

Science/Education Portraits VI: Anecdotes of Life in Singapore during COVID-19 (February 2020 to September 2020)

Victor CC Wang¹ and Maurice HT Ling^{2*}

¹Independent Researcher, Singapore

²HOHY Pte Ltd, Singapore

*Corresponding Author: Maurice HT Ling, HOHY Pte Ltd, Singapore.

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Abstract

No doubt that the world in 2020 looks very different from that of 2019, due to COVID-19 pandemic, which is the single most impactful event since World War II. This triggered a call to document this event for future ethnographical studies. Many authors from various countries had responded to this call. In this article, we respond with collection of 25 ad-hoc anecdotal portraits of life in Singapore between February to September 2020, to add to the collective documentation for this momentous time in this century. Several of our experiences echo that of other reports from other countries. We iterate the need to document this period. However, we also see anecdotal evidence of benefits from this crisis.

Keywords: Anecdotes; Singapore; COVID-19

Introduction

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. It is safe to say that COVID-19 is the single most impactful event since the end of World War II [1] and has disrupted almost every aspect of daily life [2]; ranging from health-care, economy, and social. Despite the negative impact, this pandemic also presents itself as a unique opportunity for change [3-6]. Hence, there is an urgent need on a global scale to document the effects of COVID-19 on daily life [7] to enable future study when this pandemic is over, as memory distortions can happen with the passage of time and repeated recalls [8]. Many authors from various countries; such as, Australia [9], Canada [10,11], India [12], Italy [13], Latin America [14], New Zealand [15], Papua New Guinea [16], Vietnam [17], United Kingdom [18], and United States of America [19]; had responded to this call by offering personal experiences and that of others around them, as well as various impacts on various countries.

In this article, we attempt to add to this increasing documentation with series of anecdotal portraits, which are both ethnography and narrative [20], of life in Singapore by focusing on the changes before and during this pandemic, to document how daily lives are affected. These portraits are collated from personal experiences and that of others around us, which we acknowledge to be rather ad-hoc while we are coming to terms with it. The timeframe is from February to September 2020.

Crucial timeline of COVID-19 in Singapore

The following is an abbreviated timeline of COVID-19 in Singapore:

- January 23: Singapore's first case, a 66-year-old man from Wuhan, China, is confirmed.

- February 2: All new visitors with recent travel history to mainland China within the last 14 days were denied entry.
- February 4: First case of community infection, a 28-year-old Singaporean.
- February 18: Stay-Home Notices (SHN) implemented for all Singapore residents and long-term pass holders returning from China.
- February 26: Deny entry for visitors arriving from Cheongdo and Daegu in South Korea.
- March 4: Deny entry for visitors arriving from South Korea, Iran, and northern Italy.
- March 13: Singapore-Malaysia Causeway closed.
- March 21: First two deaths from the virus.
- March 24: All short-term visitors are no longer allowed entry or transit through Singapore.
- March 26: Closure of all bars, cinemas, and entertainment outlets.
- April 3: Circuit breaker (CB) measures announced.
- April 7: CB measures kick in to at least 4 May. Most workplaces are closed, and dining-in at eateries is not allowed. Schools will move to home-based learning (HBL).
- April 14: Mandatory mask-wearing outside of one's residence.
- April 21: Extension of circuit breaker measures to June 1 announced.
- June 1: CB measures lifted and enters Phase One of reopening. Parents and grandparents can receive up to two visitors at once, from the same household.
- June 2: Schools re-open to students having to attend daily lessons.
- June 19: Phase Two of reopening. Dining-in is permitted, and households can receive up to five visitors. Some facilities also reopen.
- August 22: SHN reduced by 1 week for selected countries and visitors from Brunei and New Zealand are allowed to enter.
- September 1: Allow travel to Brunei and New Zealand for general purposes, including leisure; and for students to travel overseas for studies.

Collection of anecdotal portraits

In this section, we present a collection of 25 ad-hoc anecdotal portraits of life in Singapore from February 2020 to September 2020; comprising of autobiographical, biographical, and contributed narratives. We do not consider this collection as comprehensive. For example, the situation of low-skilled migrant workers living in dormitories, which accounts for the majority of the confirmed COVID-19 cases in Singapore [21], were not included in this article for the numbers are to render its own anthology. For anonymity, pseudonyms are used [22,23] and names of businesses have been changed [23].

Portrait #01: Myles, a 23-year old, was near the completion of his mandatory National Service when COVID-19 hit Singapore in February 2020. After his parents divorced, Myles lived with his father in a rented flat and owned a pet dog, costing them SGD 1700 per month in rental which excludes utility bills. They had been living in the rented flat for more than a year at this point in time. Myle's dad, 58-year old, was a cab driver. Under normal circumstances, they had no issues maintaining their relatively frugal lifestyle. However, Myle's dad's earning diminished drastically from March 2020 and hit a new low in CB. There could be days with no passengers. Luckily, they made plans last year and successfully applied for government subsidized rental apartment which cost them SGD 300 to 400 per month in rental. They moved into government subsidized rental apartment at the end of March.

Portrait #02: Myles, a 23-year-old male, studying in Singapore recently went back to Taiwan for his term break of his undergraduate studies. He left Singapore before several travel advisories on COVID-19 were announced. Subsequently, mandatory self-quarantine and/or SHN were issued to all travelers who have been granted entry into Singapore, as a precautionary measure taken to minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission from imported cases. He had to reschedule his flight back to Singapore as most of the flights were cancelled due to the newly announced travel advisories. He had to leave Taiwan 2 days earlier and felt unprepared and not ready to say goodbye to his family. "I may not be able to see my family anytime soon," he claimed. When he came back to Singapore, a 14-day SHN was issued to him. That made him unable to attend the first day of his last semester of his undergraduate studies which he found it to be rather disappointing. However, his supervisor and peers showed concerns to him by asking him to update his temperature twice a day and to send weird selfies in the class group chat to ensure that he was coping well with the SHN. During the 14-day SHN period, he was unable to leave his property; hence, he had to order contactless food delivery for his meals which he found it to be costly. In normal circumstances, it would cost Myles about SGD 20 per day on food but during SHN, daily meal expenses doubled to almost SGD 40. Just when he was about to complete serving his SHN, the Singapore government announced CB measures to contain the spread of Covid-19 in Singapore. The CB was announced due to a surge of unlinked Covid-19 cases and lasted for approximately 7 weeks before the measure was lifted. As part of the measures, all schools shifted to full HBL and several institutions continued with HBL even after the CB was lifted. This resulted in a reduced time to complete assignments for students under laboratory-based final year projects (FYP), as students were unable to attend the laboratory sessions for experiments due to a heightened safe distancing measure. That ultimately led to a two months extension of FYP submission and a delayed graduation which he felt let down.

Portrait #03: Faye, a 23-year-old female, currently in her second year of undergraduate studies. Ever since schools had been shifted to HBL, students like her had more free time and she along with her classmates came out with an idea to start an online business selling masks keeper. They saw the potential of selling mask keepers amidst a pandemic as people usually do not know where to keep their mask when they are dining out and they would just leave their masks on the desk which they find it to be unhygienic. The online business has been quite a success as of now and got them more motivated to come up with new ideas in the future.

Portrait #04: Faye, a 24-year-old female, working in Singapore as a packaging factory worker for almost two months before COVID-19 hit Singapore. A few of her colleagues were retrenched due to the impact of COVID-19 and this got her really worried. "I maybe the next one getting retrenched," she said. She knew if she got retrenched it would be almost impossible to find a job now especially when the country is in the depths of a recession. Fortunately, the government reacted quickly and introduced a subsidy plan to co-fund up to 75% of monthly wages paid to each local employee. Eventually, she managed to secure her job and was thankful for the government's wage subsidy plan.

Portrait #05: Faye was in her second half of her honours year in March 2020 and it came as double-whammy for her when CB measures were announced, which meant that she had to stop all laboratory work, and that her supervisor will not return to the institution after CB measures. As she had not gotten enough results for her thesis, Faye realized that CB measures meant severely reduced experimental time, which has the potential to jeopardize her project. "There is nothing much we can do but hope that the lab will reopen soon. Meanwhile, I can focus on writing up as much as I can", she said. When CB measures were lifted on June 1, 2020; she was given 2 weeks to complete as much experiments as possible, which she felt was never enough to replace the lost time but do understand the constraint of laboratory space for other classes as well. "We have to make do with what we can but lost the possibility to get a reference letter from our original supervisor as we were all in a shock then and failed to ask." Faye managed to secure employment before her thesis submission.

Portrait #06: Wearing of mask outside the house of residence was made mandatory by law on April 14, 2020. Faye took a bus to a supermarket in Jurong central to buy groceries without wearing her mask. However, she was not stopped by the bus driver nor anyone along the streets. She only realized that she did not have her mask on during her bus ride when she felt the cool air-conditioner blowing at her face - a feeling she had not felt for a while. She panicked and went to a convenient shop to buy a disposable mask but was told that it was

out of stock. Faye attempted to purchase a mask from the store attendant herself as many people carried extra disposal masks with them. Instead, the store attendant kindly gave her extra mask to Faye. "I am surprised that nobody told me that I did not have a mask on". Faye thought that this might be indicative of a degree of forgiveness and social graciousness after earlier bouts of shaming on social media, which triggered a call for social graciousness. Faye also thought that low community cases since July might have a role to play for social graciousness. This was in contrast to an incident that Faye recalled - In April when she was buying food at a hawker centre and a person went up to a Social Distancing Ambassador nearby to report of an old lady eating her meal in the hawker centre. The Social Distancing Ambassador looked at the pointed direction but did not see the said lady and was brought to near where the lady was. Faye said that she was busybody and went over to look - "The old lady was almost hiding herself in one corner with nobody near her. Just leave her alone. Complain for what!"

Portrait #07: Faye, a 27-year-old female, working in Singapore recently took a month leave to visit her family overseas. The trip was planned before the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in Singapore and she left Singapore before the government announced several travel advisories on COVID-19. Before she left Singapore, she was slightly worried about the situation but she thought everything was going to be alright as there were no travel restrictions back then. Shortly after she left Singapore, several travel restrictions were implemented and her flight back to Singapore was cancelled. She was really worried as her contract with her company was about to end in two months' time and she needed to fly back to Singapore to discuss her re-contracting details with her boss. "I may lose my job", she said. She tried contacting her airlines for an arrangement of the earliest flight possible back to Singapore but the earliest flight available was 2 months later. She panicked and informed her boss regarding the possibility of her getting stranded overseas for at least 2 months and she might not be able to come back to work and discuss her re-contracting details with him and the human resources department in person. She suggested to her boss that if she was to be stranded overseas, she would continue to work from home (overseas home). Her boss understood and took note of the situation she was in by offering to discuss her re-contracting details via virtual meetings. Eventually, she managed to keep her job and re-contracted with her current company successfully. Her boss also agreed to let her continue working from home while she was stranded overseas. She managed to fly back to Singapore and served a 14-day SHN at designated facility before she went back to her company and resumed her work in person.

Portrait (Contributed) #08: In January 2020, Myles, a 30-year old real estate analyst landed a job in a real estate software company. However, there were hints that COVID-19 might have affected the new company as there were further delays and justification to be done to bring him in. Before CB, he was offered the contract and joined the new firm. There was a delay of almost 3 months to close the job. After joining the new firm, CB measures were implemented. As a new staff, Myles was put on training. However, after completing training for a month and attending weekly calls, it was obvious that the job pipeline was dwindling. Many real estate companies were pushing back their software system implementation and they were doing nothing while being engaged by the company. Two months into his new job, company announced 4% global headcount retrenchment, mostly targeted at very senior positions. Even Goodion (Myle's previous company) announced 20% pay cut for managers and above while some people were let go. There were talks about pay cuts of up to 40%, but when the government announced Job Support Scheme, it helped mitigate pay cuts for Goodion. However, work pipelines went to complete halt, for both his new and old firms. Six months into his new job, Myles only worked on one project and realized that it was not sustainable and decided to look for a new job. As his work experience entail real estate valuation work, he was lucky to be headhunted by Blue River and I accepted their offer. Looking back, Myles only returned to office 3 times - his first day of work, to collect his laptop and to return his laptop. He had been working from home since his resigned from Goodion, and even in his new job in Blue River, had expected to do the same.

Portrait #09: Faye, a 33-year-old Vietnamese, working in Singapore as a research fellow for more than 7 years before COVID-19 hit Singapore. She had to renew her contract with her university annually to secure her work position and this got her really worried. Her principal investigator (PI) told the group during a meeting that their funding this year has been reduced due to the impact of COVID-19 and they might not be able to recontract with everyone in the group. "I am going to lose my job". she said. She was right as her PI came

to her personally and informed her that they do not have enough funding to renew her contract, they could only afford to hire a research assistant instead. "It is probably time for me to go back to my hometown and spend some quality time with my family," she said. She was not too upset about losing her job as she had been working very hard ever since she graduated, and she could finally take a short break before she starts working again.

Portrait #10: "What is today's lucky number?" Myles, a 34-year old teacher, recalled a general sense of frivolousness in the earlier days of the pandemic (first half of March 2020). Over the next 2 weeks when the seriousness became apparent, the mood turned increasing solemn. A friend from university days messaged "I know what you mean. I'm a bit hypochondriac-ish now". In another group chat - "We really should not be discussing COVID numbers at 11 pm" said another friend, to whom a reply came "it does not help when daily numbers are released around this time". Myles commented that he had to use his counselling skills and detached himself despite knowing the severity and its on-going impact on his daily life. "1,111 new coronavirus cases take Singapore tally past 9,000 mark" a message arrived from another group chat forwarding the news headlines. "By end of April or beginning May, daily new cases became just a number and I was rather numbed down then", Myles said. Myles admitted that he had not tracked the number of cases in Singapore since June, 2020.

Portrait #11: Faye, a 36-year old mother of two, had been working from home (WFH) since March 2020. As her children were below the age of 8, Faye found that WFH combined with the reduced work requirements from office enabled her to bond more with her children. Faye said that it gave her some room to explore a hobby that she had been putting off - baking. "I can spend time with my kids on Saturday morning to bake a cake for afternoon tea later", she said.

Portrait #12: Myles, a 36-year old biologist, recalled that March 27, 2020, was a turning point for him in this pandemic. "Yesterday was the 1st time in this episode that I am really worried or even scared", he messaged a friend. That came upon reading a news article¹ saying that up to 10% of the patients from Wuhan tested positive after recovery and was followed by the similar findings in South Korea². Myles confessed that his concerns had not died down despite fluctuating up and down. "My worry comes from the 2 biggest issues about this virus. Firstly, how many infected cases do not exhibit symptoms; hence, asymptomatic; and how many of these asymptomatic cases or those before exhibiting symptoms (pre-symptomatic) can transmit the virus? Asymptomatic transmission means that a person may be perfectly looking healthy but infecting others and he or she does not know it. Just go back in history and you will find Mary Mallon, more commonly known as Typhoid Mary. So where are we with this? It is currently not looking too good. Singapore had reported pre-symptomatic transmission in April, 2020 [24]. A similar study in USA found that more than half of the patients did not know where they got infected from [25]. Then you got to ask, what do these mean? All these seem to be pointing to pre or asymptomatic transmission. If this is true, COVID-19 is here to stay. Secondly, how long can a recovered patient stay immune against reinfection? In another words, can a recovered patient be re-infected again? We had a confirmed case of re-infection in August, 2020 [26,27]. If the whole virus cannot mount a prolonged immune response to protect us, what can a vaccine really do? I only hope that re-infection rate is very low".

Portrait #13: Faye, a 37-year old scientist, went for her final interview in mid-February 2020. She was offered a contract by the end of February but there was a need to complete her pre-employment medical checkup before accepting the contract. Although Faye understood that pre-employment medical was routine and accepted in Singapore, she never fully understood the reasons for it, especially during this period. Hence, she asked the human resource manager "Given that the company had curtailed nearly all medical benefits on top of statutory requirements, is there a purpose in pre-employment health screening? How unfit must I be before I am deemed medically unfit for employment? Isn't going for a medical screening at this time subjecting me to risks after a suspected case in HarbourFront Centre's Raffles Medical Clinic on January 31?" The human resource manager acknowledged Faye's concerns but had no reply. Although the offered

¹<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3076989/coronavirus-10pc-recovered-patients-test-positive-later-say>

²<http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200410000686>

renumeration was almost 15% lower than what she had expected, she accepted the contract after clearing her pre-employment medical screening without further negotiation and started employment in March 2020. "I am seeing signs that the job market is going downhill and with this COVID-19 happening, I cannot afford the time to negotiate with the risk of the offer withdrawn, which started to happen in other countries. Having a job now will put me way ahead in the next 2 years as we ride out this storm. 80% of something is much better than 100% of nothing".

Portrait (Contributed) #14: A 39-year old talent management professional father of two, contributed the following - Looking back at how COVID-19 unfolded over the last few months, there was a feeling of watching how the human civilization evolved in a very condensed timeline. When it started, it felt like any other world issue that plagued this world. The naming it "the Wuhan Virus" help made it felt all very far away. Looking back at how we had responded as an individual and as a family, I could certainly see the changes, impact and consequence. On the work front, we were fortunate to had implemented a flexible work culture from Day One. Starting my business following the loss of my job 2 years ago allowed me some runway to put together a small and nimble vessel that helped weather the storm. It was not an easy start, but we got through. The best decision we took with the business was to tap into a much-overlooked group of non-traditional talents, such as those discounted by traditional companies working on a normal work pattern. This simple decision allowed us to continue to function without a glitch. The only thing that we had to do was to procure more equipment for the staff who got children that needed to do HBL. That became one of our staff benefits. On the family front, things actually turned out well. We found ourselves with more time with each other. While we were all too busy pre-COVID, now we got plenty of time with each other. We did a lot of baking and cooking, involving the kids along the way. This brought the family closer. In a way, this pandemic slowed down the pace of work and broke us out of that rat race we all were in. We had time with parents, and certainly did a lot more video calls. The quality of communications improved. Where there were a lot more inconvenience that came along with this pandemic, the truth of the matter was things were going to get worse with different viruses and bugs that will come in future. This episode served us well in instilling that awareness in all of us and allowing us to be better prepared for the next one. If there is an end of world that is coming, the Covid-19 episode might have given us a bit more time by making us more resilient.

Portrait #15: As community spread became obvious with multiple clusters of transmission being identified, Myles, who was a part-time lecturer, started to consider the possibility of having to conduct his classes online. He was scheduled to attend a training on using Zoom to conduct lectures on April 12, 2020. However, as CB measures were announced, he had to attend the last training scheduled on April 6, 2020; right before CB measures kicked in on April 7, 2020. In the training, his head of department (HOD) introduced himself but little did the HOD know what he, and the head of another department, would be axed from the institution that afternoon with 3 months of severance wages. Based on the HOD's introduction during the training, there was no sign that he would lose his job that day. Myles could only wonder what might have transpired in his HOD's mind to make sense of the turbulence of the day - driving into work as HOD and driving home jobless. On top of that, it is not likely to get a job any time soon with CB measures kicking in the following day. After the Zoom training, Myles met up with the honours project students (one of the students was portrayed in Portrait #05) that he took over from another full-time lecturer in her 40s, Faye, whom were also axed to reduce manpower cost. Faye managed to secure a new job as a scientific officer in one of the COVID-19 testing laboratories in May 2020. On the evening of April 7, 2020; Myles gave his first lecture via Zoom and he found it great despite the eerie feel that none of the students were listening as there were no visual cues. "Teaching to a computer is really quite weird in the beginning but I am enjoying it now. I no longer fear the need to defend myself should any student say I did not cover a section in class - it is all recorded and posted onto my YouTube channel. I actually feel pride and love being recorded for my biological laboratory demonstrations for virtually the world to see, and it appeared in my friends' YouTube feeds. In my free time, I had even recorded video tutorials on the use of Excel to be posted on YouTube so that point my students to the videos rather than repeating the same thing for each student. I had even taught a 45-hour programming subject on Microsoft Teams. This pandemic had really stretched me to claim more territories into my comfort zone".

Portrait #16: Myles, a biologist turned bioinformaticist, celebrated his 41st birthday on the last week of March with his immediate family, right after closure of all entertainment venues the week before. His sister-in-law was due to deliver Myles' first nephew in the second half of April. CB measures were not announced at this point, but the hospital had given indications to reduce the number of visitors. Hence, only Myle's 30-year old younger brother, the father of the son, would be allowed to visit. It was apparent to Myles that he would not be able to see his first nephew right after birth, which would be customary under normal circumstances. To make matters worse, his nephew was diagnosed with an enlarged kidney during a prenatal ultrasound scan, which might require surgery if not resolved after birth. Given Myles' knowledge of epidemiology, it was also likely that further travel limitations would be likely as Malaysia had implemented its Movement Control Order since mid-March. Given the circumstances and expectations, Myles was rather solemn on the way home from the restaurant as the next time that he could see his brother and sister-in-law, as well as his newborn nephew, will be uncertain. "This maybe the last time I am seeing them", a thought that did crossed Myles' mind. Certainly, he expected the next physical visit may be months away which turned out to be true - June 6, 2020. The only news of medical stability of his sister-in-law and nephew was via WhatsApp video call. Myles recalled the joy of seeing his brother, sister-in-law, and carrying his nephew for the first time - one and half months "late".

Portrait #17: Myles, a 41-year old, had been jogging twice or trice per week to maintain his health. However, his jogging routine stopped during CB. "I had to wear a mask before jogging and immediately after jogging, which was rather troublesome. And there were some reports about transmission via droplets" he said. To maintain some form of exercise, Myles replaced jogging with Tabata workout in his residence. "I jogged 3 km once in my living room and kitchen, 120 laps from kitchen to living room. That did not turn out well. I did not wear sneakers, which may be stupid of me, and my calves hurts for the next few days. Tabata seems to work for me". Since lifting of CB measures after June 1, 2020, Myles did a combination of jogging and Tabata.

Portrait #18: Myles, a 42-year old professional, managed to rent out his 4-room (3 bedrooms and a lounge room) apartment to 2 Malaysian sisters working in Singapore in early February 2020. Start date of the newly signed rental lease was on May 1, 2020. Even though the mandatory 1-month rental bond and first month rental were paid during the signing of the lease, it was not considered completed until the apartment was handed over to the tenants. Hence, it was possible for the tenants to roll-back on the lease. Given the uncertainty in job market and policy changes, the property agent advised Myles during mid-March to handover the apartment to the tenants by mid-April. Once CB measures were announced, Myles called up the property agent to handover the apartment by April 4, 2020; without charging rent for the entire month of April. When the CB measures were announced, there was much uncertainty what can be done. It was not exactly clear that moving of house was possible and the tenants arranged for immediate move in on morning of April 5, 2020. A mad rush to get things the weekend before CB measure kicked in was felt by all parties. The tenants said that they were not even sure whether they would be in office or WFH until further information from office the following day (Monday; April 6, 2020). However, all repairs were halted until after June 1, 2020; and replacement for the faulty refrigerator was only completed in mid-July.

Portrait #19: "Lao gong³, I bought 3 packets of cigarettes already. You buy another 3 packets when you get back", Faye, a 44-year old mother of a 14-year old son, messaged her husband. This came when CB measures were announced on April 3, 2020. Both Faye and her husband were smokers and had no idea whether the supply of cigarettes would be reduced, leading to a price hike. "Even Singapore Pools⁴ closed⁵, how I know what will happen to cigarette supply? You cannot keep too many packets also or it will lao hong⁶ and waste my money. We had to ration cigarettes and restock often." Luckily, cigarettes were never a shortage during CB.

Portrait #20: Myles, a 44-year old assistant professor, recounted difficulties of completely WFH, as there is a blurred division between work and life. "Work-life balance is more challenging to achieve. In the past, I did not bring my laptop home over the weekends and I will be disconnected from work emails but now, the laptop is with me all day. I also find that a full online presence is mentally challenging. It feels like my physical self is trying hard to manage my virtual self. Just last month, I almost forgot to attend a master's viva. When I was in office, we would remind each other for important meetings and not I find myself forgetting meetings or double booking my slots".

Portrait #21: Myles, a 45-year old Malaysian working in Singapore as an executive, recounted that he would never forget the evening

³Chinese term for "husband".

⁴Singapore Pools is the sole legal lottery operator in Singapore.

⁵<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/singapore-pools-suspend-4d-toto-close-outlets-online-betting-12609116>

⁶Hokkien (a Chinese dialect) term directly translated to "losing wind", which generally refers to the phenomenon where biscuits and crackers turning less crunchy. In this case, it refers to the loss of freshness.

of March 17, 2020; right before the closure of Singapore-Malaysia land-bridge (commonly known as Causeway) from the midnight of March 18, 2020. Long queues were seen in media the following day⁷ but what was not captured was the human emotions as about 400 thousand Malaysian living in Johor Bahru (right at the edge across the 1 kilometre Causeway linking Singapore and Malaysia) travelled to Singapore daily to work or study - Myles was one of them. "I took urgent leave to rush back to get whatever I need and to see my son for one more time. I had not gone back for the last 6 months" he said. The media showed footage of travelers dragging large suitcases and carrying children walking across the Causeway and Myles verified that - "it reminded me of my grandmother's story of how they walked from village to the port to leave China in 1950s or the scenes in refugee documentaries" - Myles said with a laughter. "The really sad part is not the walking. There are Malaysian children studying in Singapore and I saw a mother beside me near to the immigration telling her child to just go over Singapore first. The mother looked at me and I can tell she had no idea of what will happen. Maybe we are expecting that borders will open soon, at least that was what I expected; otherwise, it will be much harder." Myles had been communicating with his family using video chats as often as he could. "Feels that that time I was studying in Singapore. Luckily, we have video chats rather than expensive international calls or writing letters" Myles laughed.

Portrait #22: Myles, a 48-year old employed in essential services, started to develop cold-like symptoms on July 17, 2020 (Friday), after being caught in the rain. By Saturday morning, it developed into a mild fever, then a high fever by Sunday and slept for the entire day. "Was it possible that I had contracted COVID?" he thought and various scenarios went through his mind, including coming into contact with his step-grandson on Friday evening. He called up his General Practitioner on Monday late afternoon who referred him a clinic to do COVID-19 swap test as it was mandatory for all respiratory and flu-like symptoms. His wife drove him to the referred clinic for swap test and was told to go to Accidents and Emergencies at Changi General Hospital as his fever was 39°C. Myles was admitted to isolation ward and multiple tests were carried out. By Wednesday, it was confirmed that Myles had dengue fever instead of COVID-19 and was discharged after a few days. "Getting dengue was not supposed to be lucky but I was relieved to be getting dengue than COVID", he said.

Portrait #23: Faye, a 52-year old single professional living alone, had been partially working from home since February 2020 as her company adopted split team arrangement to reduce contact and ensuring business continuity in case of confirmed infection in the company. This progressed to complete WFH since CB measures. "Working from home means some level of isolation as it no longer possible to chit chat with colleagues in the pantry. Although we came up with e-teabreaks on Zoom, it feels like scheduling a meeting. Over time, even e-teabreaks can be tiring. But there are benefits as well - I don't have to dress up for work, save money eating in town, and save time travelling. So, I am on the fence - I will say that I like working from home but perhaps one or two days in the office will be nice." Since Phase Two on June 19, 2020, Faye went back to office once or twice a week, which she found to be a comfortable arrangement. Faye also found that her lifestyle became more sustainable despite inconveniences during this period - "I no longer eat out that often. That reduces my expenses. I also find that I don't shop that often as well. At this moment, shopping is inconvenient due to the scan in and scan out at shopping malls and at every shop⁸. I know it is necessary but is a hurdle to enter a shop, especially when there is a queue. Even get in and out of a shopping mall can be inconvenient as number of entrances are reduced".

Portrait #24: Crazyness started in early April, 2020, when CB measures were announced. On April 4, 2020, Myles and Faye (husband and wife in their mid-60s) woke up early to go to the supermarket to stock up essentials only to find that majority of the shelves were quite empty. The remaining items on the shelves were arranged close to the edges to strategically resemble the look of full shelves. "Stockpiling of canned food started. It felt like the rationing of 1970s and it triggered a fear in me". Myles and Faye felt an urge to purchase more than necessary, just to be on the safe side. "There was no sense of security anywhere and you cannot blame us for reacting the way we did". Over the subsequent days, Myles and Faye felt some sense of security after repeated news reports of warehouses well-stocked with staples and

⁷<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/causeway-jb-singapore-traffic-travel-restrictions-last-crowds-12550138>

⁸<https://www.safeentry.gov.sg/>

canned food. However, it was clear over the subsequent months that basic food prices increased substantially either explicitly by direct increase in prices or implicitly by reducing food portions for the same price.

Portrait #25: As soon as CB measures were announced, many Singaporeans came to realize the plight of many low-end eateries would take a serious hit, especially those traditional stores by the more elderly folks. A Facebook group called “Hawkers United - Dabao 2020” (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/HawkersUnited2020>) was a community effort launched on April 3, 2020 (the very day when CB measures were announced by the government); so share eatery locations and means of ordering. Many of the earlier posts were by frequent customers of the eatery stores rather than the store owners. Subsequently, the number of postings by store owners took over. The group had garnered more than 275 thousand members since inception. “It is a great community effort to help the eatery owners during this period and let me know many nice foods around Singapore, many of which I do not know even existed. I think there is also compassion and sympathy. I remembered 2 posts distinctively. One was about a very old traditional snack store run by an elderly that one of the customers posted on behalf saying that the store had no business for the day as shown by the stacks of snacks in the photos. I went there the next day and saw a few customers. That really helped. Another posting was a noodle store at a hawker centre telling everyone that the store does delivery but will cost 1 dollar more for delivery, which would be given to the delivery guy who lost his job during this period. From the comments, many people are supportive of such actions. Since CB, I had seen many Facebook posts of regular hawker food by my friends with locations tagged. I think there is a change in the mentality of the people and more realization that we are in this together for the long haul”, recounted Faye.

Discussion

As the late poet, Muriel Rukeyser, wrote in her poem titled *The Speed of Darkness* that “The universe is made of stories, not of atoms”. Stories have the ability to engage a person more than facts [28], which is important in providing both context and emotive richness [29]. Hence, there is a long-standing view that stories may be a useful medium to communicate ethnographical accounts [30,31]. As the current COVID-19 pandemic is still on-going and evolving, its total impact is unknown at this point but it is safe to say that it has unprecedented impact since World War II [1]. This renders it significant documentation value - we, as a society, have a responsibility to document it for future generations.

Many of the accounts in this article echo that by other authors. There were fear [32] and massive uncertainty [10] at the beginning of this pandemic when multiple measures were announced in succession; all of which breaking the daily life that we got accustomed to. One of the biggest uncertainties was job security, which is consistent in other parts of the world. For example, it was estimated that 20 million jobs were lost in USA by April 6, 2020; which exceeded all the jobs lost in USA during the entire Great Recession [33]. There were also confusion and information overload [17] as events unfolded on a daily basis. Yet, there were also hopes and confidence [18]. Hence, the life in Singapore during this pandemic echo that in other parts of the world despite local context. On the larger scale, it reminded us that wherever we are, we are still connected and together. Perhaps with hopes and confidence, we can navigate out of this this pandemic, take stock of our past and into the new and better normal, in terms of healthcare [34,35], education [36] and training [37], changes in perspectives [38], as well as social [39,40] and economic [41] policies among others.

Concluding Remarks with a Poem

With three quarters of 2020 behind us and 27.6 million confirmed cases with a death toll of 900 thousand globally (as of September 9, 2020) from the real-time COVID-19 dashboard at John Hopkins University [42], it is safe to say that the world post-COVID will be very different from pre-2020 at every level, from personal to community to nations and beyond. While we are making sense of the changes around us, we respond and iterate the call to document for prosperity [7]; hence, this article. We are hopeful that we will see this episode

as a starting of something stronger, greater, and far better than the world pre-COVID. We hope that in years to come and looking back at 2020, we can say it is “A Good Virus”, and leave you with this poem:

I am beginning to think
This virus that is striking the world with crimson ink
May actually be a good virus after all
A virus that we do not want but good for the long haul

Braking our accelerating track
That may well be greeted in total train wreck
Surfacing the dead woods and the elephants in the room
Sweeping every industry and every aspect like a giant broom

Corporations that grew so big that dominates our lives
Millions paid in top salaries that suddenly took their dives
Questioning the quality of the leadership
Empty promises and chatters all called to strip

Much work that we were told that cannot be done
Must now be made to spun
With much of the world forced to stay at home
Meetings, emails, essential work; seems to be just foam

Our needs are relatively easy but wants are never satisfied
With malls closed and deliveries delayed, our wants get clarified
Questioning and evaluating our exuberance
Once a convenience now sticks out as protuberance

Students once complain about everything
Now realizes they need to be responsible for every damn thing
The same applies for everybody
Every finger pointing out has three towards embody

No longer can we ignore the great divide
Of rich and poor well fenced on either side
I've seen the other side but chose to turn a blind eye
Now I can't as daily news shows the underlie

And the bust and rush hour
Surrounded in our own ivory tower
Have we spare a thought of those we had left alone
Thinking that the world had them disown

Is this the world we should be moving forward
Never did we get time to be proper steward
This virus triggers a great realization
Gave us time to consider the eventual actualization

Finally, everybody has to slow down
As panicking struggles can cause us to drown
Giving more time to reflect for themselves
Feeding and taking care of our and other selves

Slowly but gradually everyone eases into this thing
Like a snake that shreds its molty skin
Stocktaking within us of what is important
Bits and pieces shedding what is redundant

Consider our needs and wants and how we treated others
Realize that everyone and every being is our sisters and brothers
Seeing an enemy in desperate need
Maybe offering to mend the broken bridge than leaving to bleed

We had been abusing the world to the point of unsustainable
A chance now to change our habits to collectively maintainable
Cultivating relationships, hobbies, and abilities
Rooted in love, tolerance, and civilities

Let our old ways be gone and the thoughtful new arises
Gaia issued this call for revolutionizes
Hope that we as apex species do not squander this chance
Miss this and we may never be able to take another stance.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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