



Gerard Sasges, Shi Wen Ng, eds. Teo. *Hard at Work: Life in Singapore Today*. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2019. xxxvi + 377 pp. \$32.00, paper, ISBN 978-981-3250-50-5.

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At first glance I thought this book might be like Teo You Yenn's best-selling *This Is What Inequality Looks Like* (2018), especially since it contains a forward written by Teo. My presumption was wrong, and yet only up to a point: Sasges and Ng's *Hard at Work: Life in Singapore* would make an ideal companion piece to Teo's work, fleshing out her scholarship with real-life accounts of days and lives working in Singapore.

Whereas Teo's book is a series of scholarly essays about inequality, presented in a folksy, highly personalized way, *Hard at Work* is a collection of interviews reconstructed so that interviewees seem to tell the reader their stories in their own voices, with no intermediary. It is not about inequality—and yet inequality seeps through the pores of this book.

Sasges is a historian at the National University of Singapore and Ng is a professional photographer with an academic background. The book has its origins and foundation in Sasges's teaching, where he organizes students to go forth and interview people about their work and lives as part of a class project. From a hundred interviews in hand the authors chose sixty for publication, ranging from a tissue seller (a disguised form of begging in Singapore) and a drag queen at one end of the so-

cial spectrum to a ship repair manager and a Ministry of Education scholar at the other.

This book is not about the poor or the exploited, but they are well represented. A surprising number of interviewees are self-employed but mostly living closer to the bread line or the factory floor than to the middle class: an "ice cream uncle," a temple flower seller, a "vitagen auntie," a bet collector at the races, a motorcycle mechanic, and our tissue seller.

A large proportion of interviewees are foreign workers. At one level this is to be expected since 40 percent of the population are foreign workers in Singapore, but at another level their presence is surprising and welcome: in Singapore, foreign workers are usually socially invisible even when they are working in full view.

The book is decorated with Ng's photos of everyday life (not of any of the interviewees, who are all de-identified) that are wonderfully evocative of Singapore at street level and add color (literally) to the book, but it is the stories, told in their own voices, that bring the book to life.

It is a book of very personal stories and I found myself drawn into each vignette. It is a credit to the student interviewers and the editors that they have been able to achieve this effect again

and again, especially considering that most of the accounts are just two or three pages long. The stories go far beyond the working day, extending to family life, childhood, reasons for working—anywhere that the interviewee wanted to take the conversation. There are stories of loss, injustice, luck, and entitlement.

Many of the stories reveal more about the vagaries of opportunity and injustice than the speakers intend, since they have long since accustomed themselves to their lot and regard it as normal. The book contains no analysis per se, but its sixty stories provide a wealth of qualitative data for anyone—scholar, journalist, civil servant, or politician—who might want to tease out policy lessons, or simply understand better how Singapore works and how Singaporeans work.

These unstated background themes shadow the headline narratives in many of the stories. Easily the most profound and consistent shadow is the role of government, to which interview after interview alludes. Many of the allusions validated or undermined some argument that I or a colleague has made about the problems in Singapore society, but others caught me totally off-guard.

I discovered to my amazement that tissue sellers must pay for a license to conduct their “business” (p. 116). And here I was thinking the visible drop in the number of tissue sellers over the last few years was because the elderly and poor were being helped by the government’s new, albeit modest, raft of welfare measures.

I was aware that there are small vegetable gardens in Singapore, but had never given them much thought. Now I am told that the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority (AVA) sets production quotas for them, and routinely increases the quota in what seems like a futile throwback to Mao’s central planning of production: “Three years ago, one lot had to produce 80 to 100 kg. This year it has doubled. So I tell AVA, ‘Can, no problem. I pluck the veggie, the root, the soil, I weigh them together, there

will be 200 kg.’ They only want figures so I give them figures. I tell the other farmers to do the same. It is nonsense! ... It’s the black and white that comes from the top, the planners of Singapore” (p. 56).

These are two of the more overt commentaries that cast light on the ubiquitous presence and influence of government—and the latter is one of the more direct and entertaining.

There is no index to this book, so the reader must join the spirit in which it was compiled and dip into the text. Its stories are each headlined by the job being described and they are grouped into thirteen work-related categories (such as drinking, eating, selling, recycling and cleaning, caring, moving, managing, healing, and grooming). This helps with navigation, but really, there is no substitute for simply reading, whether from beginning to end or just opening a story that looks like it might be interesting.

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