

Five Days, One City, Many Perspectives

What Singapore taught me about the world — and about Japan

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Introduction: A City That Asks Hard Questions

I arrived in Singapore knowing its reputation — a gleaming, efficient city-state that turned postcolonial poverty into first-world prosperity within a single generation. What I did not expect was how insistently Singapore would ask questions back. Questions about history, about equity, about what a city owes its residents, and about the stories nations choose to remember or forget. This photo journal is an attempt to document what I saw, but more honestly, what I was made to think.

The program brought together students from Japan, South Korea, China, Benin, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and beyond — a group as multinational as Singapore itself. That mix turned out to be as educational as any lecture. Hearing how fellow participants from countries that had experienced Japanese occupation processed that history, or how those from Southeast Asia described their own relationship to Singapore's economic dominance, shattered any illusion that there is a single correct reading of shared histories. Cultural intelligence, I came to understand, is not something you acquire from a textbook. It emerges from the friction and warmth of actually spending five days with people who see the world differently from you.

This journal reflects on two official program elements — NTU lectures on Singapore's history and economy, and the visit to Dignity Kitchen — and one day of self-directed exploration on Sentosa Island and the Singapore National Museum. Across all of them, the same question surfaced repeatedly: what does it mean to build a society intentionally?

Part I: Official Program Events

1.1 The Japanese Occupation — History Through Someone Else's Eyes

The NTU lecture on Singapore's modern history addressed the Japanese Occupation of 1942–1945 in a way that no Japanese classroom ever had for me. Singapore was renamed Syonan-to — 'Light of the South Island' — and subjected to three and a half years of military administration that left deep scars on its civilian population. The lecture covered Operation Sook Ching, a systematic purge of ethnic Chinese civilians deemed anti-Japanese by the Kempeitai (military police). Screening centres were established across the city; those who failed the arbitrary process were executed at beaches in Changi and Punggol. Post-war exhumations, organised by the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce in the 1960s, recovered remains across 27 sites. The Civilian War Memorial — four white columns representing Singapore's four ethnic communities — was inaugurated on February 15, 1967, the 25th anniversary of the British surrender.

Beyond the violence, the occupation imposed severe material deprivation. Rice prices escalated from SGD 5 per 100 catties at the start of the occupation to SGD 5,000 by August 1945. The combined annual death toll more than doubled over the occupation years, from 29,831 in 1942 to 65,158 in 1945 (BiblioAsia, National Library Board, 2019). Oral histories — including the diary of scholar Hsu Yun Tsiao, who recorded the bombings and mass screenings in Raffles Place — give these statistics a human texture that statistics alone cannot convey.

Sitting in the lecture hall, I became acutely aware of the gap between how this history is held in Singapore — memorialised, taught, observed annually as Total Defence Day — and how it appears in Japanese secondary education, which typically allocates it a single paragraph. A classmate from another country that had also experienced Japanese occupation later told me over dinner that this asymmetry felt familiar. We did not argue about whose account was correct; instead, we found ourselves asking what it would mean for Japan to engage more seriously with occupied perspectives. That conversation, made possible only by the multinational composition of our group, was one of the most valuable experiences of the entire program.

1.2 Dignity Kitchen — Social Innovation With a Human Face

The visit to Dignity Kitchen at 69 Boon Keng Road was the program's most immediately moving experience. Dignity Kitchen is a hawker centre and training hub founded by Mr. Koh Seng Choon, whose vision is simple and radical in equal measure: to provide dignified employment and skills training to people with physical disabilities, mental health conditions, or otherwise difficult life circumstances. The stalls are run by trainees who learn food preparation and customer service in a real commercial environment, not a protected workshop. The kitchen is also, by any objective measure, excellent — its food draws regular customers from the surrounding neighbourhood.



Figure 1: Group photo with Mr. Koh Seng Choon and the Dignity Kitchen team at 69 Boon Keng Road, Singapore

What struck me about Dignity Kitchen was how thoroughly it refused the charity-versus-commerce binary. Mr. Koh's framing was consistent: Dignity Kitchen is not a welfare programme that happens to sell food. It is a business that happens to employ people the mainstream labour market has excluded. The dignity is in the work itself, not in the help offered. This distinction — between inclusion as a social service and inclusion as a business model — felt important. Social innovation, as the program framing suggested, is not about making problems more manageable. It is about restructuring the system that creates them.

Reflecting on this alongside Singapore's housing model — where 80% of residents own their homes through a government-designed affordability mechanism — I began to see a pattern: Singapore's most admired policy successes share an insistence on designing with dignity rather than designing around need. The HDB flat is not social housing in the pejorative sense. The Dignity Kitchen stall is not sheltered employment. Both models ask what it would look like to build full participation from the ground up, rather than patching exclusion after the fact. This framing has since changed how I think about social policy in Japan, where welfare and dignity are too often conceptually separated.

At a food court during one of our free afternoons, I tried Kueh Salat for the first time — a two-layer traditional Peranakan dessert of glutinous rice and pandan custard. The vivid green of the pandan layer, produced from the screwpine plant, was my first tangible encounter with Peranakan culture, a hybrid of Malay and Chinese heritage that Singapore has chosen to preserve and celebrate. Something as simple as a dessert at a food court became a small lesson in the multicultural layering that defines the city.



Figure 2: Kueh Salat at a local food court — a traditional Peranakan dessert of glutinous rice and pandan custard, illustrating Singapore's layered culinary heritage

Part II: Day 2 — Sentosa Island and Singapore's Trade History

2.1 Sentosa: Where Death Became Leisure

To arrive at Sentosa by cable car — watching the high-rise skyline recede and the green of the island rise below — is to arrive somewhere that has been very deliberately transformed. The island's former name, Pulau Blakang Mati, translates from Malay as roughly 'the island behind which lies death.' The name appeared on Portuguese-Melakan cartographic records in the 17th century and is linked to piracy, epidemic, and war. Today, Sentosa receives up to 25 million visitors a year and is home to Universal Studios, Resorts World, and the Capella resort, site of the 2018 Trump-Kim summit.

Fort Siloso, built in 1878 to guard the western approach to Keppel Harbour, is now the only fully preserved coastal battery from the twelve that constituted 'Fortress Singapore.' Its history encodes a famous strategic irony: the guns were positioned to counter seaborne attack from the south, but equipped only with armour-piercing shells designed for ships. When Japan invaded overland from the north in 1941, the weapons were repositioned — but ineffective. After surrender, the fort became a prisoner-of-war camp housing around 1,000 Allied soldiers, and the island's beaches were among the execution sites of Operation Sook Ching. Remains were found in the island's creeks as late as 1957.

Walking through the fort's underground ammunition tunnels and barracks, past wax reconstructions of the British and Japanese surrenders, I found myself thinking about the contrast between the site's past and its present. Singapore has not erased this history. It has converted it into a National Monument, a tourism product, and an educational resource simultaneously. Fort Siloso was gazetted in 2022. The lesson Sentosa offers is not simply commercial resilience — it is that heritage, including traumatic heritage, can be held honestly without preventing reinvention.

2.2 The Malacca Strait — History as Living Infrastructure

From the southern shore of Sentosa, looking out across the Singapore Strait toward the Malacca Strait, I took what became the photograph I most want to include in this journal. In the frame: a cargo vessel — I later confirmed the livery as NYK Line, Nippon Yusen Kaisha, a Japanese shipping company — passing against a soft grey sky, framed by the green canopy of the fort's surviving vegetation. It was an unremarkable

moment in one sense. The strait sees approximately 130,000 vessel calls per year, and a cargo ship on the horizon is not unusual. But standing where Fort Siloso's guns once aimed, watching a Japanese commercial vessel move through the same waterway that Japanese warships had controlled eight decades earlier, I felt the compression of history that Singapore consistently produces.



Figure 3: Cargo vessels in the Singapore Strait viewed from Sentosa — the same waterway that defines Singapore's 200-year commercial identity

The history of this waterway is inseparable from the history of Singapore itself. When Sir Stamford Raffles established a free port on the island in 1819 — charging no harbour dues, imposing no tariffs — he was betting that geography plus openness would outcompete Dutch commercial monopolism in the region. The bet proved spectacularly correct. Singapore's population grew from approximately 150 people at founding to over 10,000 by the mid-1820s, drawn by traders from China, India, and across the Malay world. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 multiplied Singapore's advantage by dramatically shortening the Europe-Asia shipping route. Today the port processes over 36 million TEUs annually, and the maritime industry contributes 7% of GDP (Port of Singapore Authority). The ship I photographed was not a symbol. It was the economy, in motion.

The Singapore City Gallery at the Urban Redevelopment Authority building, which I visited later that afternoon, showed how this trade foundation has been translated into urban planning over two centuries. The Gallery's centrepiece — an 11-by-10-metre architectural model of central Singapore at 1:400 scale — shows a city where almost no land use is accidental. Marina Bay, the ethnic enclaves of Chinatown and Kampong Glam, the green corridors, the industrial zones: each is the product of planning cycles reviewed every five to

ten years. Seeing the city from above in that model, after having walked through it at ground level, clarified something: Singapore's prosperity is not the residue of good fortune. It is the output of sustained, deliberate institutional design.

Part III: What the People Taught Me

No field study journal that focuses only on sites and lectures would be honest. The most significant learning of this program happened in the in-between moments: on the MRT between visits, over meals at hawker centres, in the conversations that continued after the formal program ended each evening.

Our group included students from across Asia and Africa. Early in the program, the differences between us were most visible — different languages defaulted to, different assumptions about punctuality and personal space, different relationships to the history we were being asked to examine together. By the end, the differences were still there, but they had become something we were curious about rather than cautious of.

One exchange has stayed with me particularly. During a discussion following the NTU lecture on the occupation, a classmate from a country that had also been under Japanese rule observed that Japanese and their own historical education describe the same events in ways so different that students from both countries essentially arrive at adulthood having learned about different wars. Another peer from Southeast Asia added that in their country, the Japanese occupation is discussed with more ambivalence, because it also accelerated the end of European colonial rule. The same historical period, completely different framings. No single one of us had access to the complete picture. That realisation — that my version of history is always partial, that other perspectives are not just different but necessary — is something I could have read in a book, but I would not have believed it in the same way.

The program's multicultural design was not incidental. It was the method. Singapore itself is a city-state that has managed four official languages, three major ethnic communities, and a migrant workforce comprising roughly a quarter of its population — not without tension, but with deliberate institutional architecture designed to prevent segregation and promote integration. The HDB's Ethnic Integration Policy, which sets ethnic quotas in public housing blocks to prevent community enclaves, is one example. The preservation of Chinatown, Little India, and Kampong Glam as officially protected cultural districts is another. Singapore does not pretend difference does not exist; it manages it actively. Our program group, in a small way, operated by the same logic.



Figure 4: The program group at Changi Airport Terminal 1 on departure day — students from across Asia and Africa

The photograph above was taken at Changi Airport on our final morning. What strikes me looking at it now is how different it feels from the photograph we would have taken on arrival, had someone thought to take one. On day one, we were a group of individuals from different countries, assembled for a program. By

departure, we were something more than that — a group of people who had argued about history over chicken rice, navigated the MRT together in the wrong direction at least twice, and arrived at a shared understanding that none of us had started with. That is, I think, what cultural intelligence actually looks like when it is working.

Conclusion: The Questions I'm Taking Home

Singapore is a city that makes complacency difficult. It has built one of the world's most liveable environments on a territory with no natural resources, managed four languages and three major ethnic communities without dissolving into either assimilation or fragmentation, and done so while being honest — at least in institutional terms — about the historical violence that preceded its independence. None of this makes Singapore perfect. But it makes it an unusually useful object for thinking about what intentional nation-building looks like.

I leave with several questions I did not arrive with. How might elements of the HDB model — particularly the demand-side taxation that protects residential buyers from speculative pressure — be adapted for Tokyo's increasingly unaffordable housing market? What would it require for Japanese secondary education to engage more seriously with the civilian perspectives of countries that Japan occupied? And what does Dignity Kitchen's model of inclusion-through-commerce suggest about how Japan might redesign employment policies for people currently categorised as outside the mainstream labour market?

I do not have answers. But the questions are sharper than they were, and they are sharper because of Singapore — because of the city's insistence on asking them of itself, and because of the multinational group of people with whom I was fortunate enough to encounter it. Five days, five countries, one city. It was enough.

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