



Professor Tommy Koh chatting with a reader at the launch of *Fifty Secrets Of Singapore's Success* at the National Museum of Singapore yesterday. ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO

Singapore's recipe for success in 340 pages

Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh compiles essays on Republic's key accomplishments

Fabian Koh

A group of university students from Mexico and the United States asked Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh early last year what Singapore's secret was in its successful evolution in just a few decades from a developing to a developed country.

Professor Koh's reply was that there was not one secret but many, enough to write a book.

That gave him an idea, one that finally took form when he received a book from the former Finnish ambassador to Singapore, called *100 Social Innovations From Finland*.

Prof Koh's book, *Fifty Secrets Of Singapore's Success*, was launched by Mr Eddie Teo, the chairman of the Council of Presidential Advisers, at the National Museum of Singapore yesterday.

Curated by Prof Koh and published by Straits Times Press, the 340-page book consists of 50 essays written by leaders and experts in various fields in Singapore. They address how Singapore, a small state, has succeeded economically and in eight other areas.

For instance, National University of Singapore president Tan Eng Chye writes about the country's universities, Singapore's first Chief of Defence Force Winston Choo gives his take on creating a people's army through national service, and Ambassador-at-Large Chan Heng Chee addresses Singapore's relationship with the major powers.

Straits Times senior education correspondent Sandra Davie penned an essay on how Singapore's students outshone the rest of the world in mathematics. She called it one of the most memorable stories she has covered in her over two decades on the education beat.

"Singapore Math, as our approach to teaching mathematics is popularly called, has travelled the world. It is available in print and digital forms and in many languages. It is cited, researched and used in many schools around the world and has lifted the performance of their students," she said.

Mr Christopher Tan, the national broadsheet's senior transport correspondent, also contributed an essay on the Republic's Electronic Road Pricing (ERP) system.

"ERP has served us well since it was launched in 1998, but I think it is high time we moved to a more so-

phisticated iteration which charges according to time, place, as well as distance clocked," said Mr Tan.

He said a sharper tool would also be a more equitable system.

ST associate editor Vikram Khanna wrote about Singapore's fiscal policies, which he called one of the country's greatest economic strengths, through his observations of over 25 years.

"But there's more to it than just prudent budgeting. The fiscal soundness for which Singapore is renowned also derives from its astute design of policies around public enterprises, pensions and healthcare, which have produced good outcomes without straining public finances," he said.

In a preface to the book, Prof Koh said: "My hope is that the 50 success stories in this book will be of interest to people around the world. I hope that this book will inspire other countries to achieve their own dreams."

Notably, Singapore is among the world's least corrupt countries, has one of the highest home ownership rates and world-class schools and healthcare facilities.

The country has also contributed significantly to the development of the Association of South-east Asian Nations (Asean).

Singapore has played a leading role in the United Nations, such as in negotiations for the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, and the UN Convention on International Settlement Agreements Resulting from Mediation – also known as the Singapore Convention on Mediation – which was signed here last year.

The Republic also contributes to the international community. For



Fifty Secrets Of Singapore's Success is available for \$37.45 at all major bookshops and online at shop.sph.com.sg

instance, it helped create the 2010 Singapore Index on Cities' Biodiversity, a UN-endorsed tool for assessing biodiversity conservation efforts.

It was also involved in the 2008 creation of the Santiago Principles, a set of International Monetary Fund-endorsed guidelines for sovereign wealth funds.

In a foreword to the book, President Halimah Yacob said: "Our journey has not been easy in the face of global challenges, but we have always pulled through because we were determined to make something for ourselves."

She said she hoped the 50 essays in the book would let Singaporeans better appreciate the nation's shared journey, and also serve as "useful case studies" for other countries.

Mr Tan Ooi Boon, supervising editor for Straits Times Press, said the book helps to showcase the literary works of Singaporeans to the world, and will benefit both local and overseas readers.

fabkoh@sph.com.sg

Tommy Koh sings praise of hawker centres at book launch

The hawker centre has "saved Singapore" as it is the one place ordinary Singaporeans can go to have a good meal at an affordable price, Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh said yesterday at the launch of the book, *Fifty Secrets Of Singapore's Success*.

Compiled by Professor Koh, the book consists of 50 essays written by leaders and experts from various fields in Singapore about how the small city-state has succeeded in a number of areas.

In his opening speech, Prof Koh said: "Hawker food makes Singapore unique. It is part of our national identity."

He added: "I must say that my wife and I are great fans of hawker centres. We go to the wet market every week. We often have lunch on a Sunday or Saturday in one of the hawker centres."

Mr Eddie Teo, the chairman of the Council of Presidential Advisers, who launched the book, earlier expressed surprise that it contained an essay on hawker centres, along with one on toilets.

He said: "At first glance, many will fail to see the relevance of these two subjects."

However, he said the essays, written by World Toilet Organisation founder Jack Sim and Singapore Management University president Lily Kong, "convincingly explained how important they are for nation building and national development".

Mr Teo added that the 340-page book would be useful for young Singaporeans, who may not even recognise the authors of the essays.

"Sadly, my 10 years as chairman of the Public Service Commission has left me with the impression that many of our brightest students have very little knowledge of Singapore's history," he said.

Many, he said, admitted that they had never heard of former deputy prime minister Goh Keng Swee, and also confused Singapore's first foreign minister S. Rajaratnam with the late veteran opposition figure J. B. Jeyaretnam.

"So, I hope that this book will not only reach foreigners, but will also find its way into the hands of younger Singaporeans, if not the hard copies, at least the e-version," Mr Teo said.

But he added a caveat for young Singaporean readers. He said that while it was important to know the past to understand the future, they needed to think of their own solutions for new and future problems.

"I'm not advising them to be as frugal as Dr Goh or as negligent about work-life balance as Lee Kuan Yew," he said, adding that they must help address Singapore's problems with their own unique solutions.

"But, to succeed, they must have the same passion, commitment and love for Singapore, which our founding generation leaders clearly had," he said.

Prof Koh in his speech said the book had a message for other developing countries – that by pursuing sound policies, having honest and competent leaders as well as a good public service, they, too, can overcome their limitations.

He said: "Singapore is too small to be a model. And the world is too diverse to have one single model. We are not a model, but we can be a source of inspiration. We can be a source of practical solutions to many of the problems that developing countries face."

In response to a question, Prof Koh said the lack of natural resources had forced Singaporeans to accept the ethic that "the world does not owe us a living". He added that Singapore was forced to put a heavy emphasis on education, healthcare and housing, to ensure the population remains "happy and productive".

Fabian Koh

INSPIRATIONAL ISLAND

Singapore is too small to be a model. And the world is too diverse to have one single model. We are not a model, but we can be a source of inspiration. We can be a source of practical solutions to many of the problems that developing countries face.



PROFESSOR TOMMY KOH