

By Dr Toh Han Chong, Editor

Is Singapore flat-chested? Reflections on Globalisation

THE WORLD IS FRAPPE (BLENDED)

In April this year while on conference break, I was reviving myself on a Chocolate Peanut Butter Milkshake and a Route 66 Mushroom and Swiss Cheeseburger at the Johnny Rockets All-American Diner in Georgetown, Washington DC, a short bus ride from Bethesda, Maryland, hometown of Thomas Friedman, author of the *The World is Flat*. As I sat reading the *New York Times* editorial on illegal immigrants in the United States, a European customer asked the Hispanic waitress for an espresso. The waitress replied, "For a dollar more, you get free refills of coffee with your burger." The customer repeated her order for an espresso, and the waitress again replied, "Ma'am, for a dollar more, you get free refills of coffee with your burger." The European lady smiled – she could tell the waitress was a new immigrant to the United States and did not understand what an espresso was.

One of the greatness of the United States is its willingness and power to draw in the huddled masses from the rest of the world: from lowly patent clerk Albert Einstein to illiterate Mexicans, from Google co-founder Russian immigrant Sergey Brin, and Indian techno-geeks to Rwandan cab drivers and Chinese meatpackers.

BETTER THAN DEBT RELIEF

Globalisation is connecting us all at every level – trade, truths, titillation, blogs, baloney and bugs. Even as we witnessed the terrible spread of SARS at the speed of sound, globalisation connected policy-makers, healthcare professionals and the world scientific community to better understand and contain the SARS pandemic. Globalisation has created much fear and uncertainty. But overall, it will put more food on the tables and more money into the pockets of those who do not have enough.

Will globalisation result in downsizing and destabilisation according to the critics, or equilibration and adaptation? Good national governance and stable political systems can be put in place to redistribute globalisation goodies. That globalisation will destroy too many jobs and corrupt cultures is overhyped. I watched a Japanese movie called *Touch* on a flight home on Singapore Airlines, arguably our best global brand name. *Touch* is an endearing story about two baseball-crazy teenage brothers, their teenage female neighbour and their equally baseball-crazy families. What struck me was how America has exported its greatest secular religion, baseball, into Japan without so much

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as denting the deep cultural consciousness and integrity of Japanese society.

LA BAMBA

When I was in Houston, Texas, working as a research fellow in 1999, I had to renew my J1 visa for an extension of stay, which meant a trip to Ciudad Juarez. That's right, the same dangerous, dusty, dingy, dodgy, druggy Mexican border town with the "hungry women" serenaded by Bob Dylan in *Just Tom Thumb's Blues*. At the crack of dawn, a minivan picked us up from our highway hotel in El Paso Texas for the journey across the border. In the van were myself, my wife and two-year-old elder son, a few Indians who were software techies and some mainland Chinese. A freezing full day's wait in the immigration office in Ciudad Juarez, which included my confrontation with a horizontally challenged greasy Mexican policeman on a power trip, meant that we were the last family to get the J1 visa.

That afternoon we crossed, on foot and stroller, the bridge over the Rio Grande into the United States, together with swarms and truckloads of Mexicans seeking a better life in the New World. Government-driven pro-free trade initiatives had brought an explosion of foreign factories like assembly plants called *maquiladoras*, which possess tax advantages, to this arid US-Mexican border. Desolation Row was transformed into an Oasis of Opportunity. In 1994, Mexico became part of the North American Free Trade Agreement which opened up even more money, jobs and investments into Ciudad Juarez, making both El Paso and Ciudad Juarez culturally closer. Globalisation has made life much better for many of these Mexicans.

THE MISSION

The Singapore Ministry of Health plans to boost a stretched public healthcare that is poised to participate more actively in SingaporeMedicine, by bringing in more foreign doctors to fill a workload gap. Minister Mentor Mr Lee Kuan Yew emphasised at the Singapore General Hospital 185th Anniversary Dinner that Singapore must confront global medical competition and cannot afford not to compete for the international private healthcare market share. For some public sector doctors who are able to juggle Private Medicine with their public duties deftly (and here, we are not even beginning to speak of teaching, research and administration), their challenge is how to

grow their private practice without neglecting subsidised patient care. Our new role models would be the gracious *Thaksinomic*-trained Thai doctors at Bangkok's Bumrumgrad Hospital.

But some public healthcare doctors feel that the current care of subsidised patients could be compromised by this expansion of Private Medicine. Their view is that Public Medicine is a social responsibility with fiscal obligations. Big Business, on the other hand, is fiscal responsibility with social obligations.

If the ground troops are not able to understand the vision of their public healthcare mission, they might end up like the US soldiers fighting the Vietnam War where the mission proclaimed was to stop the domino effect of Communism but the buy-in on the ground was much harder. Even the greatest corporate CEO of his time, then Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara (nicknamed 'IBM on Legs'), with his unrivalled brainpower, management prowess, systems analysis and statistical strategy, could not reverse the outcome of the Vietnam War. He had insisted with commendable corporate rationality that by adding more US troops in Vietnam, dropping



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more bombs on North Vietnam, and piling up Vietcong body counts, the war would ultimately be won. Years later, wunderkind Robert McNamara would regret many things, including not listening more to the ground generals and not appreciating the complexities on the ground. Like a Greek tragedy, the tale of all-too-human hubris repeats itself like a long-playing record, singing “Bye Bye Miss American Pie”.

Increasing the number of foreign doctors in Singapore’s public healthcare will surely help fight the ground battle. It might free up our local doctors to move up the value chain in the Knowledge Economy, and also concentrate on more complex clinical managements. But the usual concerns of foreign intake are that of professional quality, language and culture, audit, benchmarking, acclimatisation and integration, some undesirable opportunism and possible tensions of competing with local medical graduates on a Small Island ecosystem, unlike the resource-rich American Land of Opportunity.

If the Hong Kong government allows the Hong Kong health service to open its borders to medical doctors from mainland China and beyond, it is plausible that their local doctors may protest along the streets of Wan Chai, beating bedpans and wielding stethoscopes with placards lampooning their senior administrative leaders. Indeed, the Hong Kong medical community is more protectionist and vocal.

In traditionally less expressive Singapore, some quiet murmurings of discontent might come from our doctors as they slice murderously into their croissants in the doctor’s lounge, slice a tumour mass in the operating theatre, or slice a golf ball into oblivion on the driving range.

MISS SINGAPORE AND THE C-CUP ECONOMY

At the time I was in mid-flight home from Newark to Singapore in April this year, a well-endowed Ms Carol Cheong took the Miss Singapore Universe 2006 crown. Some people felt that it was her paired natural assets that propelled her to victory, which may raise Singapore’s chances on the world stage against leggy global beauties. In an interview with the 11 May 2006 issue of *8 Days*, Carol’s tips to be a top Singapore pageant winner were:

1. Sound smart.
2. Cover up.
3. Exorcise your inner bimbo.

For Singapore to move forward in the rising Sea of Globalisation, I believe we have to move one step ahead of Carol’s maxims for local success.

1. Be smart. Because image alone, selling *koyok* or hard work are no longer enough since there are many more hardworking people in China and India and many more smart ones too, some of whom also sell *koyok*.
2. Do *not* cover up. Be open and transparent with and to the flow of information, ideas, ideals, talent, technology and tensions.
3. Exercise your inner self or end up in limbo. Minister Mentor Mr Lee Kuan Yew spoke of his admiration for America’s “Can Do” spirit when he addressed the Singapore American School recently. America’s celebration of the underdog and rugged individualism is a testament to its strength as a country. Movies such as *Mr Smith Goes to Washington*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Brubaker*, *The China Syndrome*, *Mississippi Burning*, *Rocky*, *A Civil Action*, *The Untouchables* and *Erin Brockovich* exemplify America’s enduring love affair with the underdog and the power of the Individual to effect change, and with the entrepreneurial spirit in general.

Recently, I was reading in *The Straits Times* of moving scenes of celebration in Potong Pasir on the night of the 6 May 2006 General Election, when underdog Opposition Member of Parliament (MP) Mr Chiam See Tong was returned as MP for Potong Pasir against a juggernaut campaign run by his opponent. Crowds young and old thronged the streets to cheer, hug and congratulate Mr Chiam, showing a collective heart and kampong spirit.

This true grit in the face of huge odds must surely be a plus as Singapore sails ahead in an uncharted Flat World filled with Perfect Storms. Mr Ngiam Tong Dow, Global Road Warrior Extraordinaire and pioneering Chairman of the Economic Development Board, hopes for his grandchildren’s sake that Singapore will become like an untidy Athens which survived because of its diversity of thinking, than Sparta which collapsed as a well-organised martial society filled with elitists.

The best of every Singaporean’s sinews will be needed to head to the World Cup of global competition. And we have to hope that the international referee is not *kayu*.■