

TRANSCRIPT OF TALK: The Beauty of Worth Knowledge

National University of Singapore SG50 Symposium

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Thank you to Sun Sun and Reuben for inviting me to this symposium and for being great hosts.

I was born in London, my parents are from Singapore and I've spent my life going back and forth between both the UK and Singapore. So, Singapore is definitely a place that I would call my second home.

I've been asked to share my thoughts and experiences that I've had within the Singaporean creative industry. Now, I'm a writer and an editor and my heart has always been to encourage young writers to write the books that they want to write, not what they think they ought to write. To be fearless in their storytelling and to not write watered-down versions of the story on their heart.

In recent years in the UK and USA there has been a lot of press and discussion about the topic of diversity in publishing. Authors within the Western publishing industry are often categorized and placed into different boxes. In bookshops it's not unusual to have an African section or an Asian section for books. However, as my friend joked, you never see a white section. So, with all this in mind, it saddens me when I have seen books in Singapore being categorized too but in a very surprising way.

If you go to many of the large book chains in Asia including Singapore, you will very often see the "international" books having pride of place in prime locations right in the front of the book shop. It's as though they have a giant spotlight over them. Whereas the local Singaporean or Asian authors will very often be placed in a small shelf far far away at the back of the bookstore. You can get backache by trying to reach the dusty book by a Singaporean author on the lowest shelves.

Now my novel *The Life of a Banana* was first published in the UK by *Legend Press*. But I really wanted to sell the Singaporean rights to a Singaporean publisher. My lovely agent Lorella found it a home with *Monsoon Books*. As a result, I believe I confused some of the Singaporean booksellers. You see, I'm British and *The Life of a Banana* was first published by a British publisher. But at the same time, I was using a Singaporean publisher and my family are from Singapore. The fact that the Singaporean flag is on my novel probably said that this author should come under the "local" category.

In one of the large book chains they placed a large stacks of my book in prime locations with all the Western best-selling authors. Whereas in another large chain they put one, or at most two, of the books in a dusty corner called the "local" fiction area. In fact, another chain put my novel in the non-fiction area, but that's a whole different story.

Now, this got me thinking. In all the book chains, my novel was the same novel, the same words, the same characters, the same story and the same author. Yet, there was a different mind-set. Different levels of worth.

In Singapore I have had the privilege of befriending many talented local creatives. They welcomed me into their lives and shared honestly about their journeys as creatives. There are certainly very talented people in Singapore. People like the poet Aaron Lee, the children's book author Don Bosco and artists like Namiko Chan-Lee and Donna Ong. Or there is the folk musician Dawn Fung and the wonderful jazz musician Juliet Pang. Something I've found that many Singapore creatives who I've met is the trait of humility. I've noticed in Asia that there is a real sense that people sometimes hold back in showing pride in their work, lest they sound boastful. Often, in Asian when people are given a compliment they say, "No lah, no lah." Or, for example, when an Auntie goes to the market with her handsome son and people say, "Your son is so handsome," the Auntie will say, "No lah. No lah."

Don't get me wrong; humility is a wonderful trait to have. But if you are so humble and quiet to the extent that you lose your true worth, then that is when it becomes dangerous.

I think knowing your worth as a creative is one of the most important things you can have. I once attended a workshop with a well-known Asian author and this author shared a big "secret" with the class. The author told the young writers that in order to be a "successful" global author you must write books that will suit the tastes of Caucasians. Of course, as someone who champions diversity in literature, I was appalled. I think it is so important for people to be proud of their culture and the stories they tell. There is room in the book industry for more than one point of view.

I brought this scenario to a number of creative Singaporeans and the majority of them agree that many Asians still look to the West for recognition or confirmation that their work is good. One artist said:

"Sometimes it feels like something left over from a colonial mentality. Maybe it could be because we are very westernized and exposed so much to western art that the west becomes the de facto standard by which all art is to be measured. Sometimes the problem lies not only with external biases, but also within us. We Singaporean artists often struggle with an inferiority complex, thinking too little of our own work and worth. That unfortunately only serves to reinforce the idea that we're not good enough compared to the commercial art available in the market."

The artist Namiko Chan-Lee said:

"We are a copycat nation, a lot of work (animation, visual art, dance) copies the style of someone overseas or someone established from overseas. I've seen animation trying to copy PIXAR for example. I'd like to see more originality. I think there is too high a price in Singapore for failure which kills creativity."

Namiko made a good point. In a highly competitive society such as Singapore there is a sometimes fear of failure. Yet, as we know, a lot of beautiful art is often created from a place where the artist has faced challenges and so-called "failures." A lot of good art is created when an artist faces adversity and overcomes it. As an artist, it is sometimes easier to go down the tried and tested route of what we think will sell and what has been done before. That way we don't have to face failure. But we need more brave artists to create original work; to go into the unknown and stand by their decisions even if others are not standing with them. We need to be fearless.

I'm the editor of an online magazine called *Banana Writers* and I see a lot of writing from all different countries. I was just talking to the literary editor the other day about two poets. One of the poems was written by a new writer who had never been published before. Another was by a writer that had been published over twenty times and was a lecturer at a well-known university. Yet, the literary editor preferred the poem by the young writer. She pointed out that the poem was written from a place of rawness and it was real. The poet had a voice and she got a real sense of the poet's intention and heart. Where as the other poem was trying too hard - this poet had taken too many bits and pieces from other famous poets. She was not sure about their point of view, the poems were good but there was a sense of being a copycat. What she also saw in the young poet was the potential. Sometimes it's easier to go down the route of the safe option - the less than original path.

When I was growing up I read this book called *The Teenage Textbook* by Adrian Tan? Does anyone remember that? For those that haven't read it, it's a coming of age comic novel about some teenagers in Junior College and talks about their angst and first heartbreaks. Now I loved that book and what I remember is it became a bestseller in Singapore and a hit film. I've read many books by Asian authors over the years and what *The Teenage Textbook* had, that some books lack, is heart and authenticity. It had Singlish; it had a scary Singaporean headmaster, and a nosy Chinese mother. It was a story about Singaporeans by a Singaporean author and was not trying to be anything else. I liked the book because, unlike a lot of books I've read, this author was not trying too hard and had a new take.

So I suppose the question is: how do you measure your worth? Do you always look to the West for ideas? Do you always measure your work against the latest trends in other countries? Are you someone that sees books by Asian writers or local authors as something hidden at the back of a bookshop on a dusty bookshelf, or is it something that has pride of place at the front of the store? Do you think that Art is good only when it has won a prize overseas, or are you confident enough to put your stamp on something new and original and are you fearless enough to stand by your work despite criticism? Are you a leader not a follower? A creator? An innovator? Are you someone who knows their worth?