

Drawing the readers in

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LEFT
Adrian Tan drew comparisons between Singapore and George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

BELOW
Jung Chang gives a talk on 'Utopia, Mao And The Dowager Cixi' during the recent Singapore Writers Festival.



Reviewing the 16th Singapore Writers Festival on my return to Bangkok, it struck me that it would probably be more appropriate to call what went down in the city-state earlier this month a forum for authors and fans of thought-provoking literature.

Unlike the for-profit book fairs we never seem to be short of all year round here, this 10-day event wasn't just about publishers flogging their backlists to bargain-hunting punters and promoting new releases; it also provided a remarkable number of opportunities for intimate interactions between pensmiths and the reading public.

"The Singapore Writers Festival is really a festival for readers," conceded festival director Paul Tan. "At the heart of it, it's an opportunity for the reader to celebrate the wonders of the written word in all its diverse forms."

This year's theme was "Utopia/Dystopia", and one of the best-attended events was a panel discussion on the current state of Singapore's literary scene and whether it should be termed utopian or dystopian.

"The theme isn't meant to dictate the entire programme. We use it as a kind of guide," Tan explained, noting that the broad scope was meant to allow participants to raise a whole range of issues, especially the binary questions of good versus evil and reality...

The main venues for the festival were two temporary pavilions set up at Singapore Management University.

With major art exhibitions under way at the nearby Singapore Art Museum and National Museum as part of the ongoing Singapore Biennale, it crossed my mind that if this country is not already a cultural hub in Southeast Asia, then it's only a matter of time before it becomes one.

"I don't think we want to be the art centre of this region," Tan said. "But I think that the art that is exhibited here or the writers that we invite here must surely be relevant to the region. We must recognise that we're part of a much larger area, Southeast Asia; that's more the approach we've taken for both the Biennale and the Writers Festival. Of course we have writers from the UK and Australia here, too, but I think when you have a strong Southeast Asian focus, it's got a different meaning.



English philosopher A. C. Grayling discourses on 'A Good Life In A Bad World?'

"For both the Singapore Biennale and the Writers Festival, the key target is Singaporeans. My primary audience is Singaporeans so I would like the Singapore audience to know what Thai aesthetics are like say, or what an Indonesian author is writing about. To get people excited about Singaporean literature is one of our goals as well."

Featuring more than 60 foreign writers and some 120 home-grown scribes, the festival programme included lectures, panel discussions, workshops, readings and book launches.

Kicking off the proceedings was a talk on the topic "Renaissance/Dark Ages" led by three panelists: Singaporean playwright and poet Alfian Sa'at, author and university lecturer Jennifer Crawford and publisher Goh Eck Kheng. The issue was understood to be whether Singapore's literary scene was already enjoying a Renaissance or if it was still languishing in the Dark Ages _ and the subsequent debate was frank, lively and colourful.

Sa'at, whose many plays tackle domestic social issues, offered several insights and pointed out the lack of civil liberties and several other deficiencies in his country meant that Singapore was still a dystopian society when it came to art and culture.

A problem raised by Sa'at echoes a situation we also encounter in Thailand: he lamented the fact that the majority of people who visit bookstores in Singapore nowadays are only there looking for management or self-help titles. To promote local literary talent, he suggested, booksellers should have dedicated shelves reserved just for Singaporean writers.

Other interesting events included a meet-the-author session with British psychologist Oliver James (*Love Bombing _ Reset Your Child's Emotional Thermostat* and the recently published *Office Politics*), a discussion on the use of "Singlish" in Singapore literature, and a fringe programme organised by the Arts House featuring French film-maker and novelist Catherine Breillat and US fantasy/"mythic fiction" author Terri Windling who discussed the subject of "Misogyny In Fairy Tales".

No less than 66 books were launched during the festival and there were ample opportunities for friendly chats with some of the writers there for the occasion and for browsing through titles by the featured authors in one of the pavilions.

One of the highlights of this year's festival was a series of lectures which attracted full houses at the spacious drama theatre within the School of the Arts just across the street. English philosopher A. C. Grayling, who released *The God Argument* earlier this year, gave an entertaining lecture on how people live, treat one another and interact with the the world at large.

Adrian Tan and Gwee Li Sui presented a boldly illuminating picture of contemporary Singapore by linking it with the context of the classic novels *Animal Farm* and *Brave New World*.

Also fascinating was a lecture by Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian on independent thinking which the novelist and playwright defined as thinking untainted by political affiliation and the laws of the market. He made the point that the possibilities for people from the East to provide a fresh take on the culture and thought processes of the West have been stymied by the economic crisis. Jung Chang, the best-selling Chinese-born writer, was also on hand to give a talk about the mindset of emperors and dictators with reference to two biographies she's penned: *Mao: The Unknown Story* and *Empress Dowager Cixi*.

Just a few days of sampling the festival atmosphere was enough to make me realise that the hot topic wasn't whether or not Singapore has a buzzing literary scene, but that it was possible to organise a gathering of this nature in the first place. All these publishers, writers and bibliophiles had come together to discuss how to boost public interest in literature, not just by Singaporeans, but authors from Southeast Asia and beyond. And their primary motivation was not profits or corporate brand image, but a shared reverence for the written word.