

Notice warning concerning copyright restrictions

The copyright law of the United States (title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material.

Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction.

One of these specific conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be ``used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of ``fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law.

UNDERSTANDING
Global
Cultures

*Metaphorical Journeys Through 28 Nations,
Clusters of Nations, and Continents*

3rd Edition

Martin J. Gannon

*Professor, California State University San Marcos
Professor Emeritus, Robert H. Smith School of Business
University of Maryland*



SAGE Publications
International Educational and Professional Publisher
Thousand Oaks ■ London ■ New Delhi

Copyright © 2004 by Sage Publications, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

For information:



Sage Publications, Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
E-mail: order@sagepub.com

Sage Publications Ltd.
6 Bonhill Street
London EC2A 4PU
United Kingdom

Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
B-42, Panchsheel Enclave
Post Box 4109
New Delhi 110 017 India

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gannon, Martin J.

Understanding global cultures: Metaphorical journeys through 28 nations, clusters of nations, and continents / by Martin J. Gannon.—3rd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7619-2980-0 (Paper)

1. Cross—cultural studies. 2. Cross-cultural orientation. 3. National characteristics. I. Title.

GN345.7 .G36 2004

306—dc22

2003019123

06 07 08 09 10 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

Acquiring Editor: Al Bruckner
Editorial Assistant: MaryAnn Vail
Production Editor: Diana E. Axelsen
Typesetter/Designer: C&M Ditigals (P) Ltd.
Indexer: Mary Mortensen
Cover Designer: Michelle Lee Kenny

THE SINGAPORE HAWKER CENTERS

First impressions of Singapore among first-time visitors tend to be positive, and it is easy to understand why. The taxi from the airport to the hotel cruises along miles of flower-bedecked streets and buildings, some of which emphasize traditional Asian architecture while others are strikingly modern; the taxicab driver slows down when a bell automatically sounds, indicating that he is driving over the 50 mph speed limit; and everyone is courteous and efficient.

If the visitor arrives around noon at Raffles Place, the business center of Singapore, the sun is normally blazing. People begin to emerge from the skyscrapers one after another. Most of them are the businesspeople who represent Singapore's high-powered finance industry; they are going to take their lunch break. Like many cities of the world, the crowd includes a mixture of various cultural and ethnic groups. Asians might be Chinese, Japanese, or Thai; Caucasians could be American, European, or Australian. Others may be Malay, Indian, or Indonesian. Everyone is headed for one of the most unique and emblematic eating places in Singapore, the hawker center. Regardless of ethnic groupings or residential status—citizens, permanent residents, or expatriates—many people go to the hawker center to find something they like during their limited lunch break. The hawker centers are venues where one can try a wide variety of traditional ethnic foods, the latest fad in beverages, or even simple fruits. These centers are clean, and the personnel serving the food are, like the cabdriver, efficient and courteous. Each center is a collection of at least 20 food stalls at the same location and is casual or informal in motif, presentation of food, and seating arrangements.

The hawker centers constitute a remarkable parallel to the features of modern Singapore—an integration of variety, efficiency, tremendous energy, safety, and a symbiosis of the old and new. This island nation of 3.5 million was poor 50 years ago, and there were some ethnic issues involving the Chinese (77% of the population), Malays (14%), and Indians (8%). Some of these issues related directly to the

lack of education and infrastructure, and the crowded conditions only exacerbated them. Singapore's population density is 5,771 per square kilometer, third in the world behind Macau (26,301) and Hong Kong (6,628); the United States is only 30. Nevertheless, today Singapore is a leading banking and finance center; its workforce is highly educated; and government and business emphasize the development of cutting-edge technologies and industries. As a result, the gross domestic product (GDP) per person is \$30,170; the comparable figure in the United States is \$29,240. How and why this change occurred is a remarkable story, as described below.

Origins of the Hawker Centers

Numerous hawker stalls were a familiar sight in Singapore's streets and alleys in the 1950s and 1960s. They were not much different from the hawker stalls that visitors to many developing nations see: colorful, arranged in a disorderly pattern, inviting visitors to use them, but unconsciously sending the message *caveat emptor*. While there's little argument that these hawkers brought a certain charm to the social and cultural landscape of Singapore, many stall holders plied their trade under less than desirable conditions. More often than not, hawkers operated under unhygienic conditions, contending with a lack of a piped water supply and inadequate facilities to prepare and cook their food. To compound the problems, the authorities and wider population had to deal with the indiscriminate disposal of wastes into drains. Over a period of time, these conditions caused considerable pollution in the island's water courses, endangering both public health and the environment.

As a result, the government developed a plan to build designated areas for hawkers. These areas, which we now know as hawker centers, were to have a complete infrastructure to support hawkers' day-to-day operations. An islandwide census in 1968 and 1969 was the first step in the systematic phasing out of old-style hawkers. The census registered a total of 18,000 street hawkers, who were then issued temporary hawking licenses. The exercise effectively curbed illegal hawking in Singapore, as all hawkers now needed to follow strict regulations or face financial penalties as well as the inability to operate their businesses.

In 1970, the government began to relocate street hawkers. The new hawker centers were equipped with proper facilities for food preparation and cooking and were supported by clean and efficient drainage systems as well as proper sanitation facilities. By February 1986, all street hawkers were completely relocated in hawker centers. The process, while long and difficult, was ultimately completed.

There are now 139 hawker centers owned by the Ministry of the Environment (ENV), the Housing and Development Board (HDB), and the Jurong Town Corporation (JTC). Collectively, these hawker centers hold a total of 17,331 occupied stalls; 10,333 are market stalls and 6,998 are food stalls for preparing and serving cooked food.

All stall holders in hawker centers are licensed by the ENV. They are required by law to ensure that food prepared in their stalls is safe for public consumption. Stall holders are expected to be vigilant in adhering to proper food and personal hygiene practices and to ensure that their stalls are free from pests and other infestation.

Launched by ENV in April 1994, the Stall Ownership Scheme enables stall holders to own their stalls. Under the scheme, stalls in ENV and HDB hawker centers are sold to incumbent stall holders on a 20-year lease at a discount. Those declining to buy their stalls can surrender them and opt for cash grants or else they can continue to rent their stalls at a revised rate. To date, four batches of stalls in 15 hawker centers have been sold, with 1,871 stall holders or 90.2% opting to buy their stalls; 9.2% of the stall holders accepted cash grants, and they were mostly elderly hawkers who had planned to retire. Stallholders buying their stalls were allowed to sublet them. As a result, many of these stalls are open for many hours. These stall holders were also permitted to sell their stalls. Some did and, consequently, more innovative and enterprising players joined the trade.

ENV launched the Stall Assignment Scheme in February 1998 to allow stall holders to assign their stalls to operators who are willing to pay rent as assessed by the Chief Valuer. The assignees can sublet the stall or get someone to run the stall on their behalf. Legal restrictions apply in all cases, but there are more restrictions for stalls subsidized by the government.

As an extension to the Stall Assignment Scheme, stall holders currently paying subsidized rent may opt to assign the stall to themselves. This effectively means that they can opt to pay rental rates as assessed by the Chief Valuer and can operate the stall free of the more onerous restrictions imposed on subsidized stalls. The assignees are granted a 3-year tenancy agreement with an option for renewal if the hawker center is not affected by redevelopment. If the stalls in the hawker center are offered for sale under the Stall Ownership Scheme, the assignees may also buy the stalls at the assessed values. The Stall Assignment Scheme proved to be extremely popular with hawkers, and as of December 2000, a total of 1,269 stalls in ENV, HDB, and JTC hawker centers had been assigned (Annual Report 2000 Ministry of the Environment). Whether subsidized or not, stalls must follow strict guidelines on food preparation, cleanliness, and polite treatment of customers.

Just as the hawker centers faced many turbulent changes, Singapore has also experienced struggles and challenges to reach its current status as a prosperous cosmopolitan society. Modern Singapore began in 1819 when Sir Stamford Raffles claimed this Malay island, at the time nothing more than a large fishing village, as a regional base for the British East India Company; it flourished in large part because of its central location at the crossroads of Asia. In 1832 Singapore, along with Malacca and Penang (now part of Malaysia), were established as the Straits Settlements under the control of British India, and in 1867 the settlements became a British crown colony.

During War II the Japanese occupied the nation, and in 1946 Singapore (including Penang and Malacca) became a British crown colony, while Penang and Malacca became a part of the Federation of Malaya in 1948. The Communists attempted to take over both Singapore and Malaya in 1948, resulting in a state of emergency for 12 years. After a few more tempestuous years Singapore became a self-governing state. Lee Kuan Yew, a legendary figure in the nation's history, became prime minister. At least in part because of the continuing Communist threat, Malaysia was formed in 1963; it included Singapore, Sarawak, and North Borneo. In 1965 Singapore became a sovereign, democratic, and independent nation.

Now on its own, Singapore initiated a massive industrialization project. After the shock of two oil crises, in 1979 the government initiated a program of economic

restructuring emphasizing technology and computer education and offering financial incentives to industrial enterprises.

Almost immediately, the Confucian ideals of the Chinese were employed as public policy. The Confucian philosophy argues that before an individual can be expected to perform as an ideal and sincere person (see Chapters 27 and 28), he or she must be satisfied with basic necessities, clothes, food, and a place to live. Lee Kuan Yew, the first prime minister, endorsed a program of public housing because of his Confucian ideals. It proved to be enormously successful, and today 80% of Singaporeans live in such housing. To encourage home ownership, Singaporeans were allowed to use their Central Provident Funds savings (similar to a pension fund) to pay for the apartments.

There are at least five features of the hawker centers that help us to profile Singapore. These are ethnic diversity but unity, efficiency, the power of women, safety, and synthesizing traditional and modern values. We discuss each briefly.

Ethnic Diversity but Unity

As discussed above, customers can find any cuisine—of course, Chinese, but also Malay, Peranakan, Indian (both north and south), and international food (Japanese and Western)—in a typical hawker center. The stalls are close together, and their owners frequently sit and talk with one another.

Similarly, the Singapore population comprises three major ethnic groups: Chinese, Indian, and Malay. The government encourages citizens to intermingle and understand one another in a variety of ways, for example, by ensuring that public housing includes all ethnic groups. There is a strict allocation of apartments determined by the proportion of each ethnic group in Singapore, which is maintained over time. In like manner, the government determines the distribution of hawker stalls on the percentage of each ethnic group in the population. There is one section for each group in each hawker center, with the largest number of stalls naturally serving Chinese food.

Some of the older hawker centers share a communal water supply located in the center; hence they automatically learn how to behave as responsible shop owners and cooperate with others who have different skin colors, customs, or cultures. To survive in competition with other hawker centers, the stall holders work together to maintain their hawker center, making it clean and efficient enough to attract more customers. This is exactly a miniature of the Singaporean ethos: all races making a supreme effort and sharing values beyond ethnic boundaries to survive in the face of international competition.

To shape the destiny of such a multiethnic country, the Singaporean government has embarked on a program called Shared Values to avoid conflicts among races. First discussed in 1988, Shared Values was to be a blueprint for the development of a national ideology that Singaporeans of all races and faiths could comfortably accept.

The aim of this national ideology was to create a Singaporean identity by incorporating the relevant parts of citizens' various cultural heritages as well as the attitudes and values that have helped them survive as a nation. There was also an anti-Western bias in this formulation, because the government wanted to safeguard against "undesirable" values such as an excessive emphasis on individualism and

self-centeredness at the expense of group obligations. This concept of a national ideology had already been developed by some of Singapore's neighbors. For example, Indonesia had drawn up the Pancasila, a set of common beliefs to unite its peoples.

There are four central ideas underlying Shared Values. They are placing society above self, upholding the family as the basic building block of society, resolving major issues through consensus instead of contention, and stressing racial and religious tolerance. In accordance with Shared Values, Singaporeans are actively encouraged to understand different points of view. In business discussions Singaporeans try to avoid conflicts and strive to solve problems with compromise. They are genuine collectivists.

In many ways Singaporeans are competitive collectivists. Although this is a paradox, it is a reality and is expressed in a local term, *Kiasu-ness*. Mr. Kiasu originated as a cartoon character and is roughly equivalent to "the ugly American," cutting into lines, heaping food on his plate at the expense of others in a cafeteria line, and loudly insisting on fast and efficient service before others are handled. Singaporeans are aware of this paradox, which one would normally associate with individualism, and any long-term visitor will probably experience its manifestation. The norm, however, is to follow the rules, be efficient but courteous, and be sensitive to the needs of others.

Military training also contributes to cooperation among different races. The Singaporean military includes an equal number of professional and conscripted soldiers because of the small population. This training is compulsory for men, and they serve periodically until they are in their 40s. During hard training their cohesion or friendship across racial boundaries becomes deeper.

Singapore's educational system also focuses on cooperation among the different races. The government encourages students to mingle with other races to strengthen ties between ethnic groups. Because Singapore possesses no natural resources, no major industries, and a limited workforce, the united power of its citizens is an important concept if Singapore is to survive and prosper in international competition.

Efficiency

When customers order food in a hawker center, they must follow one well-known but unspoken rule: Be quick and efficient. At lunchtime each hawker center is teeming with prospective diners. It is a major time for stall owners to transact business, and they naturally like to take as many orders as possible. Likewise, other customers desire to receive an order as soon as possible and enjoy their lunch. When a stall owner's eyes meet yours, he or she slightly jerks the chin upward, signaling that it is your turn to order. You have to immediately say loudly: "One curry chicken packet." This is the correct way to order food in the hawker centers in Singapore: Succinct orders are the rule. All meaningless conversation is left out, for instance, "How are you doing today? I would like a curry chicken for takeout."

This tendency to make conversation short and efficient is typical of Singaporeans. They are not interested in niceties, and they prefer a quick yes or no answer so that their time is not wasted. Normally it is sufficient to say either yes or no on the telephone when a person asks if it possible to obtain a loan, to purchase

a ticket to an event, or something similar. Singaporeans are paradoxically polite, but they become annoyed when such interactions are not efficient.

This efficiency is also demonstrated by the cutting-edge technology found in Singapore, which employs numerous advanced technologies for its finance and transportation systems. We have already talked about the automatic bell in taxis indicating that the speed limit has been exceeded. We should also emphasize that these taxis are a convenient form of transportation because of availability and reasonable price. A central satellite monitoring system links all taxis; when you book a taxi over the automated phone system, the nearest taxi is hailed automatically by the system and dispatched to your precise location. Public buses use the satellite system, too. When public buses approach traffic lights during morning and evening rush hours, the lights are controlled to turn green immediately.

There is a downside to this excessive emphasis on work, efficiency, and productivity. Singaporeans tend to be involved in their work and deemphasize leisure. The birth rate is only 1.37 babies per woman, much lower than the 2.1 necessary to maintain a steady population. Married couples routinely point out that they do not have sufficient time for leisure and do not even see their spouses on some days. Of course, Americans voice a similar complaint, expressed in the acronym, DINS: double income, no sex. Unmarried Singaporeans frequently say that they have no time for dating. In true Singaporean fashion the government created a department, the Social Development Unit (called facetiously “single, desperate, and ugly”), to encourage college graduates to marry. SDU sponsors events featuring speed dating (see Chapter 16, “American Football”) and zodiac dating.

The Power of Women

A distinctive feature of the hawker center is the ratio of men and women who work there. Almost the same number of men and women work in a hawker center in similar positions and with equally long hours. Women can be seen frequently occupying the upper hierarchy of the power structure—many owner-operators of the hawker stalls are women who deal with issues like accounting, food preparation, and sales.

Because human resources are comparatively scarce in Singapore, the government encourages equal opportunity in the workplace. In fact, women are among the most powerful influence brokers in Singapore. This is remarkable in view of the fact that in most other Asian countries, women rarely have high positions in politics and business. However, Singaporean women operate successfully in these areas. Women have become CEOs of major companies, ambassadors, and leaders in all walks of life.

Safety

As we have seen, first-time visitors to Singapore tend to have a positive reaction, but they also observe that there are many rules and regulations governing Singaporean life. The standing joke is that Singapore is a fine nation, for everything you do is

fined, including the failure to flush public toilets. Some youth tend to feel stymied because of the large number of rules. Hence it was not surprising that some of them began urinating in elevators, a practice that was soon outlawed. They then began carrying water bottles with them and, when caught by inspectors, indicated that water had spilled. Soon the inspectors developed a test that could determine immediately whether the offending pool was indeed urine. While this example is humorous, others are less so, and one involved a teen-age American who was arrested and caned for spray-painting automobiles at night. There was a public outcry, and former President Clinton became involved. While the number of strikes or hits was decreased as a result, the caning still took place.

Arguments can be made for and against the Singaporean system, which has tended to loosen somewhat in recent years. However, in accordance with the yin-yang tradition of looking at each situation before making a value judgment, we must take into account Singapore's tortuous history, its need to align the goals of individuals and the state closely if economic success for all is to be attained, and its crowded conditions. Unlike the situation in so many other modern nations, there are no homeless in Singapore, and the population is well off in terms of education, standard of living, and the ability to withstand major difficulties.

The government makes use of Singapore's Internal Security Act (or ISA) which lets officials detain people without trial, although extremely judicious use of this legislation has been the norm in the past. Basically this nation is small enough to control tightly. This is a major reason Singaporeans are law abiding. Paradoxically, however, prostitution is openly countenanced in the better sections of the city, which is a contrast to the power of women as discussed above. Singapore is clearly an authority ranking culture in which there is a high degree of collectivism but also a high degree of power distance. Furthermore, this strict control seems to have had an undesirable side effect in that citizens have become more comfortable being followers than entrepreneurs. Compared to Hong Kong, another Chinese-dominant society, Singapore doesn't have many major local businesses. Citizens look to a paternalistic government as an all-providing authority; they delegate decision making to the government and expect to be well cared for in exchange.

The hawker centers are open for long hours, and many of them remain open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This is reflected in the Singaporean work ethic: The average Singaporean has been taught from birth to be hardworking and diligent. The Singaporean government abhors safety violations and is concerned about assuring the public that hawker centers are safe places. The ENV even started a 24-hour service to attend to complaints from members of the public. Enforcement officers respond quickly to illegal hawking complaints as well as environmental health complaints such as noise pollution, illegal dumping, smoking in prohibited areas, and so on (Annual Report 2000 Ministry of the Environment. As might be expected, Singapore has a low crime rate compared to neighboring nations.

Synthesizing Traditional and New Values

The hawker centers sell traditional fare from the Southeast Asian region as well as newer Western food. It is common in hawker centers throughout Singapore to see

traditional Chinese herbal tea being sold next to fried chicken. Old and new are mixed without any sense of incongruity. Similarly Singapore is attempting to maintain its traditional values while pursuing efficiency and practicality. An example of this emphasis on traditions is the celebration of festivals. All three ethnic groups (Chinese, Malays, and Indian) celebrate their major festivals, thus reinforcing traditional values and heritages. The government has officially decreed that all such ethnic celebrations are national holidays. Family and close friends celebrate most festivals, and the traditions of the culture are passed to the young through such communal celebrations. Neighboring Malaysia does the same (see Chapter 18, "The Malaysian Balik Kampung").

Similarly, as Singapore prepares for the challenges of the 21st century, it is increasingly looking at blending the old and the new in its educational systems. Nothing is given more importance in Singapore than the preparation of its young for the workforce of tomorrow. The main challenge has been keeping in touch with Singapore's cultural heritage (be it Chinese, Malay, or Indian) and the cosmopolitan ways that a global marketplace is demanding. Also, Singapore is discarding the old-style educational tenets of rote learning and memorization, holdovers from the British colonial past, and a rigid emphasis on mathematics and the sciences, for a gradual broadening of the curriculum geared toward broad and creative thinking appropriate for a globalized world.

On an individual level, parents of children still motivate and pressure their children toward constant improvement, but the previous emphasis on the strictly academic has been broadened to include some new areas, for example, extra classes promoting computer skills, confidence building, and an appreciation for the arts.

This, then, is Singapore. It is a unique country, and there are some who question whether its approach would work in other situations, for example, large nations, countries with even more ethnic diversity than Singapore, and so on. Regardless, Singapore's achievements are significant, and all of us can benefit from studying this traditional but modern nation that is clearly a major player in the global economy.