

Session 1: Violet Oon

29 February 2020

Ngee Ann Kongsi Concourse Gallery,
National Gallery Singapore



In this conversation with Tamares Goh, restaurateur Violet Oon recalls her lesser-known lives in the arena of culture, including as one of Singapore's first arts writers in the dynamic cultural milieu of 1970s and 1980s.

Tamares Goh:

You're a well-known voice in Singapore's food scene. But what is perhaps less known about you is that you started your career as a cultural critic, an important voice in the 1970s. Your art reviews from that time included many exhibitions at Alpha Gallery. Some of your articles are featured in the exhibition, *Suddenly Turning Visible: Art and Architecture in Southeast Asia (1969 - 1989)* [STV]. Your many contributions were significant to the development of the cultural scene in the 1970s and 1980s. Can you tell us about some key moments in your career?

Violet Oon:

I think, perhaps most importantly, that everything starts with a "once upon a time." Every story—and everything in life is a story. That's how I've been approaching things in my life.

I started in 1971 as a journalist. When I look back, nothing was planned. You just make sure you have lots of fun, but be the best you could possibly be. That was a mantra from my father. He was Lee Kuan Yew's contemporary. He comes from a generation of people who were very dynamic, innovative, thinking of things like freedom, independence. He brought me up to think that you have to be the best you could possibly be.



Violet Oon in the 1970s

You just have to learn everything you can, if you're interested in it. It wasn't about whether it was going to give you a profession. All my working lives started off from my hobbies. I think another good piece of advice from my father came when I went to university in 1968 and I asked him what I should study. He said, "It doesn't matter what you study. A lot of people study what's going to give them the best jobs but by the time they graduate, everybody's there—there are 10,000 people for the three best jobs. So, you mustn't base it on that. You just study what you want. You go to university to learn how to think. It doesn't matter, so choose anything you want." I think that was a very good piece of advice.

TG:

How did you start as a journalist?

VO:

I graduated in 1971. You must remember that women like us, we grew up during the Women's Liberation Movement. Make love not war, burn the bra, miniskirts—we were inspired.

One of the trends was that women of my generation were not only burning the bra; they threw away the wok, because it was a sign of bondage for women. The reason I cook is that I was brought up in a non-sexist way. That's why I'm one of the few women my age who cooks professionally. At that time, women were expected to cater for the men in their lives. I mean, I'm a Peranakan girl, so I know what it's like—it's a very "Jane Austen life." You know, the father comes home, you're there taking off his slippers, you make the *kueh*, then he's sitting down, and after dinner you're playing the piano. It's true! It happened in homes in Malacca where I grew up. In those days, girls who were sent abroad only learned piano, ballet, nursing, or teaching. That's why women refused to cook: because it was bondage.





Violet Oon (first from right), her father Oon Beng Soon (left), and mother Nancy Oon (second from right) with friends at Kew Gardens, London (1962)

I came from that generation. But I became a journalist because of space, of a place and time. I didn't want to work in Jurong. It was a new place, like the boondocks in the middle of nowhere. It was new industrial. I didn't want to work in the Shenton Way area because it was so "secretary-ish." So, I stayed at home and did nothing. My father asked me finally, "Isn't it about time you found a job?" [Laughs] He said, "Uncle [Khoo] Teng Soon is editor at *The Straits Times*, why don't you ask him?"

I never thought I could write. In those days, we were not brought up to think that we were creative. So, I never thought I could write that way. We were brought up to believe that we're interpretive. We could only interpret other people's music, other people's plays—all other people's things. That was really how we were brought up.

I was in England from 1961 to 1963. I was in school there. I studied singing because I had a voice from young. My mother marched down to the Royal Academy of Music—we stayed on Wimpole Street. She went to the doorman, and said, "I want my daughter to learn the piano. Can you find a student who can

teach her? I want her to learn singing; can you find a student? She's also been learning theory." I finally learnt theory from the Professor of Theory in the fifth-floor attic. My singing teacher became a professional singer, and my piano teacher became the top examiner, who came to examine music students in Singapore. My mother had that daring—which I think I learnt from her—that you just go and ask. The most is people say no, right? [Laughs]

The most important thing I always felt as a journalist then—no social media, no Internet—was that you are the window to the world for your reader. To me, that was my most important task. You couldn't deviate from that. What window are you providing to the world for your reader? To be a good journalist, you actually don't put yourself in front. You have to take the background. It was, to me, so important that you captured the other person—what the other person was trying to say and do and what was happening.

Today, I went to look up something—Google is amazing—the title of one of Agatha Christie's books. I love Agatha Christie. I love murder mysteries. My taste in books is very shallow. I don't like anything deep. [Laughs] But anyway, I found the title, and it was lovely. She was married to an archaeologist and I'm sure that coloured the way she wrote. The title of the book is *Come, Tell Me How You Live*. I thought that was a most amazing title: *Come, Tell Me How You Live*.

TG:

You mentioned once that journalism is a noble profession because you provide a window to many issues for your readers. Being frank is thus very important. You have to be quite courageous as well, to charge forth. You were campaigning at the time for many issues too, such as women's issues. Can you tell us more about this?

VO:

Actually, I wasn't even going in with noble intent. It was nothing

about being frank; it was nothing about being noble. I was just intending to “come, tell me how you live.” Come and show me what you are.

I've always been brought up to fight for what you believe in. My father said, “Even if you don't agree with your mother, but you believe in it, it's okay.” So, it was never a noble thing. It was never anything like that. It was just natural that you be frank; you tell it as it is.

When I wrote about social issues as a working mother—even till now, if I'm going to advocate for something, I actually believe in it myself. For example, I interviewed Professor Wong Hock Boon when I was breastfeeding. I really believed he was correct [in his views on breastfeeding]. In those days, every woman bottle fed. I was writing about breastfeeding so I breastfed both my son and daughter. I brought my son at five months old, in a Moses basket, to Alexandra Hospital to demonstrate breastfeeding to women; to show how easy it was. It was Professor Wong's mission that I believed in and I thought I should support his mission.

Even today, I always say, “Let me find out.” I want to know; let me go and find out. You know, I will tell people who are cooking – I say, “Don't tell me there's no *taugeh*, unless you've been to 400 supermarkets. Don't tell me there isn't anything.” If man can put somebody on the moon in 1960-something, anything is possible.

TG:

Let's go back to music. You have classically trained ears—what were your thoughts on the Singapore Conference Hall as a music venue at the time?

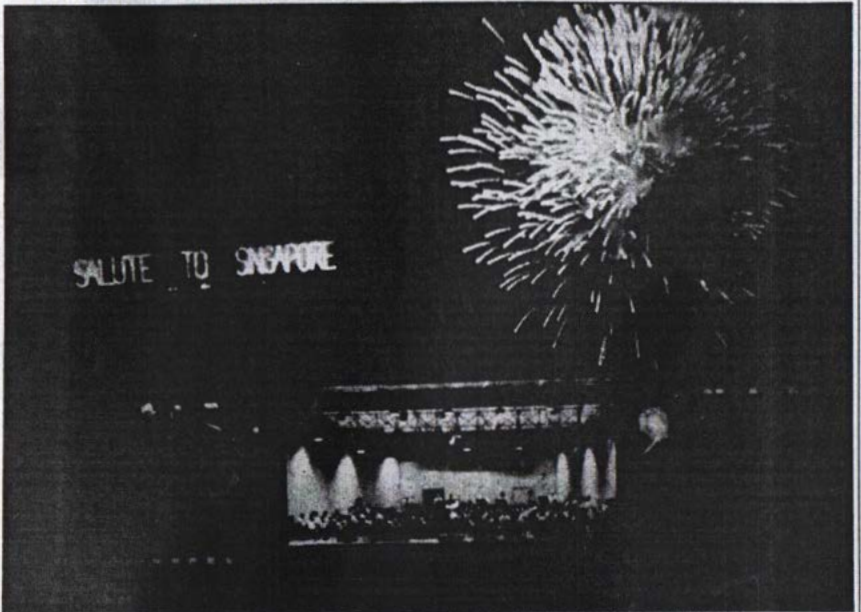
VO:

The Conference Hall was the most amazing. I was a critic. I went to the New York Philharmonic in the National Stadium. Zubin Mehta—we had people like that. The Conference Hall was the first building that was really “acoustic-ed” properly

P2 SUNDAY
SEPTEMBER 9, 1984

LOCAL NEWS

MAGICAL EVENING WITH THE NY PHILHARMONIC



A dazzling fireworks display accompanies the rousing performance of the 1812 Overture by the New York Philharmonic at the National Stadium - Monitor picture by Chew Yen Fook

by Violet Oon
Special to the Monitor

Perfection is - a moonlit night, gentle cool breezes, 27,000 fellow citizens to Stand Up For Singapore with, and the magically moving sound of the New York Philharmonic under the baton of Zubin Mehta playing Tchaikovsky's 1812 overture.

Pride is - watching our boys of the Republic of Singapore Air Force band and the Singapore Infantry Regiment band march in perfect step to the rolling beat of drums to join the world-famous orchestra in the Overture, a salute to nationalism and to Singapore.

Paradise is - the sound and

spectacle of the ear-splitting finale of the Overture accompanied by the 12 cannon brilliantly fired by our own artillery boys to the backdrop of exploding fireworks.

The 1812, undoubtedly the highlight of last night's Salute to Singapore concert by the NY Philharmonic at the National Stadium, was the culmination of an evening of patriotic and heart-trendingly emotional music, making it a Happening of the first magnitude.

The Singapore audience, usually so eager to leave any event just before it ends to beat the traffic jams, was for once loathe to leave a happening, lingering behind to hang on to that last bit of magic.

The evening was made more poignantly perfect by the threat of rain that hung over us till just before the concert began at 8 pm.

Dominating the stage and the music was the ebullient personality of Maestro Mehta. A conductor who runs a tight ship, Mr Mehta was surprisingly devoid of extraneous mannerisms, jelling his will with that of the members of the orchestra to create a sum total of rich colour, near-perfect technique, and more importantly, an almost overwhelming depth of feeling in a programme designed to tug at the heartstrings.

Mr Mehta and the orchestra stunned us by opening with a work that sounded vaguely familiar. It

turned out to be the familiar Stand up for Singapore. Lest Mr Mehta thinks that Singaporeans were not appreciative of the work by our silence, let him be assured that we were all struck dumb by how beautiful the work sounded.

The usually reticent Spore audience was unusually effusive in its applause last night. Maybe this is an indication of what music in Singapore should be like.

It was a combination of informality, of drama, of pizzazz, and of professionalism. I'm no technician, but the music must have been amplified. The wonder of it was that we did not notice it - an indication of the perfect marriage of art and artifice.

Review of a performance by the New York Philharmonic at the National Stadium by Violet Oon in *The Sunday Monitor* (1984)

and done by Lim Chong Keat. I came to this talk at the Gallery before the opening of STV because Lim Chong Keat was going to be talking. I came and I said, "Chong Keat is a Renaissance man." Until now, he's an amazing fine figure of a man. Just to tell you: all the women of my generation were lusting after him. [Laughs] And he still looks "lust-able," even in his nineties!

He's got such energy and dynamism, but he admired other people. He created Alpha Gallery [Editor's note: Lim was a catalyst and staunch supporter of the Alpha Gallery]. I got to know him because he found out I sang, so he just hijacked me. He had a clavichord and harpsichord in his house in Starpoint in Pasir Panjang, which was a Mecca—artistic people went there. I think he got obsessed with acoustics. He did the Conference Hall with the best acoustics. I heard Victoria de los Ángeles singing there. We had the top musicians and the top artistes coming to town. I heard Ravi Shankar.

Another "concert hall" was the Shangri-La Ballroom. There was no Esplanade, but it was such a dynamic period. I started writing in 1971. I think I stopped writing full-time, maybe in mid-1980s. It was such a period of dynamism, excitement, when you were in music and the arts. We had amazing impresarios—the word is hardly used now. I think a lot of us remember Donald Moore. He was one of the British who came. He had a gallery; he brought The Royal Ballet. I saw Margot Fonteyn.

To me, I was so fortunate to be able to meet these people and to go, "Wow." There's nothing more exciting than to be in the presence of a great talent, to, sort of, admire. I think admiration is so important.

Would you like to show my Arthur Yap painting? [TG shows photograph on screen] I met Singapore artists. There was Thomas Yeo, Anthony Poon. I was so excited because these were people who actually created stuff. Now, this painting was a wedding gift I requested from my friends. I was so stupid. I never collected anybody's art. I could be standing on a fortune

now, but I was just admiring. It didn't occur to me that I could buy it, you know?

I admired Arthur because he was a schoolteacher who wrote poems and created art. This painting disappeared for about 15 years—I'm not joking. I couldn't find it in my flat. Then I moved at the end of last year. It suddenly turned visible; it was hidden somewhere. [Laughs] That's why the colours are so intact—because it never saw sunlight. It's so powerful, but he was this gentle, gentle person whom I interviewed. I loved it that he wrote poetry.



Painting by Arthur Yap belonging to Violet Oon

At the time I wrote about art, it was so exciting. The artists were not painting to be collected. They were not painting to be hopefully doing well at auctions. They were painting to express themselves and painting where it was new horizons and new beginnings; belonging as a nation, as a people, because most people were from immigrant stock.

TG:

Could you tell us about some of the major events you put together at the time? How did they influence the perception of art?

VO:

Okay, the other thing is, when you're brought up in my generation, you're just very daring. I was approached by my friends in a PR company in Hong Kong who wanted to do a bond dealers conference here in 1986—before the market crashed. Goldman Sachs wanted to have the best party of this conference. You know, banks are competitive, right? They wanted the Sultan of Johor's palace.

I said, "Why don't you come to the National Museum?" At that time, I was very in touch with City Hall, where I would interview ministers. I went to the Director for Culture, Mr Lee Wai Kok. I had such an admiration of art and people who are creative that, to me, the best party in the world is in the museum. Look at the Met Gala today. They'd never had a party at the National Museum before. So, I said, "Mr Lee, can we have the museum?"

Mr Lee was a very "People's Association type," if you know what I mean. [Laughs] So first of all, I said, "Mr Lee, do you want \$50,000?" The whole museum acquisition budget for Singapore was \$30,000 for the year 1985. So, the most important: "Mr Lee, do you want \$50,000 for the Museum? But you'll have to give me the National Museum for two days and I can get you the donation."

I went back to Goldman Sachs and they said, "Can it be \$25,000?" I said, "Cannot, cannot, cannot! Because I can see \$50,000 in headlines on the front page. I cannot see \$25,000." Also, for \$50,000 you can get a minister, \$25,000 cannot — very, very "cannot." [Laughs]

I said, "We're not going to give a cheque. We're going to buy the art." The Ministry of Culture said, "We don't have enough Singapore Masters. Let's have Liu Kang, Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Wen Hsi." It was great fun for me to follow the curators—I think Connie [Sheares]—to visit the artists and to

select their works. I think that was very high price for them then: \$50,000 among 3 artists.

It was the best party ever. \$100,000 in 1986 is like maybe \$10,000,000 now, right? We had a ball. We had sushi, 10,000 orchids—just be very big. But all that wasn't worth it if there was no art.

STRAITS TIMES, WEDNESDAY, MAY 21, 1986 PAGE 9



Cocktails at the museum

Private party in art gallery may be first of many others

TONIGHT'S cocktail reception at the National Museum's art gallery will be the first private party to be held there but there may be more to come.

"If all goes well, we might do it regularly. But it must be in keeping with the tone of the museum," said Ms Constance Sheares, the museum's Curator of Art.

"People have asked us for permission to use the museum before but we don't want the museum to be used like any other function room," she said.

From all over the world

Tonight's is not just any party. The 500 or so guests are bond dealers from all over the world who are here for the Association of International Bond Dealers' convention.

They will have the whole museum to themselves this evening. "It's good publicity for us and it's a great way of showing off the museum to a group of people who might otherwise not have the opportunity," said Ms Sheares.

The idea of partying there was put to the museum by food writer Violet Oon, the party's mastermind, who is well known in arts circles.

Ms Sheares and other officials from the Ministry of Community Development's Cultural Affairs Division will be keeping close tabs on the party, hosted by US-based investment bankers Goldman, Sachs & Co,



These three paintings will be bought for the museum's permanent collection with the \$50,000 that US-based investment bankers Goldman, Sachs & Co is donating.

which is donating \$50,000 to enable the museum to buy three paintings for its permanent collection.

The gift is larger than the art gallery's entire acquisition budget for the year, which stands at about \$30,000. The paintings are by pioneering artists whose works already hang in the museum.

The new acquisitions will be received by the Acting Minister for Community Development, Mr Wong Kan Seng, who will give a speech.

The largest of the works is a cubist oil painting, Oasis, a rare early work by Chen Wen Hai, who is better known for his Chinese

brush and finger paintings. The Three Goats is by the late Cheong Soo Pieng, and Sarong is by Liu Kang, who is well known for his oil paintings.

Apart from the artistic significance of the evening, it promises to be quite a party. The flower-bearing "mannequins" adorning the four alcoves in the museum's entrance rotunda will be real people, said Miss Oon.

Guests will be welcomed by a *kompang* (hand drum) group, and ushered into the rotunda where a piano and string ensemble will play for them. The reception, which will be catered by the museum,

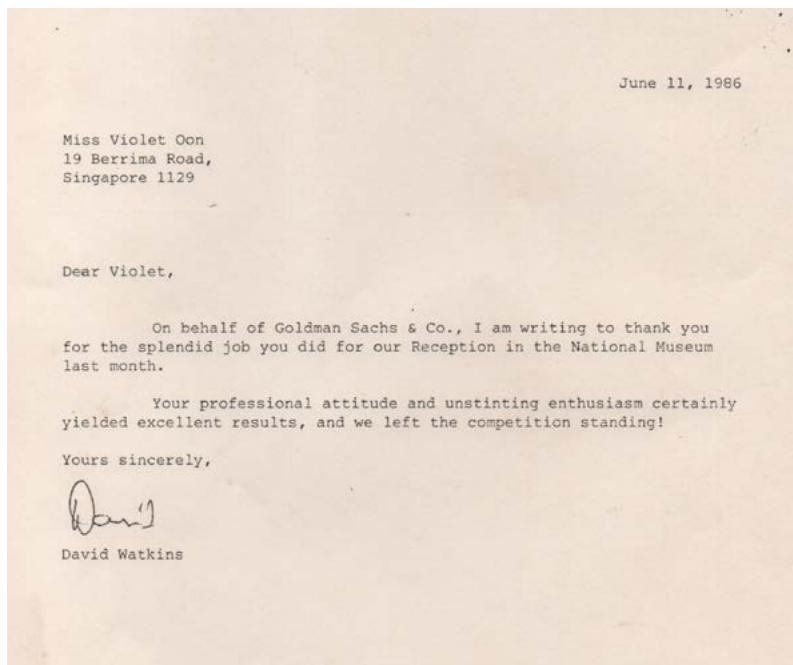
cy, will be in the gallery, where a Chinese quintet will entertain.

The party will be the swan song for the Hyatt's Assistant Director of Food and Beverage, Mr Kevin Donovan, a party veteran.

Mr Donovan delayed his departure for a new post in Melbourne to supervise the champagne buffet of everything from *dian zhi*, pate, sushi, Peking duck, steak tartare to order, rib roast to lobster, crab claws and oysters on the half shell.

It looks as though it will be a tough fight between the artistry on the table and the art on the walls.

Article on the inaugural National Museum of Singapore fundraiser in *The Straits Times* (1986)



Letter from Goldman Sachs to Violet Oon (1986)

TG:

No one was there then to set the example because a lot of things were unprecedented during that time. So, it was really for you to set a benchmark, and influence how a certain lifestyle could take root.

VO:

I think you have to be a bit outrageous, you know? And have fun—that's part of it. The artists then had fun creating—I don't know who bought their works.

TG:

You said that you were given a choice by your father to stay in Britain or to come home.

VO:

It was 1963 and I was studying music. My music teacher said to my parents, "Can she stay here? Because she's got potential." My father told me, "You can stay here, and we will support you."

But just remember, you'll never have a country. Or, you can come home." So, I said, "I'm going home."

He explained to me what that choice meant—not that you were going to have a great career; that's not the point. The point is: what does staying in Britain actually mean? In those days before internationalism, which happened only recently, he saw that so many of his friends who went to make their homes in England didn't belong; and you cannot go home. They didn't belong either way. So, I said, "Okay, I'm coming home."

Maybe part of it for people like me, who feel so much for a country and a culture, is that we've been somewhere else. We've been somewhere else long enough that you miss it. I mean, I remember that I said, "I miss the food." I could practically smell the *wanton mee*, and I missed that whole life in Singapore. When I came home and I tasted the food, it was like a reunion with a lover. It was, like, wow! You're so aware.

I got aware of being "national" because, when I was in England, we were still at the end of colonial times. I would know the maypole dance and Wordsworth, and would know how to sing *Londonderry Air*. Then they asked me, "What about your songs?" And I look at them, blank. That's when a sense of identity comes in. Because nobody is going to respect you for knowing them but not yourself. "What about your songs?" and I said, "Huh?" So that maybe fostered in us, in those days before internationalism, a sense of identity, of self, of wanting to be where you're from.

TG:

You also said that Lim Chong Keat is a Renaissance man, a polymath. I think being a polymath and going from one career to another was almost quite natural during that period of time. You've encompassed that too, and captured that moment as well—how you set your own horizons. I think that really is an embodiment of what you are too.

VO:

I think it's an embodiment of my time and the place.

But, one final thing. I gave a quote once, that "there is no future without a respect for the past." Chong Keat said he had commissioned a sculpture for the roof garden of the DBS building, which he also designed, and he doesn't know what happened to it. It disappeared. Then, the Conference Hall—it had such a dynamic interior. But those beautiful mosaic walls reflecting the patterns of Malay *mengkuang* mats—those walls have been torn down and they have made it into a *chichi* place, like pretty, with funny, rounded flower arrangements, which is so—so, like, "no idea," you know what I'm saying? Everybody's doing it.

But what struck me is, you do not blame the building owner. You do not blame the contractor. You do not blame the executive in charge because they don't know anything. I blame the architects for allowing that. If artworks have disappeared, it was this new architect who did not respect somebody else's art. I don't know which architect, but I said, "I'm appalled, not at the contractor. I'm not appalled at DBS. I'm appalled at the architect who did not fight for the work of another architect. I'm appalled at what happened to the Conference Hall."

Unless our creative people learn to respect the work of another creative person, nobody is going to respect you. Maybe this is an important message to end on.

Violet Oon is a chef, restaurateur and food writer known for the restaurants she co-owns, as well as her cookbooks and columns on Peranakan cuisine. Oon's food career began when she penned her first food column in 1974 for *New Nation*. But before her foray into food, Oon started her career as a cultural critic in the 1970s. Her arts reviews from the time included many exhibitions at the Alpha Gallery.

Tamares Goh is Head of Curatorial Programmes at National Gallery Singapore.



This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

All images courtesy of Violet Oon.

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* This version is exported in single pages for easy digital viewing. There is another version exported in double-page spreads with its pages reordered for booklet printing. You can find both at: www.nationalgallery.sg

About the Series

The “Another Initial Impetus” zine series explores the legacies of the seminal Alpha Gallery and its place in a formative period of Singapore’s cultural history. Sparked by a series of programmes organised in conjunction with the 2019 exhibition *Suddenly Turning Visible: Art and Architecture in Southeast Asia (1969 – 1989)* at National Gallery Singapore, each zine features individuals connected to the Alpha Gallery, as well as those who were inspired by or embody its spirit.



About Alpha Gallery

Yet another gallery: another four walls, another fifty pictures, another initial impetus. ALPHA is all this, too. And we believe, more as well.

—Arthur Yap, Introduction to the catalogue accompanying Alpha Gallery’s inaugural exhibition, October 1971.

The Alpha Gallery was as an artist-run cooperative gallery established in Singapore in 1971. It adopted a model of collective organisation where artists could share resources, enter and exit freely and actively contribute to burgeoning debates surrounding artistic production in an era of new modernity and rapid economic progress in then newly independent Malaysia and Singapore. The pioneering architect Lim Chong Keat was a catalyst and staunch supporter of the Alpha Gallery. Lim was inspired by the Bauhaus concept of a totality of knowledge, where the boundaries between disciplines like art, architecture, craft and design were fluid. Alongside becoming one of the most significant venues in Singapore for exhibiting contemporary art from the region, Alpha would thus also eventually become a place for the exchange of ideas between artists, as well as writers, cultural policymakers and architects, among others. Many members of these networks had also studied or practiced abroad, returning home during a critical juncture in Singapore’s history when it was considering urgent questions of postcolonial national identity. Against this backdrop, Alpha’s global outlook inspired a generation of artists and public intellectuals who went on to shape various fields of practice in Singapore.

