

Alexis Ong: Singapore is the happiest place in Asia? Seriously?



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It's been almost 20 years since William Gibson's infamous Wired article "[Disneyland with the Death Penalty](#)" on Singapore -- one known to plenty of expats but not as many locals.

Disneyland is, after all, the self-styled happiest place on earth, and as an oasis of wealth and stability in an otherwise troubled region, why shouldn't we be happy as pigs in s**t?

Enter U.S. writer Dan Buettner, who claims [Singapore is the happiest place in Asia](#). But if we're still anything

like the tightly controlled theme park that Mr. Gibson laid out in 1993, that makes us the saddest place around.

Following an interview with MM Lee, Buettner concluded that Singapore is proof that [happiness can be manufactured or engineered through government policy](#).

I'm assuming this guy is an optimist, but I've never heard anything so cynical from a writer who styles himself as an explorer and seeker of happiness. Clearly the way he quantifies said "happiness" is vastly different from how the rest of the world might define it.

Before we get round to Buettner's thought process, broad terms like "happiness" and "creativity" are used in slightly different ways here; the powers that be have been diligent at shaping the way Singaporeans interpret nouns like "innovation" and "creativity" -- words that are often associated with science and technology here instead of the arts.

We have restaurants pioneering the use of kitchen robots, a world-class biotech community, an absurdly talented army of engineers and A*STAR -- the government agency dedicated to fostering world-class scientific research and talent -- cooking up new things all the time.

And not unlike how the government has pragmatically re-contextualized "creativity" to make prettier headlines, Buettner has used his own yardsticks to measure "happiness" among our population.

In his book "Thrive," Buettner argues that from an evolutionary standpoint, humans are programmed to seek security more than freedom -- a notion that might meet some resistance in certain parts of his native country. Therefore, seeing how safe it is in Singapore -- he cites how women can go out at night without getting raped, etc -- he correlates security with happiness.

I'd be inclined to agree that security dwarfs freedom, if we were talking about third-world nations or, say, a prehistoric clan of cavemen. But in a supposed first-world context, especially among younger generations, civil liberties are a crucial part of maintaining a healthy society.

A more accurate statement would be that Singapore is the most contented place in Asia. Content, not happy, because we're being taken care of so well that it creates a sort of social placebo effect.

Yes, we're safe, and as a woman, I can't disagree with my low chances of getting assaulted, and if I had kids here, yes, I'd be fine leaving them on a playground. Public security down, now we move onto the importance of welfare: the government has financial incentives to maintain formal familial structures by keeping our elderly close, which backs up Buettner's other assertion that socializing with our parents creates a sense of satisfaction -- I'm not even going to get into that.

Singapore is well known for financial stability, transparent government, and high levels of home ownership, all of which feed back into the primal need for security. Nonetheless, these things do more to create a communal peace of mind than actual happiness -- the latter remains a personal concept that continues to be butchered in the self-help book industry.

My favorite part of Buettner's research is that he chose to interview MM Lee on the topic of happiness in Singapore, which is pretty much like digging up Walt Disney and asking him what made the Magic Kingdom so magical.

According to Buettner, MM Lee is our "happiness architect," which of course, is perfectly cool with the kind of people who are content to have someone else at the wheel.

His other interviewees -- including people he spoke to for his 2008 book "The Blue Zones" -- are successful entrepreneurs, the guy who owns Sakae Sushi, a real estate tycoon, a self-made millionaire, the former CEO of Raffles Hotel, a lawyer and our Community Chest chairman -- basically, everyone who doesn't make up the majority of the heartland population.

If you're still interested in going out and buying this self-described "story-driven science that ends with a handbook with how to be happier" -- honestly it's the biggest crock I've ever heard -- then maybe you deserve to be Buettner's sort of happy.

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