

Family Throbs at the Heart of Singapore's Success

I remember the day my mother perched me on the foot of her bed and told me that I'd be going to Primary School soon. "School," she remarked crisply, "is where you learn how to take care of yourself, so when you grow up, you can take care of Mummy and Daddy." I still remember my eyes widening in resolute horror as I came to terms with the gravity of my future. I was only six years old.

Singapore, a bustling cosmopolitan city of about 5.8 million people, has long been revered for the success of its education system and the competitiveness of its economy, for which it ranks first globally. The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), considered by many to be "Education's 'World Cup'", has seen Singapore rank within the top three places in Mathematics, Reading, and Science for the past two decades (PISA was started in 1997.).

With close to zero natural resources of her own, and, against the likes of 79 participating countries and economies (China, the United States, and Finland, all-inclusive), I harbor proud incredulity: This tiny city-state has taken only 55 years to shape itself into a relentlessly formidable global competitor – but how?

I can still hear it, a circadian rhythm so familiar my eardrums still ring with it in the morning, even as I live 8,774 miles away. At 5:30am, the nation launches into clinical synchronicity as Casio alarm clocks sound off across its distance. All the city's youth sit up, bright white ceiling LEDs glaring into their ruffled bedheads. There is a hypnotic, *Oliver Twist*-esque cadence to the humdrum of bleary eyes, slow shuffling, and washing up before they throw on starched uniforms, swing their backpacks over sagging shoulders, and stumble on board 6:15 buses to school.

Then, time speeds up. In the blink of an eye, the national anthem is mumbled, pledge chanted halfheartedly, a flurry of STEM and Humanities classes, a half-hour recess (where large, soupy bowls of noodles, usually jazzed up with two dubiously composed meatballs are quickly slurped down) and more classes, all the way till 2 in the afternoon. My seven-year-old head would frequently ring, mind, and self often exhaustedly divorced in this blast of activity.

My parents did not have the luxury of this first-world stress growing up. My mother came from a different era of Singapore, surviving on a 15 cent allowance every day: it would get her the smallest plate of unseasoned noodles, with no dubiously composed meatballs. My father was from different stock, although just as impoverished. Hailing from rural Malaysia, he shines with quiet pride as he now recounts mornings spent peddling chow mein and red bean dessert soup on his mother's tricycle to make ends meet, in the absence of his opium-addicted father. There was something defiantly gritty in their actions, dignity they clawed for, and hopes that they held for a future not yet dreamt. I was to embody their faraway dream of lifelong stability they could barely imagine then.

Across my entire 12 year stint in Singapore's rigorous public education system, my parents' hopes sang in synchrony, vocalized time and again. As my father later thrived in his lifelong career as an airline pilot, my mother found first-world comfort in travel, where she was exposed to new-found-and-fangled worlds. Funnily enough, she never brought us novelty souvenirs from travels past, but always came back with best practices. The Japanese children have expensive ergonomic backpacks hand stitched from leather, she told us once. This keeps their spine aligned and the nerves in place, so they think faster. This is why they are doing so well! My siblings and I all got expensive ergonomic Japanese backpacks hand stitched from

leather that year. This same approach followed with calculators from the United States, and abacuses from China.

Even as we spoke only English at home, celebrated Thanksgiving with turkey and Christmas with an ornately adorned tree, our Eastern heritage alluded to fundamental cultural values that underpinned our eventual academic successes.

A sense of filial piety was not merely a "good-to-have"; it was part of your DNA. I observed my mother signing off on monthly checks to her mother with relish, revelling in being able to provide for generations of people she loved.

Any success I achieved in school was therefore fuelled by my mother's devotion to honor her forebears: most frequently conveyed through deliberate, offhandedly-positioned remarks for me to "work hard so you can do the same", to "be better than me, score full marks in school". As I grew, her loving sentiments crystallized into my personal attitudes. Make no mistake, this process did not come easy. I threw myself into tutoring classes that stretched late into the night, campaigned for leadership positions, and played varsity sports to beef up my resume. I became a willing, but accidental proxy for vicarious shots at another dimension of destiny my parents had never seen for themselves.

Other systems existed to remind me that I wasn't the only one who fought this hard – which only spurred me on to fight even harder. Singapore's tuition centers burst at the seams, many with preposterous waitlists and even diagnostic tests to assess just how one child's final academic performance could affect each tutor's reputation. My siblings, all older than me, metamorphosed into the Asian parent dream trio of lawyer, doctor, and engineer. All around me, everyone else seemed to want to wring out the benefits of their education and dominate their futures.

But of course, much like my parents, the privileges I have experienced have been inextricably intertwined with my birthright. As Singapore's go-getting baby boomers harnessed nascent systems of meritocracy to break out of their poverty cycles, their children dutifully perpetuated their inherited privileges onto their children, who have done the same. Such a virtuous cycle and positive progress has, however, left many who did not hop onto the meritocratic bandwagon early on yearning for much more, especially among Singapore's second largest ethnic group, the Malays, which comprise 15% of Singapore's population. The National University of Singapore observed the flip-side of perpetuated privilege in a paper written by Hasfah Binte Mohammad Kasim, stating, "More...Malay students obtain low educational achievement [and] are found in the lower rungs of the occupational ladder. The problem of poor socio-economic standing among the majority of the Malay community in Singapore remains a reality." As academic, and later, socio-economic benefits are seized upon the upper echelons of society, a greater lesson must be learned, and remembered -- much of this success is inherited and exclusively dominated by a fortunate majority, who then uplift the country's overall growth and global standing. When government-endorsed endings of material bliss don't come to fruition within a lifetime, disengaging from dreams of success often appears to be the only way to cope. More often than not, this leads to profound disappointment that translates into cross-generational economic depression. For better or for worse, family *throbs* at the heart of Singapore's education system, and every offshoot therefrom.

As I woke up each day to a pressure-cooker environment of hyper-achievement and rat racing, it was profoundly evident that all of my pressures were thoroughly surmountable. Despite the incessant alarm clock ringing and seemingly endless academic saturation, my education was never a stumbling block. Rather, it served as a crucial stepping stone that would come to elevate

the lives of those I loved, those I would come to love, and mine – in that very order of importance.

I have not written my first check to my parents; I will do that when I "become a lawyer", as my mother predicts hopefully, and I know I will do it with pride. As Singapore barrels furiously along an upward trajectory, my earnest efforts to do my best as a daughter, a future mother, and an individual fervently strive to mirror the same -- founded on love, fuelled by birth-given privilege and teeming with purpose. This, I have been taught.

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