

S'pore's objects of identity: Some things borrowed, some things new

Linda Lim
The Straits Times
Monday, Aug 26, 2013



"Uniquely Singapore" objects such as the thumbdrive can reveal facets of the socio-historical context of their times, as shown in a new book by SMU students.

(Almost) Uniquely Singapore: 18 Objects

Edited by Pang Eng Fong

Select Books and the SMU Wee Kim Wee Centre

168 pages

SINGAPORE - This slim but engaging book has an intriguing, though not unique, premise - that an examination of particular objects can reveal something of the socio-historical context of their times.

In this case, the 18 objects that are (almost) "uniquely Singapore" came out of an undergraduate class at Singapore Management University taught by Professor Pang Eng Fong, who also edited the collection of short chapters by the student researcher-writers.

The book succeeds admirably in using the selected objects as a take-off for musings on specific aspects of life in Singapore, in addition to describing the origins of each object, some so mundane though ubiquitous - the parking coupon, in-vehicle unit (IU) for Electronic Road Pricing etc - that many of us have probably not stopped to think about how they came about.

It is good to be reminded - or learn for the first time - that the SAR-21, widely known as the "wife" of national servicemen, was developed by a Singapore Technologies subsidiary to

have features that make it lighter and easier to handle in dense vegetation and to improve the accuracy of highly myopic soldiers.

Similarly, the Infrared Fever Screening System, or IFSS, was developed within two days during the 2003 Sars crisis by the Defence Science and Technology Agency in an impressively efficient collaboration with ST Electronics.

Not all the objects included, or the technologies they embody, were invented in Singapore: Some (such as the string trimmer and casino chip) came from elsewhere, to fulfil a specific local need, while others represent a local application of "international" policy principles (such as the auction principle embodied in the certificate of entitlement, or COE).

But most of the objects do reflect responses to Singapore's constraints of national security vulnerability, land shortage/transport congestion, and resource scarcity (Newater).

Interestingly, the overall impression the reader gets from the commentaries is the heavy role of the Government and state agencies in most aspects of life in Singapore, from education (the 10-Year Series) and transportation (IU, COE), to religion (incense burner) and recreation (casino chip), and the authors' general celebration of this.

Yet the most truly "indigenous" and "iconic" Singapore-originating objects with broader regional or global impact come from the private sector - the Singapore Sling, Tiger Beer and Tiger Balm (which have colonial-era origins), and the more recent Sound Blaster and thumbdrive. (Newater, the Risis orchid and SIA kebaya have a much more local, and state, provenance and market significance.)

Anywhere else in the world, it would be curious for business students to consider state actions to be superior sources of innovation, or necessary complements, to those of risk-taking private entrepreneurs. Is it dependence on an interventionist state that makes us "uniquely Singapore"?

And is this model of state dependence sustainable - or anachronistic - in an increasingly globalised and interconnected world where other countries can and do rely more on vibrant local private entrepreneurship to power their development?

stopinion@sph.com.sg

The book was launched at SMU on Wednesday. It will have a public launch at the Singapore Writers' Festival on Nov3 at the Festival Pavilion.

The book is available at Select Books and other major bookstores at \$23.54 with GST.

The reviewer, a Singaporean, is professor of strategy at the Stephen M. Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan.