Singapore’s recipe for success in 340 pages

Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh compiles essays on Republic’s key accomplishments

Fabian Koh

A group of university students from Minnesota and the United States asked Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh early last year what Singapore’s secret was in its successful evolution in just a few decades from a developing to a developed country.

Professor Koh’s reply was that there was one secret but many, enough to write a book.

That gave him a idea, one that fi
nally took form when he received a book from the former Finnish amb-
bassador to Singapore, called 100 Social Innovations From Finland.

Prof. Koh’s book, Fifty Secrets Of Singapore’s Success, was launched by Mr Eddie Teo, the chairman of the Council of Presidential Advis-
ors, at the National Museum of Sin-
gapore yesterday.

Curated by Prof Koh and pub-
lished by Straits Times Press, the 340-page book consists of 50 es-
says written by leaders and experts in various fields in Singapore. They address how Singapore, a small state, has succeeded economically and in other areas.

For instance, National University of Singapore president Tan Eng Chye writes about the university’s success, Singapore’s first Chief of Defence Force Winston Choo gives his take on a creating a people’s army through national service, and Amb-
assador-at-Large Chan Hong Chee addresses Singapore’s relationships with the major powers.

Streets Times senior education
correspondent Sandra Davis penned an essay on how Singaporean students outshine the rest of the world in mathematics. She cited one of the most memo-
able studies she has covered in her
two decades on the education beat.

“Singapore Math, as our ap-
proach to teaching mathematics is popularly called, has travelled the world. It is available in print and digi-
tal forms in many languages. It is
cited, researched and used in
many schools around the world and
has lifted the performance of their
students,” she said.

Mr Christopher Tan, the national
directorate’s senior transport corre-
spondent, also contributed an es-
say on the Republic’s Electronic Road Pricing (ERP) system.

“ERP has served us well since it was launched in 1998, but I think it is high time we moved to a more so-
phisticated iteration which charges
according to time, place, as well as
distance covered,” said Mr Tan.

He said a sharper tool would also be a more equitable system.

ST associate editor Vikram
Khamra wrote about Singapore’s fi-
cial policies, which he called one of
the country’s greatest economic strengths, through his observations over 25 years.

“Not too many is it that prudent budgeting. The fiscal
soundness for which Singapore is renowned is also derived from its as-
timate design of policies around pub-
lic enterprises, pensioners and health-
care, which have produced good
outcomes without straining public finances,” he said.

In response to the book, Prof. Koh said: “My hope is that the 50 suc-
cess stories in this book will allow us
to peer into people around the world.
I hope that this book will inspire other countries to achieve their own dreams.”

Notably, Singapore is among
the world’s least corrupt countries, has
one of the highest home ownership
rates and world-class schools and
healthcare facilities.

The country has also contributed significantly to the development of the
Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean).

Singapore has played a leading
role in the United Nations, such as
in negotiations for the Rio Declara-
tion on Environment and Develop-
ment, the UN Convention on the
Law of the Sea, and the UN Conven-
ion on International Settlement
Agreements Resulting from Media-
tion — also known as the Singapore Convention on Mediation — which was signed here last year.

The Republic also contributes to the international community. For
instance, it helped create the 2010 Singapore Index on Global Biodiver-
sity, a UN-endorsed tool for assess-
ing biodiversity conservation ef-
forts.

It was also involved in the 2008
creation of the Santiago Principles, a set of International Monetary Fund-endorsed guidelines for
recongvery funds.

He forwarded for the book, Presi-
dent Halimah Yacob said: “Our jour-
ney has not been easy to the face of
global challenges, but we have al-
ways pulled through because we were
determined to make some-
thing for ourselves.”

She said she hoped the 50 essays in the book would better appreciate the nation’s shared journey, and also serve as “useful case studies” for other coun-
tries.

Mr Tan Ooi Soon, supervising
editor for Straits Times Press, said the book helps to showcase the literary
works of Singaporeans to the world, and will benefit both local and
international readers.


Tommy Koh sings praise of hawkers centres at book launch

The hawkers centres has “saved Singapore” as it is the only place ordinary Singaporeans can go to have a good meal at an affordable price. Ambassador-at-
Large Tommy Koh said yesterday at the launch of the book, Fifty Secrets Of Singapore’s Success.

Compiled by Professor Koh, the book consists of 50 essays written by leaders and experts from vari-
ous fields in Singapore about how the small city-
state has succeeded in its many challenges.

In his opening speech, Prof Koh said: “Hawker food makes Singapore unique. It is part of our na-
tional identity.”

He added: “I must say that with all the great farms of hawkers centres. We go to the wet market very
very well. We often have launch on a Saturday in one of the hawkers’ centres.”

Mr Eddie Teo, the chairman of the Council of Presidential Advisors, who launched the book, expressed
his surprise that it contained an essay on hawkers centres, along with others on the economy.

He said: “At first glance, many will fail to see the relevance of these important
texts.

However, he said the essays, written by World Tist
Organisation founder Jack Sim and Singapore Management University president Lily Kong, “con-
vincingly explain how important it is for Singapore to
set its sights on the future and national development”.

Mr Teo added that the 340-page book would be useful for young Singaporeans, who may not even recognise the authorship of the essays.

“Sadly, my 90-year-old chairman of the Public Ser-
vice Commission has left me with the impression
that many of our brightest students have very little knowledge of Singapore’s history,” he said.

Many, he added, admitted that they had never heard of former deputy prime minister Goh Chok Tong, and also confessed Singapore’s first foreign minister S. Rajaratnam with the late veteran opposition fig-
urer, B. Jeyachandran.

“So, I hope this book will not only reach for-
eigners, but will also find its way into the hands of younger Singaporeans. I hope the hard copies, at least the version,” Mr Teo said.

But he added a caveat for the Singaporean read-
ers. He said that while it was important to know the past to understand the future, they needed to think
of their own solutions for new and future problems. “I’m not advising them to be as legal or a legal as or ignorant about work life balance as Lee Kwan Yew, etc,” he said.

“My hope is that this book will inspire other countries to achieve their own dreams.”

But to succeed, they must have the same passion,
commitment and love for Singapore, which our
founding generation leaders clearly had,” he said.

Prof Koh, in his introduction, said the book had a mes-
gage for other developing countries — that by pursu-
ing sound policies, having honest and competent leaders as well as a good public service, they, too, can overcome their limitations.

He said: “Singapore is too small to be a model. And the world is too diverse to have one single model.

We are not a model, but we can be a source of inspira-
tion. We can be a source of practical solutions to
many of the problems that developing countries face.”

In response to a question, Prof Koh said the lack of natural resources in Singapore required ac-
cept the exit that “the world does not owe us a liv-
ing”. He reminded the prime minister was forced to put a heavy emphasis on education, healthcare and hous-
ing to ensure the population remains “happy and pro-
ductive.”


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