In this powerful and persuasive book, Teo You Yenn challenges Singapore's self-image as a pro-family society. She reveals the contradictions of a state that champions family life yet often overlooks the stress, anxiety, exhaustion, and gender and class inequalities that define it. Kiasu parenting, she argues, is less a personal choice and more a response to structural conditions and policies. If *Unease* leaves you unsettled, then it has succeeded in prompting us to confront the difficult questions it raises.

—Donald Low,
Professor of Practice,
Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

Teo You Yenn has once again written a groundbreaking book which speaks clearly and directly to its readers. This time, the concerns are more immediate; they enter each of our lives and homes. Looking at family, gender and class, *Unease* is a page-turning series of provocations packed with illuminating interviews, punchy analyses and an abundance of care.

From my perspective as a playwright, and one who constantly writes about contemporary Singaporean characters and issues, the book is invaluable as it shines a light on the 'Singapore condition'—who we are, and why we are what we are. It challenges us to re-examine ourselves as individuals, families and communities in a nation-state; how we can—and should—break away from rigid systems and social conditioning, and find greater agency within ourselves and solidarity with each other.

—Haresh Sharma, Playwright

In this love letter to Singaporean parents, Teo You Yenn sensitively teases out the unspoken truth of family life in a supposedly 'pro-family' regime. The author pulls into the spotlight the key contradictions that organise families in contemporary Singapore, conditions that families around the world share: prosperity without pleasure, childhoods without playfulness and education that feels like work for parents and children alike, especially for mothers. Teo You Yenn argues that anxiety, competition and hierarchy influence the tacit knowledge and everyday practices of parents more than we realise. Inequality, she reminds us, harms us all, not just those struggling at the bottom.

Through meticulous research, conveyed through the empathetic voice of a lifelong educator, this book prompts us to realise our shared humanity, our care for our children and the promise of a family life beyond the stresses of kiasu parenting. As you pick up this book, know that Teo You Yenn is asking every reader to make a break from a life structured by inequality to participate in creating a new collective culture of inclusive prosperity, built on the values of ethical agency, solidarity and respect for human worth.

—Smitha Radhakrishnan
Marion Butler McLean Professor in the History of Ideas
and Professor of Sociology, Wellesley College

This is a book that asks us to look closely at how responsibility and care are practised in everyday life and what we quietly pass on and pass over in the process. It articulates with particular force the gap between the values we profess out loud and the quieter logics we reproduce through habit, silence and structure—giving shape to tensions many of us live with but rarely have language for.

Written with striking intellectual precision and a profound attentiveness to lived experience, this is scholarship that makes room for the heart without sacrificing rigour, and for rigour without losing the human. This work is incisive, intimate and quietly heartbreaking in what it helps us see. It asks, with quiet insistence, what we are really raising ourselves—and our children—to value, and why that question matters more than ever now.

—Pooja Nansi, Poet

The idea that the family is a basic unit of society is widely held, and not just in Asian societies. Indeed, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed by the United Nations in 1948, includes this article: "The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State". On the one hand, familial responsibilities and obligations are extolled as foundational for social stability and economic success. On the other hand, beneath this idealised veneer, the burdens and costs of parenting are unevenly distributed amid unequal social conditions and a culture of individualist meritocracy. Teo You Yenn's *Unease* is both a model of qualitative social research—learning deeply from the lived experiences of wage workers in Singapore—and a meditation on the disjuncture between ideal and reality and how we can imagine a good society based on relationships of mutuality and solidarity.

—Kwok Kian Woon
Emeritus Professor of Sociology,
Nanyang Technological University

Teo You Yenn does it again. *Unease* represents what good social science research should look like, marrying analytical sharpness with social consciousness. In her typically accessible writing style, she details the lived realities of some Singaporean families which are often glossed over or ignored when macro data is put forth. Statistics do not always capture the complex lives of individuals. This book fills that gap well, reminding us that human beings should never be reduced to mere numbers.

Prof Teo takes the experiences of ordinary Singaporeans seriously. More of us should. Her impassioned call for Singapore to engage in self-introspection on ideas such as meritocracy should be genuinely considered by those in power and everyone else, as evidently, not everyone benefits equally from the system. Hopefully, those who read the book will be filled with some unease, realising that for many people, life is not as comfortable as the stats suggest. Singaporeans should indeed be, in her words, "allowed ambivalence, contradictory feelings and critical responses to our own lives and the city".

—Walid Jumblatt Abdullah
Associate Professor
School of Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University;
Author of *Why Palestine?: Reflections From Singapore*

Teo You Yenn looks behind the façade of Singapore's developmental success at what it *feels like* to actually live there. She finds that many parents feel a palpable sense of unease. Under intense pressure to do everything it takes to help their kids succeed, they feel overextended, stressed out, exhausted and yet still inadequate. They also feel like they have no choice but to play this game. They feel trapped, ironically, by a national identity predicated on success.

The brilliance of *Unease* is its systematic and sensitive exploration of the texture of everyday life in Singapore. It goes a long way in helping us understand not only how Singaporeans feel but also *why* they feel this way. The book enlarges our perspective on 'development' by examining its hidden psychic and emotional costs. In doing so, it creates the space necessary for Singaporeans (and all of us) to ask crucial questions about what a good society—not just a rich or developed one—should look like.

—Marco Garrido
Associate Professor
Department of Sociology, The University of Chicago

Why, in a country that prides itself on its 'pro-family' policies, do parents feel deep unease and worry about their children? Drawing on the lived experience of Singapore parents across class and gender, Teo You Yenn shows that their fears about their children's preparedness for uncertain futures crowd out the joys and possibilities of parenting. In lucid, approachable prose, she demonstrates how structural constraints—state policy, labour markets, educational systems—shape what seem like individual parenting decisions. Teo vividly illuminates how social conditions shape lived realities and political subjectivities, and how inequalities come to seem natural. Her analysis offers an alternative political imaginary, defined by a common sense of collective care, solidarity and agency, rather than individualism and fear.

—Rachel Sherman
Michael E. Gellert Professor of Sociology, The New School;
Author of *Uneasy Street: The Anxieties of Affluence*

Unease—what a marvellous title, and what an excellent book. Teo has not only revealed the palpable tension between the imagined and real narratives of Singaporean families, but also opened an important portal that tells us about the lives and realities of families in countries across the world! A real accomplishment and a must-read for anyone interested in learning about family and society today.

—Ito Peng,
Professor and Canada Research Chair in Global Social Policy;
Director, Centre for Global Social Policy
Department of Sociology and
Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy,
University of Toronto

Teo You Yenn offers another lucid analysis of Singaporean families. Blending sociological insight with rich ethnographic stories and a commitment to social change, she uncovers the roots of parental anxieties, explores the broader context of inequality and invites readers to reflect on what a good society should look like.

—Lan Pei-Chia
Distinguished Professor of Sociology,
National Taiwan University

Unease: Life in Singapore Families

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LIFE IN SINGAPORE FAMILIES

ethos books

For my family

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Preface

In societies where there are dominant, sometimes overpowering stories, there are also gaps between, on one hand, idealised, overly stylised tales and, on the other, ordinary, messy lived realities. These gaps present spaces of possibility: writers who care to write and readers who care to read can insert themselves and generate complexity. Playing in this space, our knowledge of society can become a rich soundscape rather than a single note, and our imaginations of ourselves can unfetter the boundaries of existing words and frames.

In this book, I explore the gap between the idealised Singapore family and the realities inside family lives. Here, the story of Singapore families blossoms and bloats: the truth of the matter is that 'family' stands at the core of Singaporean culture, but truth be told the family is experienced as stressful and increasingly burdensome. The education system for children is excellent, but it is also true it is hard to find one parent or child happy in it. Truly, Singapore's problems with social divisions are mild compared to the rest of the world's, but it's also true that inequality is imprinted on everyone's everyday realities.

The title *Unease* refers to the puzzle I use to focus my attention—for a puzzle is something that needs to be explained, and my task as a scholar must go beyond play. This is a puzzle of double-faced, contradictory truths—a world-class-everything city in which there is a palpable sense of unease. What is going on here?

The puzzle is also a place for the reader. This is a book with many layers of analysis, unfolding gradually over chapters. It requires attention as well as its movement: from the nitty-gritty of daily living and feeling; to the logics embedded within institutions knocking against individual decisions; to the dynamics of national or global developments driving the movement of our days. Back and forth we must look. 'Unease'—*what is going on here?*—can be an anchor, a signpost or a bench. When things get unruly, come back—to a reminder that there is a gap between ideal and reality in which something is happening. Our task is to explore what it is and why it matters.

Eight years ago, almost exactly to the day as I write this Preface, my book *This Is What Inequality Looks Like* was published. The book was a series of essays built on my ethnographic research. It described the lifeworld of Singaporeans who live with limited, inadequate income and other resources, against the backdrop of a wealthy country with elaborate narratives about its economic, political and social successes. The book reached a much larger audience than academic works typically do and widened the space for public discussions of the poverty/inequality problem in contemporary Singapore. Having read or heard—sometimes involuntarily—numerous reviews of it, I've noticed that one of its main effects has been to awaken wider recognition of the fact that there are people in our society experiencing significant deprivation and hardship.

This is important. But in the years following the book, I found myself persistently having to make the case—in lectures, conversations and further writings—that the problem I am trying to surface is not just about poverty but also inequality. I continued to struggle to articulate my sense that inequality's effects are wide-ranging and deep, neither limited to a small group of persons, nor just

about problems of access to some resources. I sensed in responses to the book that it is perhaps easier, more intuitive, to think of 'inequality' as a problem of poorer outcomes for small groups of people, and perhaps easier, less uncomfortable, to think of how we might uplift 'the poor'. These are consequential and meaningful approaches, but I still think they do not fully confront the significance and urgency of inequality in our collective lives.

This book is another attempt on my part to address the inadequacies of the previous one, to have another go at thinking through, and finding the words to describe, how inequality is a feature of contemporary life—the ways it seeps into everyone's experiences and worldviews, shaping us as persons and as a society.

The biggest gift I received after the success of *TIWILL*—a gift I occasionally experienced as curse—was the experience of losing control over my own words and work. I am not enlightened enough to always face this sanguinely. But I am a teacher and have been teaching for more than twenty years, and whereas my research-writing practice and my teaching work had previously been somewhat separate aspects of my job, they fused in refreshing ways after I saw how, in writing just as in teaching, there are zones of unpredictability.

These zones are places where minds, consciousness and ideas meet and meld. And they exist because readers and students alike are free and agentic persons—they bring to the book/classroom their own experiences and worldviews, their agendas and desires. I carry tools of my trade to this encounter, but unless readers/students too bring their expectations and dreams, knowledge and skepticism, nothing interesting can come of either a book or a course. Losing control is (mostly) a gift because it is the accumulation of the labour of others, which then allows the writing/course to become all kinds

of things that are impossible for one person to generate alone. This is how knowledge-production can be truly democratic and embracing of complexity.

For many scholars in research universities trying to be 'world-class', incentive systems and institutional rhetoric compel us to place teaching as a lower priority to research. For many reasons, I think this is a mistake. After many years of holding research-writing and teaching as separate tasks, and at times prioritising the former over the latter, I have, with more intentionality, brought my teaching practice to the writing of this book. The rewards of teaching constituted a lesson hiding in plain sight: insight, critique, growth are magical things that can happen when there is space for the meeting of minds. Teaching is not about control over what students should know; it has to be about creating enough freedom for them to meet you in that space of unpredictability.

Unease, then, is a Sociology course. I bring the tools of my discipline—words and concepts that tease out 'structure' and 'culture'; different forms of 'data' to demonstrate the many realities of living in an unequal society; references to scholarship beyond my own that inspire the asking of certain questions. I also carry with me the lessons I have learnt from teaching, through engagement with students, over the years. It is a course for which there are no prerequisites. Come as you are. You bring your attention, your agentic, thinking self—along with your rich and varied life experiences and agendas—and I'll bring my commitment to creating a space of unpredictability, where we can be open to learning new things, thinking fresh thoughts and considering our shared fates and collective futures with imagination.

Teo You Yenn
January 2026
Singapore

Chapter 1

A World-Class City, A Paradox of Unease

> Singapore have to work or else ah. Working in Singapore you earn money but at the expense of your children.
>
> —Sasha[1] (37, office manager, married mother of two)

Before Sharley (42, accountant, married mother of two) quit her job, she was a busy woman.

She had two children, 8 and 6 years old. When they were babies, Sharley's mother took care of them. But a few years ago when Sharley's father suffered a stroke and her mother needed to care for him as well, she asked Sharley to put the kids in childcare. On weekdays, the older child would go to her mother's flat after school (primary school ends around 1pm). The younger stayed at the childcare centre until 7pm, when Sharley's husband picked him up. Every day, Sharley commuted by bus, almost two hours each way—"like going to Malaysia like that"—to and from her accounting job. After work, Sharley would go from her office directly to her mother's flat, arriving around 8pm. She and her family would eat dinner there before going back to their own flat at about 9pm.

[1] All names mentioned in this book are pseudonyms. To further prevent individuals from being identified, and where doing so would not affect interpretations of data and key arguments, I sometimes alter or mask demographic characteristics or combine features of respondents.

She told me, "It's like that every day, except for Saturday and Sunday. I send them for enrichment on weekends." On weekends, she and her husband split responsibilities—sometimes him taking the kids out while she did housework, other times her taking the kids to enrichment classes while he did the chores. The couple rarely had leisure of their own; nor did they spend much time together as a couple.

Sharley and I spoke at length about her children. The conversation revolved almost entirely around their education. It eventually became clear to me why her life was hectic: not only did she and her husband work full-time jobs, but they also spent what free time they had—evenings and weekends—bringing their children to English, Chinese and taekwondo classes. Ever since her daughter was 5 years old, when her daughter's teacher told her to consider enrichment classes if she worried about her child not reading, she began looking for such classes outside of school. Comparing them to other kids of the same age, Sharley worried about them being "slow" and "delayed". She was willing to spend a significant part of her income on enrichment classes to help them catch up. Her husband disagreed with her perspective, and this was a source of tension and quarrels. She resolved this by paying for the classes herself, frequently while not telling him the true prices of fees.

Sharley and I met on a weekday afternoon in 2019, at a small food court near her home. Speaking in Mandarin, she told me she was able to make time to speak with me because she had taken a temporary break from working. When employed, she had been exhausted, her home a mess, and she hardly had time to see her children. Unemployed, she was hyper-conscious about depleting her savings each passing month and felt pressure to look for new work. Still, she told me with visible relief, the break from work gave her time to clean up clutter

that had accumulated in her flat, and take her kids to and from school. She spoke happily about having taken them on a trip to Taiwan during the school holidays, her first opportunity to travel in a very long time.

In many ways, Sharley is a prototypical average Singaporean: owner and resident of a 5-room HDB[2] flat, married with two children, a history of respectable and stable jobs. When she worked full time, she and her husband together brought home about S$7,000 per month for their four-person household (S$1,750 per capita). In 2019, when I interviewed her, this put them within the 21st to 30th percentile in terms of household per capita income from employment.[3]

Embedded in her biography is even a journey that resonates with the Singapore state's narratives around meritocracy: that Singapore is a place of opportunity, where upward social mobility is accessible to and a reward for all who work hard. Originally from Malaysia, Sharley spent most of her childhood in Singapore but stopped schooling for a year when she was 15 and her parents decided to move back to Johor. She later returned to Singapore to live with an aunt and older sister,

[2] HDB: Housing & Development Board. HDB flats are the predominant form of housing in Singapore. Built and subsidised by the state, they are referred to as 'public housing'. In contrast to public housing in other countries, however, they are not what scholars call 'social housing'—typically limited to low-income residents. More than 80 percent of Singapore's 'Resident' population—Singapore citizens and Permanent Residents—live in HDB flats, and the other 20 percent in 'private' housing of condominiums and houses. The vast majority of HDB residents (90 percent) 'own' their flats. HDB flats have components of private property: they are purchased by individual buyers on a 99-year lease period, can be sold on 'resale markets', and their prices are affected by market demand and supply. HDB flats vary in size—3-room, 4-room and 5-room HDB flats are the most common. 1-room and 2-room flats are primarily limited to flats that the state rents out at low rates to low-income households (these would be called 'social housing' in international parlance). Significantly, access to HDB flats generally requires the formation of a 'family nucleus'. Heterosexual marriage is the most important component of this 'family nucleus'. For more on the historical genesis and details of housing policies in Singapore, see Ng (2020).

[3] See Figures 1.1 and 1.2 at the end of this chapter for some information on household income in contemporary Singapore.

taking her 'N' and then 'O' levels[4] as a private candidate and eventually earning an accounting diploma from a polytechnic. She worked at two major auditing firms and acquired the ACCA certification (Association of Chartered Certified Accountants) while working. Thereafter, she had no trouble securing jobs and worked successively as an accountant at various multinational firms.

Her children, too, live a typical and model Singapore life: both children have attended one of the many childcare centres set up over the past decade, with significant state support, to serve the needs of working parents like herself.[5] The older was already in, and the younger would eventually enter, a public primary school—heavily state-subsidised, with fees at just S$13 per month. They will grow up within an education system reputed to be well-resourced and productive of stellar academic results—a 'world-class education system' with some of the highest-scoring students in global standardised tests.[6]

Sharley and her family's lives thus bear the trappings of a good and decent life for which Singaporeans are regularly reminded by the PAP[7] government to be grateful (to them).

Between 2018 and 2020, I interviewed many parents like Sharley. I also talked to people who had more or less than she did in terms of

[4] At the end of secondary school, students take the Singapore-Cambridge GCE (General Certificate of Education) 'O' (ordinary) level or 'N' (normal) examinations. More on this in Chapter 3.

[5] Pre-primary schooling is not mandatory in Singapore. Until the early 2010s, much of the sector was run by private, profit-making preschools. Over the past decade, the Singapore government has ramped up on efforts to increase the number of spaces at childcare centres and kindergartens and keep fees low. For example, it has established arrangements with 'anchor operators' and 'partner operators' who receive state subsidies in return for capping fees.

[6] Singapore students score among the highest in the world in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which tests literacy in reading, mathematics and science. See OECD (2023). More about this in Chapter 5.

[7] PAP: People's Action Party. This is the political party that has dominated Singapore's political, economic and social landscape since 1959, and which today remains synonymous with 'the government'.

income and wealth, educational credentials and occupational status. I set out to understand how Singaporeans of various (gender, ethnicity, class)[8] backgrounds navigate work and care—how they organise their lives to meet the dual demands of wage work and care responsibilities.

This book details what I found. It is anchored around a particular finding, a common thread amongst Singaporeans of divergent backgrounds. As we spoke about their everyday routines and habits, jobs and careers, present worries and hopes for the future, and especially as we talked about their children, parents repeatedly displayed a sense of *unease*. Everyday life is hectic and tense; life is stable but not quite secure; there is a pathway to follow but it does not always seem right; family is everything but family life feels off-kilter. The unease is subtle but persistent. Against my own expectations, it is a motif that cuts thickly through the diversity of my sample. Observing this animated my curiosity, and I hope it triggers yours. Held against the backdrop of Singapore's story, unease is puzzling, and this book is an effort to interrogate and understand it.

The impressive wealth of this small island-country, its high rankings on numerous global indices measuring quality of life[9] and the state's strong and highly institutionalised 'pro-family' interventions and care-infrastructure investments over the past decades indicate that Singapore is a great place to live and raise kids. If this cannot realistically be true for everyone, then it should at least hold for those who fit into the idealised citizen or family imagined by public

[8] Aside from these key demographic characteristics, to capture a fuller range of parenting experiences, my interviewees also included people of different age, marital status, number and age of children. See Table 1.3 at the end of this chapter for details.

[9] See, for example, Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) (2024); Mercer (2024); United Nations Development Programme (2024).

policy—heterosexual, married, educated, employed.[10] Yet, in account after account of life in contemporary Singapore—even among these legitimated 'families'—I heard about shortfalls in time, missed connections in relationships, fractures between aspirations and real life. In the interviews, there was a palpable sense that imbalance is the norm, survival is the creed and 'no choice' is the default.

Unease explores the puzzle of why and how, in a case that looks so perfect on paper, a place so loudly 'pro-family', the interior of family lives is often weighted, tense, off-kilter. I trace the everyday contours, rhythms and logics of life inside families. There is a lot of nitty-gritty living that makes up individuals' days and years; this is also the 'stuff' of society's shared habits, norms and values. These details are necessary for putting together an account of life in Singapore today, and especially important for giving shape to the puzzling gap between ideals and realities. They help us see that we in fact have folk theories to account for that gap—like the one about 'kiasu parents' being the culprits of a high-stress education system—and that we should look a little closer to see what is really going on. I address the puzzle of unease by weaving a picture of social conditions that people encounter—macro-economic forces, policy principles and arrangements, institutional actors and institutionalised practices, societal norms and cultural discourses. These are encounters in which inequality is salient—where the logics of hierarchy, competition and unequal worth shape material lives and worldviews.

Before elaborating on how the book unfolds, let me say something about the significance of *pointing out* that there is a gap between idealised forms and ordinary reality.

[10] Through policies around housing, childcare support, retirement funds, the Singapore state has given concrete shape to the definition of 'family'. In earlier work (Teo 2015a), I elaborate on how—through institutional measures—it has made deservedness for public support contingent on heteronormativity. For an account of heteronormativity's historical genesis and its burdens on excluded groups, see Oswin (2019).

Taking ordinary people seriously

Unease is a difficult puzzle to hold steady—in one's mind and in public discourse. Even for me—a sociologist who has made a career of studying ordinary people's experiences[11]—the outlines of the idea keep blurring and dissolving. It takes effort to perceive and believe that the unease is 'real'—with material bases, reflective of social forces—and not merely evidence of Singaporeans' unrealistic standards and penchant for complaining (as the stereotype goes).

From a scholarly perspective, 'unease' is actually not entirely surprising. Globally, studies show the rise of inequality and corresponding intensification of insecurity and precarity across the world, particularly in the past five decades.[12] If we look at Singapore as a case, it makes sense to find that people who live in Singapore—a global city with relatively high levels of income and wealth inequalities; where resources are finite and competition is stiff; where formal credentials matter and market participation determines material wellbeing and social status—should also be experiencing troubles when it comes to people's material and subjective wellbeing. Situating Singapore in comparative scholarly perspective, we have access to analytical tools that can account for people's unease.

Yet, when one lives and works in Singapore, sustaining this comparative lens and approach is tricky. On an everyday and corporeal level, there is the fact of living in a city that is clean,

[11] See Teo (2011; 2018).

[12] This is a massive body of work, spanning disciplines, geographical and analytical/empirical foci. Economists have been especially influential in articulating and drawing attention to extremes in income and wealth inequality since the 1980s (Stiglitz 2012; Piketty 2014; Chancel et al. 2022). Scholars have explored the implications of inequality, precarity and insecurity widely. See, for example, Wilkinson and Pickett (2010); Standing (2011); Beck (2014); Pugh (2015); Morduch and Schneider (2017); Kalleberg (2018); Lan (2019); Sandel (2020); Koo (2022); Taylor (2023).

orderly, functional. More important, layered upon this are specific *framings and interpretations* of Singapore's great success in economic development. The dominant motifs in Singapore's accounts of itself are about how Singapore has avoided the pitfalls of both neoliberal capitalism (sometimes termed 'market fundamentalism') and state welfarism; of Singapore as exceptional, a case like no other, and indeed somehow outside (above?) the normal concerns of developed countries or wealthy cities.[13] Even within scholarly settings, some scoff at comparison. Particularly when presented with cases that do better than Singapore at mitigating inequality and social provision, I regularly hear statements along the lines of "but actually those cases have problems too", or a more flippant, conversation-stopping claim of "but Singapore is unique".

Correspondingly, something peculiar happens to observations of Singapore's problems. At meetings and seminars, I notice people—politicians, civil servants, academics, 'thought leaders'—implying that the problem Singapore faces is that Singaporeans have overly high expectations of life and public services precisely because the PAP government has been too effective. In the strongest version of this argument, ordinary Singaporeans simply do not know how good they have it relative to people in other countries. In other words, if Singaporeans feel insecure, precarious or, as I am putting it, uneasy, this is not necessarily because they have anything *real* to feel bad about, but because things are so good in Singapore that their expectations have become unrealistic. In a sleight of hand, the unease gets relegated to the (mistaken/irrational) mind, and the problem the government has is one of communication and, indeed, of over-competence.

[13] For some recent examples, see these speeches by then-Prime Minister (2004–2024) Lee Hsien Loong and current Prime Minister (2024–) Lawrence Wong (Lee 2023, 2024; Wong 2024b).

Ideas and accounts about society exist in context. This script is possible because of a specific political economy of knowledge production. Political and economic elites in Singapore have a multiplicity of overt and subtle instruments through which to represent their worldviews as universal ones. In particular, the state has strong monopoly over data, information and accounts of Singapore society.[14] People dominating public discourse—whether politicians, senior civil servants, business leaders or select academics—belong broadly to a class that has benefited tremendously from Singapore's particular growth trajectory and distribution of wealth. From a certain vantage point, Singapore is perhaps indeed a great place to live. Recognising and taking seriously the insecurity of others is not easy. Let me nonetheless throw down the gauntlet: the inability to take ordinary people's experiences seriously stems from an elitist blindspot. It is a failure to fully recognise and comprehend the Singapore many are living in. And using people's '(too) high expectations' to wave away feelings of unease is suffocating; it is as if Singaporeans are not even allowed ambivalence, contradictory feelings and critical responses to our own lives and the city.

With this backdrop in mind, I invite readers to take seriously the gaps between ideal and reality, to consider Singapore as idealised model *and* Singapore as a place where actual people live. This does not, and should not, require taking a rigid position—things are great *or* things are lousy, the government is good *or* the government is bad. Instead, it demands sitting with complexity and puzzling over contradictions. People's lives are complex—we need multiple as well as layered stories to make sense of them.

[14] For an account of Singapore's media landscape and how it has morphed over time, see George (2020).