

MYANMAR MADNESS*

Constructing new worlds.



“Southeast Asia has become the centre of attention, as Europe and China slows down economically. In business, I expect Myanmar to be the biggest winner in ASEAN because its doors are open, and because everything is needed in the country to rebuild its economy.”

* Excerpts from this chapter are from the article “Emerging Myanmar in ASEAN: The Way Forward” published by *CrossRoads*, a business journal in Myanmar. Some material is taken from my speech delivered during the ASEAN Energy Business Forum in Malaysia held on 5 October 2015.

The film *Back to the Future* came to mind, as I ‘teleported’ back into a period of conquests where treacherous jungles, deadly mosquitos amid exotic tea and club houses exist against the backdrop of my landing site.

With streets filled with dust, cars and people, Yangon is bursting with a desire to redefine itself. The facade of a mosque, with an undeveloped historical structure waiting to be developed by regional corporate giants, coupled with the smell of fried crickets sold by Myanmar vendors on the street, with a mini counter selling Aung San T-shirts, describes my first walk in the city.

The majestic Shwedagon Pagoda overlooks the skyline of the developing landscape. The Shwedagon was said to be constructed more than 2000 years ago, making it the oldest Buddhist stupa in the world. According to the country’s local laws, no other building within a certain radius should be higher than the ancient gold pagoda, to maintain its significance.

Anyone that has been to Yangon recently would understand that the country is at work. But whether it will succeed is another question altogether. Today, Myanmar seeks to develop itself and establish its presence in the world, after decades of being under the control of a dictatorial military regime. As the country opens up, a new atmosphere

of competition is appearing. There's no U-turn in sight, simply because too much is at stake, and too much has been promised.

I chose Myanmar as my destination, as I knew too well that operating out of my comfort zone was my cup of tea. And I had to witness firsthand the opportunities developing in a country that was formerly completely shut off from the world.

Whether it's the unprecedented elections or the entry of another huge conglomerate planting their seeds in the country, there is much to look forward to. While I have always thought that Myanmar would be an exotic location to work, I never expected that this would come so soon for me.

The country, which once denied entry to foreign writers and journalists—including blocking Google—has now opened its doors, welcoming both foreigners and foreign investments. For many years Myanmar was an isolated, military-led country struggling to maintain an unrealistic regime. Unexpectedly, things changed dramatically since 2010. A once-stifled press is now finding its feet, with censorship laws being eased and a new press law allowing greater media freedom. Pro-democracy opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi was freed following controversial elections. President Thein Sein pushed through sweeping changes in parliament, and welcomed Ms. Suu Kyi into parliament in 2012.

The government then agreed to initiate dialogue with ethnic groups after decades of civil unrest. Political prisoners were released, ceasefire agreements took place, and other major steps resulted in a suspension of hostilities. I understood that some confidence was restored (especially after a series of economic reforms), but I guess that wasn't enough to satisfy the masses, especially those from the rural areas.

Sense of Arrival

On 8 November 2015, landslide elections showed that the people were clearly fed up with military rule, and wanted Aung San Suu Kyi to be their leader. Now, with the world watching, there was no place to hide. At that moment, everyone held their breath. Election observers streamed into Yangon, filling up hotel lobbies with their cameras and film crews. By 4 PM, 80 percent of the electorate had voted in this unprecedented expression of the democratic process.

After witnessing the monumental 2015 elections, it was clear to me that the sense of nationalism in the country rose to the occasion. Some cried at the polling stations, purple ink staining their little finger, a sign that they had taken part in the vote. Others wore red and T-shirts with Aung San Suu Kyi's photo, all of them waiting patiently on the sidelines for something magical to happen. Voters were not just hyped up about the prospect of change—they felt that they needed to stand up for a sense of injustice done, with many referring back to the 1990 elections and how they had previously won but were cheated of their decision.

This time round, things were different. Two days after voting, the European Union observation mission reported that Myanmar's election was "credible" and "transparent". However, it was highlighted that the election cannot be deemed "truly genuine" because not all of the parliamentary seats were up for election—one-quarter of seats were reserved for the military.

Myanmar's ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) had lost the elections. It was a landslide victory for the opposition, not a marginal one. The USDP admitted defeat and declared that power would be handed over to Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD).

It's natural that the USDP won't be fully credited for their work. But I do believe a coming together of all parties is necessary and critical to solving the wider problems the country faces. After the elections, USDP minister U Soe Thane told the *Wall Street Journal* that the focus should be on reconciliation of the country and not on the "downside of a remarkable process and ignoring the magnitude of change unfolding before us."

U Soe Thane later said: "Smart and pragmatic lawmakers are needed for our new Parliament, above all those who can draft and pass new laws and get things done. They are the ones who can complete Myanmar's transition into a democratic, federal, developed and peaceful country. Reforms initiated by the current government must be continued. Otherwise, the next five years will be a setback for the country."

Whatever the outcome of this power transition to the NLD, they can expect heavy scrutiny. Some say that there will be no easy solutions to the serious ethnic and religious flashpoints that have plagued the country for many decades, dating back to the 1940s. Either way, the future will be tough for Myanmar, but its prospects have never looked so good.

I had the privilege of speaking to Aung San Suu Kyi before the elections. Elegant and boldly defiant, she finally saw some hope after three decades of struggle with the junta. She told me that nothing would stand in her way.

"I don't believe in giving up. It's not easy, but I will make it work," said the Nobel Peace Prize winner and symbol of democracy in Myanmar. This was told to me nine months before she led the National League for Democracy (NLD) to a majority win in the first openly contested election in 25 years. Now the lady has to face the test of making things work.

The USDP leaves behind unfinished business for the new



With Aung San Suu Kyi in Yangon. (Author's photo)

government, but it has also left some opportunities to be worked upon. This includes the Special Economic Zones, a more basic ceasefire agreement and a policy framework for international businesses, as well as a new stock exchange. But what's certain is that Aung San Suu Kyi will play a much greater role in leading Myanmar into its next phase.

Before I moved to Myanmar, I felt uncertain about the future of this country. But at the same time, my instinct told me that what goes down, must come up. Southeast Asia has now become the centre of attention, as Europe and China slows down economically. In business, I expect Myanmar to be the biggest winner in ASEAN because its doors are open, and because everything is needed in the country to rebuild its economy. Businesses are sprouting up everywhere and the overall



Arrival of the first KFC outlet in Yangon. (Author's photo)

business environment is vibrant. Myanmar's gross domestic product averages around 8 percent, one of the fastest rates in the region.

Steady growth in consumer spending, real estate development and expansion of the energy sector are key drivers in its economic development. However, the country faces several key obstacles that hinder its progress: inefficient infrastructure, poor accessibility and a lack of access to capital. For Myanmar to achieve exponential growth, bold change—politically, ideologically and structurally—has to take place.

In the immediate post-colonial era, Myanmar had been considered a rich country. With a long history of oil production, Rangoon Oil Company was the first foreign oil company to drill in 1871. Today, according to the Myanmar Investment Commission, foreign capital pledged to Myanmar's oil and gas sector was estimated to be

\$17 billion. This represents around 30 percent of the country's total foreign investments.

Despite its abundant natural resources, a massive shortage of electricity prevents Myanmar from realizing its full potential. About 70 percent of people in Myanmar don't have access to electricity. The USDP had embarked on a plan to increase access to electricity by 2030. If that works, the national grid would have to be expanded on a massive scale.

Other teething problems are also expected. First, the inclusion of local companies into the greater development equation is a critical part of the pie. It's important to train locals to fit into the work force. Otherwise, this domestic gap will affect industry competitiveness.

Second, Myanmar does not have enough skilled talent to meet its current and future demand. There is a need to deploy skilled labour and develop local expertise. Third, the level of transparency and emphasis on social responsibility towards marginalized communities will be a key factor in whether US sanctions will be lifted, and whether Myanmar can withstand the test of democratic reforms.

The issues of poverty, security and national development all compete for top priority. And surely there's no easy answer. As reforms continue, I think what's necessary is to quicken the pace of private-public collaboration, without compromising values.

I remember a conversation with the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Energy. We discussed the state of the energy sector, in particular Myanmar's shortage of gas. I asked him how they were going to manage the problem. Gas is Myanmar's biggest export to Thailand. The key problem is that both these countries need gas (to convert into electricity) for their longer-term survival. He mentioned market factor constraints, not just contractual ones, which hinder the development of gas. He said some private sector firms were taking advantage of this situation by trying to sell electricity at sky-high

prices to the government. I saw a look of disgust when he explained the situation.

When it comes to pricing, things get complicated. How do you define what's high, unless some benchmarking is done? In the case of Myanmar, many issues are unprecedented. So arriving at a fair calculation has to take place at the policy level.

Besides the urgent need for policy change, the hearts and minds of the Myanmar people, their frustration, hunger for success and sense of purpose, will drive this country into the twenty-first century. Otherwise, private sector companies will not be keen to stay for long, as other Southeast Asian countries present attractive options.

Burma Business

On arrival at Yangon airport, while waiting in the customs section for my 'On-Arrival Visa', the officer saw my passport, and said quietly to his colleague, "Ah, Singapore", then waved me on after pasting a visa entry slip on my passport. This gesture indicates a sense of respect that's given to Singapore and Singaporeans, and for the reputation it has consistently built up over the years.

In Myanmar's more open political environment, voices have become louder. International NGOs are now active in promoting their causes, and developing strategic plans in critical infrastructures, such as hydropower facilities, sea ports and power plants.

I sometimes give speeches at business conferences. And I know that I am supposed to feel honoured. But what I actually feel is something more akin to being a stranger. It's as if I were intruding into someone's home and advising the owners on how to place their furniture. On one occasion, I spoke about Myanmar's sea port in its Special Economic Zone of Kyauk Phyu.

A project estimated to be worth hundreds of millions, this port holds significant value, as it represents the shortest trade route from

India to China. Once constructed, more than 5000 sailing kilometres would be 'saved' compared to its existing route via the Straits of Melaka. More importantly, the port is also capable of creating significant demand across the region because it can dock mother vessels, meaning bigger ships carrying more goods.

I don't claim any credit for how this port evolves. However, I was in charge of bidding for a new deep-sea port during my work for Parami Energy Group, a group of companies involved in oil and gas, construction and power generation businesses, among others.

One man caught my attention: Ken Tun. Ken is a local entrepreneur and CEO of Parami Energy. He made his mark through building nothing into something. At first, I thought Ken hadn't done anything remarkable. In truth, he stood out from others because of his good looks, but this was a matter of personal popularity. It wasn't until I realized that the challenge of doing business in Myanmar, especially in the energy sector, was no easy feat, especially for a man with humble beginnings.

Ken knows exactly how to turn a well into a lake. Building a company from scratch to one that's considered to be a leading oil and gas company in Myanmar, is not kid's play. For what it's worth, Ken could have easily taken bribes to accelerate the company's progress, but I guess he didn't want to earn the quick bucks like some did. As a person, he somehow manages to maintain integrity within a collective culture that isn't receptive to straight talking.

Working in Myanmar deprived me of the luxuries that Singapore offered, but that's not a bad thing. Seeing the transformation of the country at firsthand is a worthwhile trade-off, as it reminded me of what I took for granted in the past. I was in the middle of all this as Parami's chief operating officer (COO), where I managed a variety of issues, dealing with slick overseas businessmen, opportunists and game changers from Yangon to Mandalay to Nay Pyi Taw.

Some companies adopt a touch-and-go approach, designed to get you from enquiry to talks in the hotel's coffee house. Some adopt the approach of window shopping. Others try to spin things off first, and then invite you to come on board. In short, there is no fixed rule on how business is done.

One could compare doing business in Myanmar as being like buying an antique limousine. It's like stepping back into a time where craftsmanship was much more valued. Myanmar's heritage still gives a thumping good drive, although the engine needs to be changed.

On this note, the shipping industry tells a good story: Myanmar had its inaugural experience, with the country's only national shipping line, Burma Five Star Line. The local company started decades ago with about eight ships, and chartered around 30.

Then the rice trade collapsed around 1965, and the economy dipped to its lowest point as the country became shut off from the world. As Myanmar fell into depression in the 1960s, other countries in ASEAN progressed, leaving the once prominent country in dire straits.

Back to buying a car; having old engines and wheels will invite trouble on bends, but going fast is not all this car is about. There's a real sense of sexiness within. This is a car that pedestrians will take a second look at, unless it breaks down and becomes a safety hazard.

Conversations of a Dark Past

Myanmar remains a mystery to many. When the military was in total control, many of the country's opposition members were imprisoned in their struggle for justice and legitimacy. Knowing the country's history is like a revelation, offering a deeper perspective above all the current dynamism.

I chanced upon a man who has been through hell for the sake of democracy. Each time I listened to the stories of U Khun Myint



Khun Myint Tun, Chairman of Pa-Oh National Liberation Organization.
(With permission from Khun Myint Tun)

Tun, or “Tun”, I tried to imagine what has happened to this charming middle-aged man. Tun was a former NLD Member of Parliament for the Thanton province, and a political prisoner dressed in customary Burmese clothing when I first met him during the Norwegian king’s state visit. There, we engaged in a conversation sufficient for a follow-up meeting, which unexpectedly turned into a deeper conversation about his past; I subsequently became intrigued by stories of his survival and struggle.

As an MP and NLD youth leader, Tun had been imprisoned in solitary confinement for seven years, and finally released in August 2003 from the Buthee Daung prison, the final stop among the seven prisons he was jailed in. After his release, he was “fearful of being watched and returned to work for the NLD”; he sought to upgrade his skills, attaining three diplomas in four years. He left the NLD in July 2007, just before the so-called Saffron Revolution, and subsequently worked for the legitimacy of the exiled government, with the purpose of unifying Myanmar at New York’s United Nations in 2008, but failed in this quest.

Today, Tun is a genial man with high hopes, but remains determined to maintain a realistic outlook on how things could change in modern Myanmar, and strives for peaceful resolution among ethnic

groups in Myanmar as the Chairman of the Pa-Oh National Liberation Organization.

I couldn't help but like this man. But how was he able to put his painful past behind him? "I knew I must forget the past to move forward in the future," he said. Born in Burma in 1963, Tun was set to have a promising future. He completed his bachelor's degree in geology in 1983 from the University of Yangon, and quickly distinguished himself as an activist, calling for government reforms. But all this changed the moment he stepped into politics to campaign for a free country.

Twenty years ago, the Karen state had asked Tun to invite Aung San Suu Kyi to meet in Insein township, a district of Yangon. She accepted the invitation and was supposed to attend a New Year festival on 20 December 1996. This was a unique year for the military-run country, because it was six years after the 1990 elections, which the NLD had won. "At that time, I was the neck of the party trying to arrange for meetings with other ethnic leaders," said Tun.

That night, Tun was arrested by the authorities and was accused of arranging for Aung San Suu Kyi to meet members of the Karen state. This was considered illegal by the military regime at that time. "They (the military) were worried that the lady might get too close to the ethnic leaders, and being too familiar wasn't a good thing for the military government," said Tun.

Thereafter, Tun was detained in a military intelligence centre for 10 days. Interrogated by Captain Thitlin, a military intelligence officer married to the niece of General Khin Nyunt, Tun said that he was treated properly. Surprisingly, the discussion focused on furthering relations with China and the US, specifically on "enhancing the friendship" between these countries, which was deemed to have a strategic impact on the progress of Myanmar.

Nothing concrete came out from these discussions. So the junta

decided to throw Tun into solitary confinement, where he was held with a piece of black cloth over his head, and locked up in a small cell of a 12-room prison known as MI5. His confined space included just a bamboo mat (with no pillow).

Next morning, at 6 AM, Tun's captors handcuffed him and started to treat him like a criminal. The treatment had become much more hostile. "They wanted to scare me this time," said Tun.

Although he wasn't beaten, the interrogation started as the questioning intensified. Tun was put in stress positions, his head fully covered with black cloth, and made to sit on a stool without any back support. This carried on for five days. As expected, Tun was asked to resign as an NLD MP, and was promised that he could survive thereafter by doing agricultural work, which the Junta would fully support. They also tried to persuade him to cooperate with the military government and wanted to employ him as a spy.

"They wouldn't stop asking the same questions. All they wanted was a signature to say that I denounced being an MP and that the NLD is bad. This was a difficult period. On day two of the questioning, my head was spinning due to the tiredness and brainwashing. Tears flowed, as I was afraid of being killed anytime. So I had to resort to auto-suggestion," he admitted.

Tun spoke to himself frequently to stay sane and avoid giving in to the demands of his captors. The military wanted three things from Tun: that he resign as an MP; speak against Aung San Suu Kyi; and state that the NLD leaders were wrong.

Prison conditions were sparse. Prisoners were not allowed to read anything. There was only one exception given to another prisoner, who was allowed to have a Bible to read. The rest were not exempted. Prisoners would use blood or soap to 'write' underneath their metal food trays and pass messages around secretly. Jailers sometimes turned a blind eye, and Tun could manoeuvre his way into making his

life slightly more tolerable.

Tun continued to be self-dependent, despite his imprisonment: “My family could come and see me, and they would bring blankets and other clothes. We couldn’t change our clothes because there was only one set per person.”

Without the slightest overstatement, Tun said that maintaining an internal dialogue was critical to keeping sane. Sneaking in Buddhist mantras written by monks was another way of passing time.

The worst times, as he put it, were the daily interrogation sessions, where his captors would ask him the same questions repeatedly, till it felt like a form of brainwashing. This lasted months, until he admittedly ‘gave in’ to their senseless acts. “If you wish to kill, then kill. If you wish to sentence, then sentence,” he said, completely resigned to his fate. It was an act of defiance that told his captors that this was the end of their session, because he was accepting his life could be taken.

What seemed to be the hardest part was over. Tun managed to engage with his deeper self beneath the black cloth that covered his head, omitting other distractions and becoming more appreciative of life—yet also felt ready to end it when compelled to do so.

At the end of his jail term, Tun said that he would be free only when there was a free Myanmar. He was released in 2003, and kept himself out of harms way, only to restart his political activities while studying with the British Council to keep abreast of world developments. He wanted to master the English language and gain the benefit of what the language could bring him.

Until recently, Myanmar was closed to the world under a brutal military regime. I told Tun that I might not have been able to withstand the solitary confinement, even though I had completed ‘prisoner-of-war’ training before. In fact, none of the personal obstacles that I faced as a young man could compare to what victims of political oppression

experienced every day, and I could only imagine the loneliness that Tun had to face when he was captured.

Tun's struggle was just the beginning: jailed by his own countrymen, Tun courageously endured seven years in a series of prison camps. Not only did he survive this ordeal, but he went on to spend the second half of his life bridging the gap between Myanmar's ethnic minority groups and the mainstream political parties.

Tun's recollections reflected intense experiences that remain mind-boggling to me. Spending years in prison, harassed for being patriotic, and being blamed for problems much larger than his own, he endured personal sacrifices that one could only imagine.

BRAVE NEW WORLD

Compete or wither?



“As pragmatism remains the core principle of the government’s policy making, it has to be combined with empathy and compassion... Today, Singaporeans expect more, want more and need more. So everyone needs to play their part without diluting the country’s social fabric and integrity.”

I was on the way to Yangon airport for my flight back to the Lion City. “I wish my country could learn more from Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew,” said a taxi driver as he chewed betel nuts that reeked of gasoline. I didn’t like the smell, but was pleased to discover the positive impressions of a foreigner on the founder of modern Singapore.

After the flight from Yangon to Singapore, I walked out of Changi Airport’s arrival hall with the usual sense of relief. It felt good. The roads are clean and well maintained; beautiful trees provide some shade and solace. And, of course, Changi Airport never falls short of fantastic shopping and facilities.

Over the years, Singapore has moved on from being a developing to developed country. It’s demographics, productivity and expectations have evolved to new levels. Singaporeans now are better educated, more tech savvy, vocal and expect a better standard of living. The bar has been set high, and it’s time to move on to new terrain. Singapore is now at a unique crossroads. What’s next—what’s new? I ask.

Where Do We Go From Here, Singapore?

The year 2015 was filled with profound changes that made headlines and history. The passing on of Mr Lee Kuan Yew (LKY), local flash

floods that unleashed nature's fury, and the 2015 elections have shown Singaporeans that unity is the answer to many questions.

I remember the People's Action Party's (PAP) heyday in the 1990s, when LKY and Mr Goh Chok Tong hashed out innovative public housing estate initiatives. New flats were built in mature estates, and open spaces in the heartlands were developed to be more user-friendly for both young and old, with new playgrounds and more communal spaces to build social capital.

Those were days where "development" was the buzz word. In this decade, it has been a time of soul-searching. Much seems to rest on checks and balances, who should I vote for and why? The party means as much as the candidate.

Today, Singaporeans expect more transparency from the government and its political parties, especially on policies that have an impact on them. There is also an expectation that empathy and compassion should play a greater role in the country's national value system.

Among these things, I think Singapore cannot be average if it wishes to maintain its hard-earned success. If one day, the mentality to "leave things for another day" becomes widespread in Singapore, then it would be disastrous for the country. If we let a "dumb government" take over, as LKY puts it, then Singapore will be in the dumps.

LKY moulded a hard-working, competent and disciplined society, although criticisms of the resource-poor island state's unique democratic processes are sometimes being voiced. His methods of governance worked well for Singapore then, but today, new methods and policies are needed to spice up the good old recipe.

Now that I'm in my late thirties, I observe recent events around the world and remain largely optimistic. I am always curious on how Singapore fares when I read *The Economist*, whether gross domestic

product is increasing, whether the Singapore Exchange is losing its relevance. I also watch how prices evolve: high costs of living, property prices, car taxes and so on. It feels like piecing together a giant jigsaw puzzle on a small table.

Sometimes, I wonder about the identity of Singaporeans and how the country will be 30 years down the road. We have mixed cultures. Unlike the Japanese or the Koreans, we do not have cultural costumes, cultural practices, or characteristics that are unique or deeply entrenched.

Am I Singaporean because I was born here? What makes a Singaporean? With no concrete answers in mind, I concluded that Singaporeans are a unique group with mixed potential and a diverse culture that can make things happen in a competitive world.

There's a saying that the Singapore dream is made up of the so-called 'five Cs': credit card, condominium, cash, car, country club and so on. I have heard that this 'dream' has now expanded its usage, including the values of compassion and contentment. This, folks, is but a cliché.

Some of my foreign friends say, "I don't blame you for working so hard. You want more money so that you can buy your condo." "What else do Singaporeans want?" is a common response I hear. I think Singaporeans are much more than that. They have ideas of their own and a tough spirit, enough to get back on their feet and do better when the going gets tough. Singaporeans are entitled to pursue their own dreams in their own way. It's a personal choice that shouldn't be generalized as a way of life.

I do think within that cliché lies some truth, however. It has to do with how some people judge others, and a general sense of embedded rivalry. It probably has got something to do with the survival instincts of Singaporeans, as they are typically competitive in the workforce, which could lead to some forms of unexpected strife.

Out of Our Comfort Zone

Going out of our comfort zone is essential to any form of development. My parents taught me to pursue my dreams. They allowed me to spread my wings. And I only did so at a later age. It's difficult to think about what you really want at a young age. Only when you hit your early twenties, then you have some life experiences to help you decide what you really want to do.

Some people I know at 40 still don't really know what they want to do in life. It's quite normal because people have more choices today, as a result of higher salaries (as compared to the rest of Southeast Asia), a stronger dollar and more savings in general. If anything, I would hate to live out of Singapore, fearing that the value of my savings and prospects would be devalued.

What Singaporeans struggle with are the high prices of cars and housing. Plus, it's widely known that Singapore is one of the world's most expensive places to live. In a weird sense, my subconscious mind tells me that high quality comes with a price. We get what we pay for.

Having said that, despite increased frustration with the government, there's still much hope and positivity in the air. A few years back, I often heard expressions of frustration about the government. Many people were unhappy. Some were offended by the arrogance of some government officials for being out of touch with ordinary Singaporeans.

The trains breaking down (sometimes) surely didn't ease their frustrations. It was the perfect political storm. Nevertheless, strong leadership and national cohesion saved the day. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong seized the opportunity, together with his team, to change things.

If he had been a weak leader, Singapore would have turned into a mediocre state. After the 2015 elections, the PAP ruling party won

a majority vote and regained confidence among Singaporeans. They heard the peoples' voices, and adapted quickly.

As pragmatism remains the core principle of the government's policy making, it has to be combined with empathy and compassion. Perhaps it's about managing expectations, rather than managing prices. Today, Singaporeans expect more, want more and need more. So everyone needs to play their part without diluting the country's social fabric and integrity.

For me, I'd like to think 'aspirationally' for the future. If I do well in my career, my parents will have a more comfortable life. But if, for some reason, I do not make it, avenues of assistance are available. The idea is to think big, work hard and adapt to modern ways of doing things.

My world view is defined by what I've experienced. I believe now, as I've believed always, that Singapore can continue to prosper if it continues to push the boundaries with a solid team. However energetically I leap into different environments, Singapore remains close to my heart. Because of Singapore's system of meritocracy, I can now travel, work and contribute in different capacities. If I grew up in Syria, North Korea or Zimbabwe, I know results would have been very different. The world is my oyster.

Big Picture

What better time than the present period of historic transition to a new century of conflict and creativity? After spending some time with American think tanks in Washington, D.C., I was drawn to the idea of using disruptive technologies to tilt the balance of power in a conflict zone. The US remains a superpower despite major setbacks in its security and financial sectors since the new millennium. There is, of course, a knock-on effect for Southeast Asia, where the US has played a key role in regional security.

The tides have changed today. Many theorists support the view that it could be the end of Western domination. I disagree. I believe that the West will continue to dominate the region because of its culture of creativity, world-class education institutions and mature economies. The US will remain a superpower due to its creativity and resilience. Since the 2008 financial crash, it has shown obvious signs of recovery, and Europe has managed to bail itself out of a potential economic meltdown.

In the past, the country of immigrants has undergone unprecedented evolutions, overcoming insurmountable challenges during the Great Depression; survived two World Wars; and emerged as the driver of change during the industrial revolution and counter-culture periods.

Currently, Silicon Valley still produces the world's most innovative tech leaders. The best universities in the world are mainly in the US and the UK. Google and NASA control most of the world's satellites. Clearly, the US continues to lead in research and technology. But Asia has put up a good fight to gain market space.

In the 1990s, China was already poised to be a dominant world super power. Earlier, Japan had also risen to prominence through their giant, innovative tech companies, such as Sony, Hitachi and Mitsubishi. Plus, the development of thriving new businesses by the Asian Tigers—Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea—further reinforced the notion of a free market and developed economy in Asia.

Largely through manufacturing exports, these set of conditions created significant traction, until the 1997 financial crisis inflicted first degree burn wounds to the once booming economies. The Asian Tigers lost their bite, and a huge piece of the pie. By mid-1998, the crisis was so bad that spill-over effects threatened markets in Europe and the US. As this happened, the Internet boom got into full

swing. Stock markets saw their value rise rapidly. Unfortunately, this refreshing air of hope didn't last for long.

The Internet bubble burst, turning key tech industries into ghost towns for nearly two years. Then, when everything seemed to be getting back on track, the 9-11 terrorist attacks happened and broke the camel's back. As the saying goes, when the US sneezes, the world catches a cold. 9-11 formed the impetus for the war in Afghanistan, which changed the world's views on security and terrorism.

Human Terrain is Key

As the security landscape tightens, so many other things are changing. Technology especially has brought about great changes, with the world moving from a knowledge-based society to one that is based on disruptive technologies. Gone are the days when a few people control an entire system.

I have noticed a trend: where influence has become a shared commodity, through the powerful network of the crowd. For example, in 2015, the death of a Zimbabwean lion named Cecil attracted much media attention around the world, in fact more than those dying from a bomb blast in Afghanistan. People care more about issues they can relate to directly.

Some governments chose to turn a blind eye when their people were unhappy. The Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street movements, and watershed elections, have shown that social mobilization creates domino effects that impact public perception and confidence.

I'm still trying to figure out how influence works today. Social influence plays a critical role in defining how a country operates. For one, people don't respond well to 'BS'. The public has become more attuned to looking between the lines, and seeking ways for their voices to be heard across different platforms.

That's why I think authenticity is essential. This means taking

bold steps and creating value. It's about presenting a genuine side, but without trying too hard. Let me offer a negative example. After the Malaysian Airlines MH370 disappearance first became public, thousands around the world commented, but few posts got noticed. But this one certainly did.

“ The rescue operation for the missing MH370 is in full swing. Passenger safety is also a top priority at Volvo Cars, let's pray together for the 239 lives that were on board the plane. Bless them, and may a miracle occur. ”

This was posted by a Volvo Car Corporation employee on Weibo (a Chinese equivalent of Twitter). While the post was taken down within an hour, the damage was already done. After I saw this post, I felt as if a thorn had pierced my forefinger. I think social media can be a wonderful thing for building branding and marketing. But when it becomes offensive or disturbing, then it's counter-productive.

In this case, the moral challenge was about doing what's right in a public space. Readers are free to interpret an article, and they are free to comment on it. The problem happens when one capitalises on tragedies for one's own benefit. Unfortunately, such online crises have become a new normal. In the past, I've tried to ignore such comments. But now, it's difficult to completely ignore provocative statements, especially when the online world today is so dynamic and immediate.

Likewise, as the social media world changes to adapt to new communication technologies, the bad guys know how to capitalise on technology, too. Terrorists now use encrypted online apps to communicate and radicalise newcomers via online platforms. They exploit broader social media to spread their propaganda to create psychological paralysis, rather than cause mass destruction.

Matters concerning ideology are not easy to understand; intentions are even more difficult to decipher. And no one-stop solution can erase history or heal open wounds. To me, these issues are difficult to untangle. So I shall look at other things that are less heavy—specifically, the issues facing Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asia

With its warm exotic beaches, historical landmarks and modern cities, Southeast Asia contains marvels that include heritage sites and diverse cultures containing centuries-old traditions.

Some of my own experiences include wandering around Bangkok, checking out French shops in Vietnam and rowing along the Mekong River. As a former military officer attending meetings, training and occasionally escorting a general around diplomatic events, I have fond memories of the region.

As for business and the economy, I believe Southeast Asia (SEA) will be Asia's most dominant region in the next five years.

First of all, the region contains enormous cultural, religious and ideological diversity. It has undergone massive social and economic transformation, and has posted one of the highest growth rates. Emerging markets such as Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (CLMV) are now testing grounds for economic and social development.

Despite increased social pressures for greater reform, I think governments and citizens need not worry about a contagion effect, nor should street politics be misconstrued as an Arab Spring style copy-cat. In the end, long-term stability depends on the implementation of democratic and transparent practices.

Since the 1990s, significant events have taken place. Cambodia returned to ASEAN, Indonesia became democratic after massive riots and Myanmar opened its doors to the world. Now, Indonesia has become even more determined to flex its muscle, despite much

political upheaval, and with all the challenges presented by its ethnic and ideological diversity. It made me realize that no one could actually achieve change in any regime, especially in those that come with massive baggage, both good and bad. “We became rich initially via the exports of crude oil. Then it was industrialisation. Now the focus is on consumption to production to investment in industry and human capital. Change can be painful but it can create winners and losers. There will be no gain without pain,” said Indonesian President Joko Widodo at the World Economic Forum in 2015.

Problems that affect one country can spread easily to another, like the common flu. For example, the Asian food system is beset by serious challenges today, and risks production prices becoming volatile and overpriced, in many cases leading to an oversupply of commodities. Farmers in the region are struggling, hoping for the best. Many of them are in danger of losing their livelihoods. To cope, rice farmers are compelled to find new ways of working by using more fertilizer and machinery. The food system, I fear, has become a hardship for farmers whose livelihoods rely on agriculture.

Countries such as Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos are directly affected by such agricultural practices due to the increased exposure to global markets, a flood of imports, extreme weather and changing consumer tastes. According to the International Monetary Fund, indexes of market prices for rice, wheat, palm oil and rubber have all dropped steadily since 2012. Wondering about the actual impact of this, I spoke to Sun Chanthol, Senior Minister of Commerce of Cambodia (now Transport Minister), hoping to find out more about the real situation.

“Access to capital is the key most pressing challenge. Now that Cambodia has moved from a deficit of food to a surplus, the expansion of exporting rice is now a priority, but they still need relevant technologies to assist them. An example is measuring rain to



Residents crossing a bridge in Phnom Penh. (Author's photo)

improve yields of farmers.”

According to Chantol, Cambodia produces an average of 4 million tons of rice yearly, but exports only half a million because of the lack of funds. These exports from Cambodia have caused prices in Vietnam to fall significantly.

From Ang Kor Wat to the Shwedagon Pagoda, business waits as if it was a cuisine spread out on the table, with spicy, sweet and sour flavours tempting the palate. There are many tastes, but few doors are open for the undecided. Larger businesses are getting more of the pie in property development, partly due to a shift in oil prices and the Chinese currency. As all this happens, ASEAN countries are making great improvements across the board.

No Easy Day

CLMV countries are resource-rich but are trying to make some very difficult transitions. Besides tackling challenges in agriculture, poverty,

and unemployment, human trafficking remains rife beneath the facade of economic progress.

The good news, however, is that these developing countries are gaining traction in regional economic integration and the liberalisation of global trade. Having said that, economic independence is no guarantee of peace.

In the past decades, SEA has witnessed its fair share of political upheavals. In the Philippines in 1986 and 2001, a vigorous broad-based social movement overturned two decades of dictatorship under Ferdinand Marcos, and ousted elected president Joseph Estrada during a failed impeachment trial for corruption. The Philippines is striding ahead with new spending programs that focus on enhancing regional trade. As for Thailand, it's struggling in the aftermath of a deep political deadlock under military rule.

Indonesia's President Joko Widodo has injected confidence with a new cabinet ready to take on new challenges, despite past corruption scandals. Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib is also struggling to account for himself over corruption accusations amid a fluid business and security environment.

Cambodia is not spared from such problems, after the Cambodian National Rescue Party rejected the results of the 2013 elections, calling for more transparency within its ruling Cambodian People's Party. Hun Sen, its long-standing prime minister, has held onto power despite a political deadlock that was intensified by large demonstrations in Phnom Penh.

I believe the gradual unwinding of long entrenched positions is slowly happening in Cambodia. If things continue, the pace and extent of progress in the Chinese-backed country will continue, depending on the extent of its political will and investor confidence. I don't think the regime will change at its core, but will become more competitive as other countries step up to meeting the challenges of



A monk at the Thai–Myanmar border. (Author's photo)

our time in the region.

As for Laos, the landlocked country is not merely a popular travel destination, it's one of Southeast Asia's most consistent markets. Transformed from a nation isolated by Cold War conflict to one that is opening up its economy in the Greater Mekong Subregion, the country is now making steps up the economic ladder.

Despite such credentials, Laos has not maximised its full potential because of a lack of access to capital and human expertise. But, it's a country to watch out for because of its natural resources and electricity generation capabilities. The landlocked country is likely to continue as a transnational road link, driving up cross-border trade, with further investment promoting economic cooperation in the region.

There is something magical about the former French colony. The confluence of the Mekong River, sacred temples and hydropower dams enchants the accidental visitor. When I was sent to Laos to

study the market and to seek business opportunities in 2013, I discovered that the country is filled with adventure, from trekking to kayaking to rock climbing. It's a heaven for reflection and seeking peace within.

When I travelled to this country, I knew it was time to nourish the soul. At the same time, I thought of my life and how it will turn out. I wanted to take a shot at being an entrepreneur in a developing business environment. I felt lucky to be living so well, but a part of me felt quite discontented. One thing is for sure, I wasn't about to sit back and relax. That's why I went to Vietnam—to jump into my first business venture.

Triip.me

As a first-timer investing in a tech business, I didn't know what to believe and what to hope for. And during this time of flux, I learnt that one of the most important things is to trust your instincts, even when the stakes seem high. I thought about luck, market penetration and the numbers. And yet some of the figures were not the way I wanted them. I invested in the company when few took a second glance.

I knew my partner, Viet Hai, from school. He is eccentric, creative, purposeful—a full-blooded entrepreneur. This was enough for me to believe in his passion and to invest in his dreams. With his wife, Ha Lam, they founded Triip.me in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, to connect local guides with travellers. To me, they had enough hunger and energy to make this work.

"What we have right now is something we are passionate about and that we love to do...We sold our house and used the money to rebuild the company...The first investor from Singapore was a tourist who booked a Vietnamese calligraphy class in Ho Chi Minh City. He really loved the experience and believed in our company," said Ha Lam.

According to a CNN news article, Triip.me is arguably one of the top tech start-ups in Asia. In 2015, the company had more than 7,000 users and 800 guides worldwide.

With Triip, anyone can be a tour guide. People can enjoy what they do, make some pocket money and, of course, enjoy wonderful travels. One Singaporean who volunteered for Triip during her vacation shared her thoughts:

“Many of us Singaporeans have our day jobs. We get up in the morning, get ready for work, work the entire day, then return home for dinner. Life becomes a routine. When I recall my recent solo trip to Japan, the best memories were not of me visiting key attractions... it was of me sitting by a river, watching people as they went about their lives as the sun set. It was of me having hours of conversations over *ume* soda with my Airbnb host Naomi about our countries and differences in cultures. Naomi has never been to Singapore, and after the wonderful hosting she had for me in Kobe, I thought about how I would like to take her around.”

The business of travel is multi-faceted. People travel to broaden their horizons, meet people of different cultures and to develop goodwill. Some do it to gain new perspectives and experiences. The feeling of exploration never stops; this business evolves through the concept of social capital, where networks spin within networks, all of which brings about a sense of sharing that drives a spirit of adventure.

This is the key that provides a sense of purpose. Jim Collins wrote in his book *From Good to Great* that our driving resource (what makes us money) eventually drives our actions. That's the theory, but the facts on the ground suggest that change starts when we decide to make changes ourselves. Rodin, the great French Romantic artist, said at the age of 16 that success is what we make of it:

“Michelangelo and Raphael are great names, but we can match them... That was when we lived in another world, full of illusions; we could already see the clouds parting to let crowns of glory drop upon our heads. Then, pausing, you would yearn to penetrate the shadows and read what fate had in store for you at the age of twenty.”

Rodin: The Hands of Genius by Helene Pinet (2010)

Rodin couldn't get into the schools he wanted to, and eventually did his own work. People thought he was a fake, but he turned out to be a genius. He created original artistic visions throughout his life, in both sculptures and paintings. And his vision has brought about much change in the development of the arts. To me, having a vision is not dreaming. It's about creating a space to generate new ideas without fear of being judged.

As clichéd as it sounds, when there is a will, there will be a way. And with this analogy, I bring you to the final chapter of the book, where I examine some of the challenges that I faced head on, and how I addressed them in ways that seem to me to have stood the test of time.



At Triip's happy office in Ho Chi Minh. (Author's photo)

CONCLUSION



“All men dream; but not equally.

Those who dream by night in the dusty
recesses of their minds wake in the day to
find that it was vanity; but the dreamers
of the day are dangerous men,
for they may act their dreams with open eyes,
to make it possible.”

— T.E. Lawrence, British archaeologist, military officer, and diplomat