

China is the prevailing and overwhelming model but it is not the only one. Asia also features the harmoniously efficient Singapore: a balance and synthesis of tradition and modernity. Or the continuity of the Thai

# Singapore and Bangkok: two faces of Asia

REPORTAGE 2

by Silvia Sartori

capital with a life philosophy which is still untouched by stress and other typical western neuroses. It is difficult to understand if and how these diversities will manage to resist the all devouring Chinese giant.



**M**aybe it was because I was coming from China. Maybe because China's shadow penetrates every corner of Asia and it seems that anywhere you go in the continent, the "Chinese miracle" must be in some way reflected in life or society. Or maybe because around three quarters of the population of the city-State is of Chinese origin.

When arriving in Singapore, you do not expect to find much more than a miniature "dragon". In a tropical version with a Southeast Asian flavour.

Instead you will discover that there is much more and not so Chinese.

First, it is incredibly efficient. You find that out as soon as you land and pass through

the labyrinth of the huge airport. There are signs in four languages anywhere inside: English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil. In every corner before passport control, there are internet points and free public telephones. All around are Indian, Malaysian, Chinese staff – all natives – whose only purpose seems to be answering your questions. All with a painted on smile and sincere willingness that almost leave you perplexed.

Everything seems made to welcome you and help you discover a "model country". So distant from the sensation that hits you in China, where any action is a conquest, a target which, whether you know it or not, has to be achieved. Using the underground, for example, is a challenge against a crowd which throws itself in a carriage without considering the passengers have to get off. Buying a ticket is a fight against all those who have no concept of queuing and push you from every side. Moving through

Singapore has become one of the main financial and technological centres in Asia and in the world. Bangkok is ancient Asia, where the strongholds of tradition juxtapose streets bustling with life and narrow alleys full of buildings, temples and markets.



streets – whether on foot, by car or by bike – is a battle against the crazy creativity of drivers, motorcyclists, cyclists or pedestrians. Shopping is often a battle with shopkeepers who double or triple prices to foreign buyers. Communicating is a nightmare in a country where English has still not taken root.

Instead in Singapore your Chinese range of daily problems disappears. You forget about them all together, as they become inconceivable all of a sudden. At the underground stop, the queue waiting to get on waits for the passengers to get off first. In the stations, cashiers and automated services at every step make queues almost impossible. On the street, a strict system of rules (and fines!), combined with their keen and almost religious observance, avoids any risk of accidents. In shops, smiling assistants wish you a nice day when giving you your receipt. Whoever you meet in the street, whether Chinese, Malaysian, Indian, young or old, rich or poor, has spontaneous and casual conversations in fluent English.

An almost impeccable perfection obtained in 40 years of independence during which the small but powerful city-State has become one of the four Asian tigers and one of the main financial and technological centres in Asia and in the world. You feel like being in

a kind of padded country, an Asian Switzerland featuring exemplary racial harmony. Little India, Chinatown, Kampong Glam and Geylang Serai are ethnic microcosms that manage to enjoy their traditions living side by side. Everything is concentrated, mixed and takes shape in a city which has an air more like a province town than a capital city. Nevertheless, you explore it and it entertains you with its people. You get a sense of finding in it a miniature history of the world: the dominion of the marine routes of global commerce, colonization and the fight for independence in the past, the combination of the great religions of humanity, the path towards racial harmony, the “miraculous” economic development of the second half of the Twentieth century, the uncomfortable vicinity to the big Chinese brother, the lack of natural resources.

It seems that Singapore, in its small way, has survived everything and found a recipe for everything. And, if it still has not found one, it will continue to look for it in its way

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and with its Asian identity. To show that Asia can still give its contribution to the world, without having to swallow the medicine prescribed by the West.

A few weeks later, I arrive in Bangkok. I was still wearing the South Asian colours of Singapore, the courtesy of its people, the ordered and pacific cohabitation of ethnic groups, the lush vegetation in every corner, the limpid light blue sky which you often forget about when in China.

The first to welcome you to Thailand is the King. While you are queuing at passport control, the colourful and bright screens, above the ever present "yellow line", lightly praise him with *Long live the King* and *We love our King*. Along the road, at traffic lights, on the roofs of buildings, at docks, there are large pictures of his highness, accompanied by his wife or immortalised in various scenes of his work. Flowers and small altars solemnly surround every effigy. An impression of sacred royalty appears to float through the city. His presence, silent but constant, gives a first touch of fairy tale magic to the atmosphere of this country. It's framed inside a bright blue sky, blemished here and there by puffy white clouds, with passages of green at his feet. All around, roofs, pinnacles and spires of temples and royal palaces emerge, covered

with sparkling colours: orange, gold, green and blue. Everything stands out, looking almost fluorescent and unreal, and you feel thrown through architectonic and artistic views that you thought had disappeared for good, wiped out by the unstoppable modernization machine.

Instead, this is the daily scene that life in the Thai capital features and is comforted by. Despite its more than eight million inhabitants, it does not strike you as a developing Asian megalopolis at all. There are almost no large buildings or skyscrapers on the horizon ruining the view; quite the opposite actually as the horizon seems wide and relaxed. There is no feeling of architectonic crowdedness, no jungles of buildings growing on top of each other, fighting to get their own precious space. Of course, signs of urban disorder are also here, with artistic ancient palaces suffocating among small hovels of uncertain origin and modern buildings. The traffic removes any possible doubt: a confusing crush of every type of vehicle, with no logic and the pollution emitted are among the most typical mark of these swarming Asian metropolises. My mind goes back to China while I watch this parade of moving life that amuses and concerns me at the same time. The feeling of concern because I am breathing in a cocktail of fumes and smells and, with some scepticism, I realise how much more there is to do to make this area of the world more environmentally sensitive. Of amusement because there are very few things other than traffic that can paradoxically give you an idea of the modern inventive and creativity of Asians. Apart from the model of vehicles only seen here, the rainbow of "modern rickshaws" and "do it yourself driving" immediately reveal a universe that is hardly affected by globalization and modernization (for once). Moped of all types and colours are to Thailand as bicycles are to China. Even pavements are made for mopeds with sloping down ends to facilitate access. Then fighting for the title of king of the road are the unmistakable "tuk-tuk", the modern and motorised evolution of the ancient rickshaw. They self-confidently slip through cars and lorries, in an agile and determined way. Overtaking or undertaking (what's the difference?!) they identify themselves as



un-motorised vehicles when it comes to using cycle lanes or pedestrian areas, to then be in pole position before taxies and cars when the roar of engines call. Buddhist monks wrapped in bright orange wander among the alleys of palaces and temples and along the streets and markets. With their peacefulness and cathartic look, they seem to portray a country that is intrinsically different and chained down by historical problems of development, but which after all is happy as it is. Even they, reflecting an Asia that is said to be changing, seem different to me than their Chinese counterparts. In Bangkok, they smile at you, are approachable and sometimes even come to meet you

themselves and chat with you, though in a rather hesitant English. In China, where they are already more difficult to meet, they usually continue on their path almost unconcerned by the surrounding world. They are hard to approach and rarely speak any English. Also when communicating with them in Chinese, they address you with an air of uncertainty: doubtful, diffident or simply curious. Perhaps the

Although Bangkok has over eight million inhabitants, it does not give the impression of being an Asian megalopolis. It is along the canals on the outskirts of the city that one finds the strongholds of Asian tradition unconquered by the global village



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\_The rainbow-hued modern rickshaws and carelessly driven mopeds of every shape and colour make one realise that Bangkok is a universe untarnished by globalisation and modernisation

result of an identity which is more difficult to obtain and, as such, to be maintained more tenaciously. Almost a conquest to be jealously guarded.

The same swarming life can be found in the immense city markets as well as in the even more characteristic floating markets held in labyrinths of water canals. They can be reached by driving for a few hours out of the capital, passing the suburbs and into the country. Still I was overwhelmed by the white tinged turquoise sky with immense coconut and banana plantations and tropical vegetation to the sides. There is little traffic and for a moment you could be driving in California or Florida, with the same wide roads and a few cars or lorries to keep you company. Arriving in a world of canals you realize that strongholds of Asia fortunately still exist and resist the global village.

People live along the canals in dignified dwellings, each different in a small way, with their whole existence being lived along these canals. Produce is cultivated along the canals to be then sold in long canoes that nimbly and skilfully paddle from canal to canal to sell fruit, vegetables and souvenirs. The same canoes are used by their owners to cook, eat and "pursue" tourists to make a deal. Around midday, onboard their canoes,

these people go home, along the canal, of course, for their lunch break. If you follow them you will notice that, at your side, along the same muddy canal in which the life of this community starts and grows, there are people bathing in the water. You watch them amazed and perplexed while they greet you with their happy smile which washes away any worry.

Back in Bangkok it is Sunday afternoon. I am looking for a small restaurant to have lunch when I realise that everything is quiet and still. It feels great! It reminds me of those summery Sunday afternoons in the city, when the streets are empty and shifty eyes can be seen behind half-closed shutters, a cat sleeps lazily and a child invents a game from nothing.

For the first time, I realize how distant these moments are for me now that I live in China, where nothing ever stops, where there is no time to stop, almost as if people did not feel the need. In the Middle Kingdom, the "development syndrome", the historical ancestral revenge, does not accept any rest and drags everyone in a frenetic and merciless whirlwind that leaves behind anyone who cannot keep up.

When joining together all these frames you wonder where Asia is really going. The Chinese locomotive, on one track or the other, crosses the stations of each neighbouring country and goes beyond. The small old tigers like Singapore are reconsidering their growth model as they can no longer afford to stop and enjoy the "miracle" they have achieved. Thailand, though still dealing with the heavy burden of poverty, seems to be taking the luxury of lagging behind a bit, continuing to praise its identity, reluctant to bend down to global modernisation and find itself levelled to the same model of "the others".

And you go back to the same dilemma you had started from: better an ancient and different (but poor) Asia or a modern and successful (but not very Asian) Asia? ■■■■

*The article herein published was obviously written well before the coup d'état occurred in Bangkok during the night of September 19.*