

NATIONAL DAY: VOICES FROM THE FUTURE

This week, as Singapore soaks in National Day celebrations, BT asks five of its interns to pen their thoughts on Singapore and their hopes and aspirations. While not representative of the whole spectrum of the millennial generation, they offer a glimpse into the anxieties, dreams and attitudes of a group of young Singaporeans who will take the nation into the future.



From left: Tan Jia Hui, Kimberly Chan, Syarafana Muhammad Shafeeq, Adeline Tan and Chin Yong Chang. PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG

As the future beckons, fears mingle with hope

Getting an internship and a job are no longer given for fresh graduates

By **Chin Yong Chang**
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STUDY hard, find a good job, work hard, and you'll be set for life. That's what I was told growing up. But as I near the end of my undergraduate studies, it's becoming clear things aren't quite so straightforward.

In today's very different world, young adults like me often find it difficult to secure internships and employment upon graduation. Even those who do will find themselves swimming in dangerously choppy water.

But here, the "Singaporean first" dictum seems to offer some comfort. My friends from the local universities seem to be able to find work with relative success.

One friend interned for three months in Hewlett-Packard's Singapore office, another did a stint at DSO National Laboratories, and yet another did multiple short internships in several illustrious law firms.

The going may not always be easy - the friend in the law firm had to translate piles of documents from Bahasa Indonesia to English despite not speaking the language; another intern had to pencil page numbers onto a 3,000-page document - but an in-

ternship is still an internship. In the UK, where I am pursuing my undergraduate studies, anecdotal evidence suggests that students there don't have it so good. Take the legal sector, a hot favourite among my friends. It is common practice for students to compete for places for what are known as "bright days" - a day when students are invited into the firm to get a taste of what goes on. It's only a day-long "tour" - as call it - yet places for these are so highly contested that having attended one is significant enough for it to appear on your CV. The same applies to so-called "spring weeks" at banks and financial institutions.

Burdened by debt

And in newsrooms there, the environment has become so tough that unpaid internships are becoming the norm.

This last bit to say good internships do not exist. But for these, candidates will fight tooth and nail to land a spot. For instance, a summer internship at Bloomberg's London newsroom receives hundreds of thousands of applications - for just eight places. And of these, only about half will eventually be hired.

For graduates fortunate enough to land a stable job in a decent company, other hurdles - both financial and non-financial - await.

Many students, especially those in the US or Brit-

ain, will start their careers with large sums of student debt. Even if they had taken up a "father-mother scholarship", there is still significant non-financial "debt".

From a macro perspective, today's young generation is also burdened with collective debt. Bloomberg columnist recently noted that a significant proportion of current economic growth is being built on borrowed money. Total outstanding world debt now stands at 225 per cent of global GDP. All this money's got to be repaid somehow by people of my generation or the next.

Changing demographics worsens the situation as fewer able-bodied workers have to support an increasingly older population.

In some sense, today's youths cannot be faulted for feeling slightly cheated. We were promised a secure economic future, but are instead saddled with debt whose fruits will largely not be enjoyed by our generation.

Being Singaporean, though, offers some silver lining. Our constant battle-cry is about job creation. And being a net creditor nation, it has also escaped the debt trap.

Singapore may not be perfect, but fiscal responsibility and forward planning are among the blessings we can count on ourselves.

■ The writer is a third-year student at UK's Durham University reading sociology with economics, and will graduate in June 2018



We were promised a secure economic future, but are instead saddled with debt, says Chin Yong Chang. PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG



For Syarafana Shafeeq, growing up in Singapore has assured her that she and her countrymen are Singaporeans first. PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG

We are Singaporean, before anything else

By **Syarafana Shafeeq**
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WHEN I was in primary school, I remember going to the canteen at recess and wondering which group I should sit with. Should it be with my Indian friends, who shared my physical features, but did not speak the language I did? Or with my Malay friends, who shared my tongue, but whose skin tone was considerably fairer than my own?

As it turned out, the question was moot. The canteen in my neighbourhood primary school was never really segregated by race to begin with.

Everyone sat together, enjoying their lunch. I picked up my Poweruff Girls lunchbox and sat down with one of the groups, happy I didn't have to put much thought into it thereafter.

Recently, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said: "We call ourselves Singaporean first, before identifying ourselves by our race."

And I can safely say, that for me, growing up here, that has been a truth more than just a slogan. We are all members of a race, but above that, we are citizens of a nation, and that is what identifies us. We are in fact immersed in our very own culture - that of being Singaporean.

I had myself using words that are not part of my own cultural group. How many of us say: "Eh, wanna taboo?" ("Shall we do a takeover?") And many of my Chinese classmates say: "Let's go makan!" ("Let's go eat!")

I have friends from all races - in school, we

change teams every four weeks - so there has just been no option but to mix, mingle and pick up some shared turns of phrases or habits.

I remember exclaiming how I was talking to my Chinese friend, and how she said she would love to see herself in one. We headed to my home, where I showed her my array of headscarves and asked her which one tickled her fancy.

She chose a forest one, and looked intrigued as I taught her how to wrap it around her face. She laughed happily when I was done, and naturally - being the millennials that we are - we posed for a selfie for Instagram.

My heart warmed

My heart warmed when I saw comments from our friends telling her how cute she looked; others told me they wanted to try it too.

I was never worried about receiving any ill-winded comments about my feeling.

Luckily, for the Muslim community here, Singapore's embrace of multi-culturalism has quelled our anxieties about being discriminated against because of our choice of modest clothing.

However, as an Indian-Malay-Muslim woman in a hawker, I will sometimes have a trickling fear that people might judge me a little too musky based on how I look.

But that quickly dissipates when I eat with my friends in the food court, navigating tables crowded with packs of tissue paper, complaining about the crazy weather and chit-chatting about Bollywood

movies while waiting in the queue to buy bubble tea. Being Singaporean has exposed us to each other's cultures, and enabled us to link heritage to culture, and culture to identity. We have even gone as far as creating our own language, one that baffles anyone who isn't Singaporean.

"Alomak, then how, like that?" we say, laughing, when foreigners don't understand us. We snicker at the thought of linguists around the world doing research into our manner of speech.

So yes, PM Lee is right. For many of us, our shared culture, and the things that make us Singaporean - even the not-so-see-bits - are a big part of our identity.

So who are we? Proud of it.

■ The writer is a third-year mass communications student at Republic Polytechnic

Correction

■ Earlier intervention, tougher action needed from regulators" (BT, Aug 8), we wrongly said that former Singapore Post director Keith Tay received a reprimand after the company failed to disclose his potential conflicts of interest related to certain deals. It should have been an advisory from the Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority. We are sorry for the error.

NATIONAL DAY: VOICES FROM THE FUTURE

For the love of sports, dive deep

I come from a family of national athletes so it is really an honour to be able to fly the Singapore flag high in any competition

By Kimberly Chan
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WHEN I stand on the edge of the diving platform, 10 metres up from the competition pool – the equivalent of a three-storey building – a complex mix of thoughts and feelings runs through me. Not just because the sport is a thrilling one, I'm also afraid of heights.

So believe me when I say it takes a lot of courage to balance and execute a dive from such a height. But as I step towards the edge of the platform, I anticipate the thrill of a jump perfected by painstaking effort, and a motivation to do my best for the country.

I certainly remember my first dive from 10 metres in 2013, when I took the literal plunge to qualify for the Southeast Asian Games (SEA Games) in Myanmar. It was Singapore's first SEA Games comeback, and it was one of the most exhilarating experiences of my life. While the Singapore divers felt the pressure of representing Singapore, there was also the excitement of a new endeavour.

It was the year that Singapore diving won its first medal in 28 years, which proves that we do have what it takes to make this sport grow and hold its own against any sport in Singapore.

Since the Youth Olympic Games (YOG) in 2010, sports in Singapore has also progressed. Jacques Rogge, president of the International Olympic Committee, was right in declaring "that a new chapter in the history of the Olympic movement had been opened" during his opening speech at the first YOG held in Singapore.

That also marked the first time platform and springboard diving had been reintroduced to the sports scene in seven years, since Chia Shu Ying's participation in the 2003 SEA Games in Hanoi.

It's not an everyday luxury to travel and compete in the sport you love, for the country. Training six days a week, with more than 20 hours spent at the pool and dryland facilities, standing at the edge of the platform, ready to execute a dive – hopefully to a

near-perfect entry, is something I strive to master. Seeing efforts pay off at competitions also helps to boost my morale, on top of the support from my teammates. Even as we watch our competitors dive, the exhilaration, anxiety and excitement still remain, because I feel that once you have experienced the training, the rigour and passion for the sport, it is something that is etched both in your mind and muscle memory.

I come from a family of national athletes so it is really special and honourable to be able to fly the Singapore flag high in any competition that we go for.

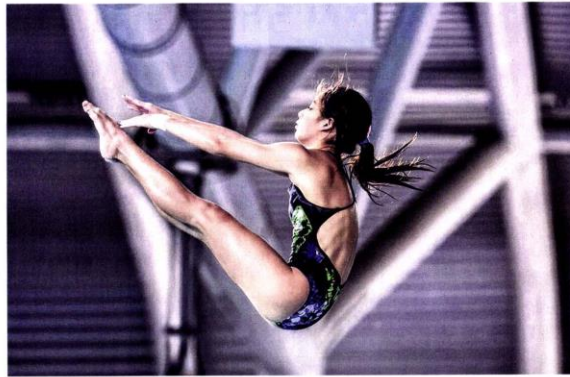
After I began my sports journey as a gymnast, my siblings followed suit. My brother Jonathan and I transitioned to diving in 2009 and 2010 respectively, while my sister Colette is pursuing artistic gymnastics, representing Singapore as well.

Commitment and a sense of achievement

Being in competitive sports has definitely taught us to juggle schoolwork and sports; it is a commitment that we choose to uphold, and it brings us a sense of achievement when we excel in both.

This comes as we compete against international athletes who train full time, which makes us feel proud to do nearly as much as they can in the sporting arena, given we spend so much time in school as well. I see potential in the growth of my sport, but this comes with the support of the government, schools, and the national sports associations. The OCBC Aquatic Centre is the facility that has housed many other competitions, both regional and international, for the four disciplines in aquatic sports in Singapore.

This has helped Singapore become a world-class arena, with the opportunity for athletes to train, compete alongside and learn from these big names, and for coaches and officials to learn from the world's best. But diving has yet to become a school co-curricular activity, which is one of the more effective



ways to promote this unique sport.

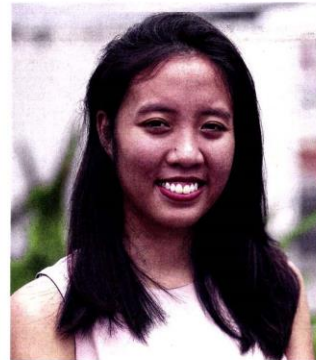
Having done well at the previous games, and having had the opportunity to take part in more international competitions, I hope more support and exposure will come our way. As Singapore grows a year older, my wish for Singapore is to keep that fighting spirit as my fellow athletes compete in the later half of August this year, at the 29th SEA Games in Kuala Lumpur.

■ The writer is a final year economics and corporate communications student at SMU. She came in 4th in the 2015 SEA Games Women's 100m Individual Platform. Fellow Singaporean Freida Lam took home the Bronze medal.



As Singapore grows a year older, my wish for Singapore is to keep that fighting spirit as my fellow athletes compete later this month this at the 29th SEA Games in Kuala Lumpur, says Kimberly Chan. Top: Ms Chan executing a dive at the 2015 SEA Games.

PHOTO (LEFT): KELVIN CHING



"With the media industry undergoing change, I may one day have to tell my stories through a video or in some other format – one other than a newspaper. To me, it is the outcome and the process that matters. The medium in which the story is told is secondary."

Adeline Tan, now a year away from graduating with a degree in communications, has wanted to be a journalist since she was 16.

PHOTO: KELVIN CHING

The importance of doing what you love

By Adeline Tan
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I HAVE wanted to be a newspaper journalist since I was 16, which is why I enrolled at the Nanyang Technological University's undergraduate course in Communications.

With a year to graduation, anxiety is setting in as, here and abroad, I see the media industry going through tough times.

Fairfax Media, one of the largest media companies in Australia and New Zealand, will cut its editorial budget by a quarter in the face of declining advertising and circulation, and reduce its staff strength by up to 115 across the newsrooms of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age*, *Brisbane Times* and *WA Today*. Further afield, even Pulitzer-winning publications with long histories such as *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* have also slashed staff and costs.

In our own backyard, Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), which counts this newspaper among its stable of publications, last year announced that it would reduce 10 per cent of its workforce over the next two years and merge two of its newspapers into a free daily tabloid.

News is becoming digitalised, and readers now demand news packaged in formats other than the traditional newspaper, such as video clips.

The changes stirred fear in me and my peers. Already, some seniors in the newsroom have moved on to jobs in related sectors such as public relations.

But I am thinking I will stand pat about pursuing my long-held dream career.

When I was still an intern at *The New Paper*, I was assigned to cover the Woodleigh MRT security scare. It was

raining heavily that day, but I stood in the rain, looking for people to interview. Another time, chasing a follow-up to an accident, I found myself attending the victim's funeral. The taxi driver dropped me off in the wrong part of the cemetery, so I had to trudge across the huge place, in the process, ploughing through mud.

During those times, the work day would seem twice as long under conditions that would be uncomfortable to most people, but I have kept going. What has kept me going? The thought that I can possibly make some kind of change, or difference, by getting the information out there – information people would want to read.

Don't dread working

It's why I get out of bed every morning. It's why I don't dread coming in to work each day.

My internship has given me insight into the life of a journalist, but more importantly, it has made me surer that this is what I would like to do for as long as I can.

With the media industry undergoing change, I may one day have to tell my stories through a video or in some other format – one other than a newspaper. To me, it is the outcome and the process that matters. The medium in which the story is told is secondary.

I choose this path – with my eyes open to the likelihood of the industry going through some rough patches – over having a more secure job.

I am making an active choice to do what I like. So even if journalists have to change the way they work as the industry changes, I will still be able to get through the day because I am doing what I enjoy.

■ The writer is a fourth-year Communications student at the Nanyang Technological University.



If the arts can indeed be commoditised, then I venture to recommend investing in this long-term, high-yielding asset instead.

While the arts are still conventionally dismissed with nonchalance, it would be parochial of us to neglect its gaining favour and relevance with the public, says Tan Jia Hui.

PHOTO: KELVIN CHING

Making the arts a national asset

By Tan Jia Hui
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"POETRY is a luxury we cannot afford", said Lee Kuan Yew in the late 60s, but it's a mantra that strikes a chord with me, even today.

Poetry, perhaps a synecdoche for the arts in general, has long been deemed the impractical, lofty subject: it is the "softer", romanticised alternative to its "harder", more realistic academic cousins such as mathematics, the sciences, finance, law and the like.

In other words, leave poetry to the celebrated patrons of the arts to create; the harder, more pragmatic subjects are where reality is truly grounded.

But even as I have spoken in praise of the arts, I'm abashed to say that these mantras have taken root in my mind, tinting my cheerful optimism with hesitation and sombre ambivalence.

Two years ago, I struggled with this exact dilemma when I had to pick the field of study I was to enter: would it be law, business, media or the liberal arts? Would pursuing the last option be akin to dealing a fatal blow to the rational mind? Would I be scorned for choosing a path so seemingly adversarial to one's *compos mentis*?

Yet, despite Lee Kuan Yew's ostensible advocacy of a prosaic ideology, I've always thought that his mantra was, ironically, rather the stuff of poetry. To me, the statement "Poetry is a luxury we cannot afford" suggests, not the harsh denouncement of the arts as an abominable blight upon society, but rather, a note of hopeless yearning, coloured with a tinge of regret. It is, quite simply, what the heart wants, but is resigned never to get.

While the arts are still conventionally dismissed with nonchalance, it would be parochial of us to neglect its gaining favour, and its growing relevance with a previously unreciprocated public.

Avant-garde artist Yayoi Kusama has sparked an almost unprecedented amount of fanfare and public viewership with her ongoing exhibition, *Life Is The Heart Of A Rainbow*, at the National Gallery Singapore.

Even taking into account the exhibition's tremendous potential as a photogenic backdrop for posts on social media, we should not be so hasty about discounting proof of the growing popularity of the arts with Singaporeans of all ages.

In May, it was reported that more than 70 per cent of the graduates of the School of the Arts Singapore (SOTA) go on to pursue non-arts university courses. In 2012, the figure was 60 per cent, and in 2015, 83 per cent. The school at first provided ammunition for opponents of the arts, who decried the usefulness and real-world relevance of the subjects taught there, but alumni of the school have come out with a barrage of loving, grateful testimonies of their time at SOTA.

And Sonny Liew has made the news with his book, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*, the first graphic novel to win the Singapore Literature Prize for fiction in 2016. This year, it bagged three Eisner awards.

Rosy future

Much debate ensued over the National Arts Council's decision in 2015 to revoke the graphic novelist's S\$8,000 publishing grant, followed by its offer of congratulations to the author last month. Regardless of the arguments advanced over this, the graphic novel has nonetheless catalysed important dialogues about art in Singapore, and fostered discussions about the developing cultural and visual identity of this nation.

Truly then, the arts have come a long way since its previous censure, growing in relevancy, accessibility, and significance in today's dynamic landscape. Our city-state's annual National Day celebration is as much a recognition of today's triumphs, as it is a promising augury of the progressive change that tomorrow heralds.

If the arts can indeed be commoditised, then I venture to recommend investing in this long-term, high-yielding asset instead.

■ The writer is a third-year student at Yale-NUS College, and will be doing a semester-long exchange programme at Amherst College from August 2017.

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