very interested in the undertaking business.

When I was 16, I join a lion dance troupe because like sibe cool but people in there mostly ah beng (brash), so I very sian (Hokkien: fed up) because I'm not an ah beng and I don't like to fight and all that. So I join a few months and quit because I don't like the people there. Then I join a Taoist temple because they got tiao dang (ritual in which the deity possesses the body of the medium), like very cool. Wah, also a lot ah beng in there you know. Then the adults there introduce a job to me, to be a night caretaker at funerals, to jaga (take care of) the things there, the coffin and watch out for cats because they say cats like to climb on top of the coffin. Yah, so when I doing night watch at different funeral managed by different funeral companies right, it was sibe boring, then I walk around and see the Buddhist altar. So I got very interested in wanting to know what are they for and all the Taoist/Buddhist stuff, like why need to use lotus candle, why for some funeral the coffin is placed vertically and some horizontally.

Sorry, I sidetrack a lot. Yah, so that day I quit my design job, my boss very brother one. He asked the finance woman, which is my lady boss, to issue me my pay straightaway. Wah, then I walk out and it hit me, I tomorrow boh gang zoh and my mother will kao peh kao bu (Hokkien: nag) at me why I quit my job. So I Google and called up 40 over funeral companies. You guess how many funeral companies there are in Singapore! Wah, yah, how you know ah? Got 100 over companies! So after calling 40 over, my current company accepted to interview. Heng ah (Hokkien: lucky!) I was about to kill myself liao, call so many companies, no one really want to hire me, some more I'm so young, 24 years old only at that time and no experience, sibe heng this company accept me.

Now I'm working here for more than two years already, and I can tell you: I am working for the passion. Everybody in the industry will know me, you ask them who is the best they will tell you it's Jason. Really, because when I work I do everything sweet sweet (Hokkien: beautifully) one, I put myself in the family's shoes. Then the family

will be very thankful and tell me, thank you for helping to serve my papa or mama.

So two months ago, I received a call when I was working, my dad called me to tell me my aunt might be passing away soon. I work long enough and I was very calm, so I just told him okay relax, I will come down when I finish work. So after work I went home to get my aunt's identity card, because when the worst happen, you will need it. So when I got home, they called me to tell me that she passed away, so I went down to the hospital, pass the nurse the identity card – if not, they will not release the body for embalming...

So I was thinking siao liao (Hokkien: madness), because my company is not the cheapest. But I also don't trust the other companies, because their facilities I know one. The embalming place, so dirty you know not, it's like a rat's hole. My facility at least I know because I will always clean it and I know it's clean. I don't want to decide for my family, you know? Later every Chinese New Year my relatives will nag at me say, "Wah lao eh Jason, why you ask us to engage such an expensive funeral company for auntie's funeral?" Wah, very stress you know? So I told them, I do not want to set the decision of which company to engage, but for now, let's invite auntie back to my company embalming home to do just embalming. So yah, in the end my aunties, uncles just decided to let my company take charge of my aunt's final journey. Which was good because I can rest assured that my aunt's final journey was well taken care of.

I really love my profession, but to be honest, the pay doesn't really justify the long hours and sacrifices that we make for the job. Sometimes I don't get to go home because I'm on standby and there are a lot of cases. You can't control when you got case, right? If that person choose to go at that time, even if it's nearing the end of your shift, you just got to suck thumb and do your job. My pay is comfortable enough for me, but I just feel that it is not fairly compensated. This job takes a toll on our health, you know?

I tell my boss already, the pay is not attractive enough to retain staff. You see, the staff here ah, come and go one. The turnover rate is so high, young people don't want to do this job because of the pay and the job is not very respectable. Older people with family, need to take care of family, where can be on standby, work until so late? Actually, other company paying a lot higher but if I jump there, I won't be happy because the working culture not good, they are all very unprofessional and they don't have the passion and compassion. So now I just cin cai (Hokkien: be easy-going) lah, when I have a girlfriend in the future, need to BTO (Build-To-Order, applying for a Housing Board flat) or touch wood ah, shotgun (wedding) my girlfriend, then I jump company lor.

Interview by Bernard Loh Meng Chin

WHAT THE RESULTS REVEALED

Okay, so maybe I didn't do exceptionally well, but the fact that I managed to pass four modules from one of the best law schools in the world, to me, showed that education was about more than doing well on standardised tests or getting into some famous university.



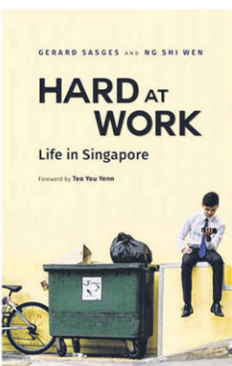
THE ACADEMIC GHOSTWRITER

LOVE IT, BUT IT'S TOUGH

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THE FUNERAL DIRECTOR



The stories on this page are excerpted from a new book: *Hard At Work – Life in Singapore*

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- The book is available at Kinokuniya, Times outlets, Books Actually and other leading independent bookshops.
- Gerard Sages received a PhD from UC Berkeley in 2006. In 2012, he joined the National University of Singapore where he is an assistant professor in the Department of South-east Asian Studies.
- Ng Shi Wen is a photographer, educator and chronicler of everyday life. She is the founder of Photo Rikiki and has taught at the National University of Singapore and School of the Arts, Singapore.