



THE RIDGE MAGAZINE

Commentary

FROM EARTH TO ASHES,
ROAM SWEET ROAM,
FAREWELL NEVERLAND
& MORE

Lifestyle

SKIPPING THE 9-5,
IMPOSTER SYNDROME,
LA NOUVELLE RÉALITÉ
& MORE

Fiction

MOULD &
THE WAITING ROOM

Poetry

MASS RAPID TRANSIT,
MOVEMENTS,
GRANDFATHER CLOCK
& MORE

*“The future is always all
around us, waiting, in
moments of transitions, to be
born in moments of revelation.”*

— J. MICHAEL STRACZYNSKI

IN TRANSIT

AY24/25 SEM 1

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear readers,

Welcome to a world of the unfamiliar where boundaries blur and curiosity triumphs.

This year, The Ridge is back sooner with a semiannual issue under the theme *In Transit* - a reflection of non-normative societal practices, cross-cultural interactions and new experiences. You will find stories spanning from university life, arts and culture, to social mores.

Through these stories, we invite you to venture into uncharted horizons—whether geographically, socially or intellectually, to explore the beauty of the human condition through an extraordinary lens. As you flick through the pages, we hope that you feel inspired to fully engage with the unfamiliar and embrace the discomfort that accompanies beauty in the unexpected.

Finally, I want to express sincerest gratitude to our great team of more than 30 writers, designers, marketers and website managers who have dedicated the last four months to the production of *In Transit*. You have worked hard, and we are truly fortunate to have you on our team. This magazine would not have been possible without you.

To readers, we hope you enjoy *In Transit* as much as we enjoyed bringing it to life. Thank you.

Warmest regards,
Angie Truong Hai Ha
Chief Editor



CONTENTS

Skipping the 9-5 02

THERE'S A
Gap in Your Resume

04 *Imposter Syndrome*
AS AN INTERN

06 *University:*
OPTIMISM AND
APPREHENSION 08

Friends to Strangers
AND VICE VERSA:
NAVIGATING
FRIENDSHIPS IN UNI 11

Farewell Neverland:
THE YEARNING FOR
CHILDHOOD IN MEDIA 21

THE GREATEST
Plot-Twist 18

NUS Law Moves
TO U-TOWN 14

LA
nouvelle réalité 16

BLURRING THE LINES OF
GOOD AND EVIL IN
Despicable Me 24

RETURNING TO THE
World of WALL-E 26

MALE FANTASIES,
Male Fantasies 29

THE JOURNEY OF
Coming of Age
IN CHINA 32

10/02/23 -
Tet, Singapore 35

From Earth to Ashes 38

Grandfather Clock 41

THE
Waiting Room 42

Roam Sweet Roam:
DREAMS OF A DIGITAL
NOMAD 44

Mass Rapid Transit 47

Nettle Song 48

Movements 49

Bites of Change:
HOW OUR FOOD
SYSTEM IS EVOLVING 50

The Green Paradox
OF MODERNITY 53

Mould 56

It's Just Art: 58
THE ACCESSIBLE ART
EXPERIENCE

Skipping the 9-to-5

by Vishnu Vardni

Opportunity cost is a heavy word. It carries the guilt and anxiety of all the “what-ifs” should one have chosen to do something else instead of college—content creation, food blogging, tutoring, baking, or literally anything else. Sylvia Plath’s fig tree metaphor looms large here: each fig on the tree represents a different future ripe with possibility, but choosing one means watching the others wither and fall, lost forever. The paralyzing weight of deciding which branch to climb often leaves us questioning whether we’ve picked the right fruit—or if, in our hesitation, we’ve lost them all.

However, “having your cake and eating it too” is increasingly possible in the post-Covid world. Freelance and gig culture promise a middle ground, where students and graduates can earn while keeping their independence and schedules intact.

Platforms like Upwork and Fiverr are overrun with opportunities that let students turn their “free time” into income. And let’s face it, for students managing rising tuition and living expenses, the extra cash isn’t just a bonus—it is often a lifeline.

Final year business administration undergraduate Sasmithaa Mano, 21, has thought about jumping full-time into what is now her freelance venture and starting her own tuition hustle. “There are many odds stacked against women in business, and that can take a toll on the opportunities, employability, and even our will,” Sasmithaa commented based on her experience as President of NUS’ Women in Business committee.

A \$1.4 billion industry in Singapore, tuition is often a viable freelance option where hour rates can start from \$100. The opportunity cost of a 2-hour lecture, for example, is \$200. But constantly measuring “lost potential” can drag one into an endless instant-gratification spiral, trading long-term skills for short-term wins. Mathematics freshman Thang Pang Ern instead recommends gig work as a platform to uncover the full potential of your hobbies.

Having been in the media team of his CCA back in secondary school, Pang Ern has had seven years of photography and videography experience. It is what led him to pick up expertise across various camera equipment and photoshop tools, and what led him to meet his photography idol Keith Louitit. Although the 21-year-old has never considered videography as a full-time venture, it has opened the door to a community of like-minded people and much professional experience.

Same with Sasmithaa, who was into food blogging in 2020. Racking up over a 1,000 followers on Instagram, her page @thatsoyumyyy attracted collaborations from top companies like Singapore Airlines and Singapore Tourism Board. But turning hobbies like photography and food blogging into full-time ventures is a process that demands commitment, and “blind faith”, in the words of Pang Ern, who pictures himself as a mathematician down the road.

Both had weighed their options carefully, knowing well that freelance work has little employee protection, little assurance of a safety net, and is a saturated, competitive market. Yet, Sasmithaa shared that Singaporean youth are generally burnt out from this rat race. “People may think we are a ‘strawberry generation’. But that never stopped us from trying so many different things. We are increasingly prioritising ourselves over the material benefits of employment,” she remarked.

Featured

Formal employment for Gen Z is indeed declining. The six-month employment rate for fresh graduates dropped for the first time in five years, according to the 2022 Joint Autonomous Universities Graduate Employment Survey. It also found that the freelancing rate rose slightly from 1.7 to 1.8%.

In an economy where everyone is not only encouraged but rewarded meritoriously for their multi-hyphenated lives, students may often find themselves anxious to cover all categories—be it volunteering every week, signing up for case competitions, or piling on three CCAs. Freelancing and gig work have become appealing options that allow students to check off the “work experience” box while managing packed schedules. But this freedom comes with its own set of pressures.

Teaching

Baking

Content Creation

Others

Featured

From the outset of their undergraduate careers, do students ever get to “switch off” in the processing of monetising every possible hour? They are leaving college already familiar with the pressure to keep income streams flowing, constantly thinking about how to turn downtime into work time. Freelancing may promise freedom, but in an economy where hyper-productivity is the baseline, it’s become the new normal—a standard that many are realising comes at the cost of ever truly slowing down.

“The best rest is a change of work” encapsulates the paradox of modern productivity: the belief that even rest must serve a purpose. For students navigating freelancing alongside academics, this mindset creates a peculiar tension. Rest isn’t just elusive; “Rest is commodified,” noted Sasmithaa. Even the language surrounding rest has taken on an economic tone, downtime has become “recharging”—requiring “strategic” planning or “investing in oneself” to enhance productivity. One is hence left to wonder whether there is any intrinsic value to rest. “Freelancing’s great as a hobby, but once it’s considered an actual revenue stream, it can quickly turn into just another pressure,” said Pang Ern.

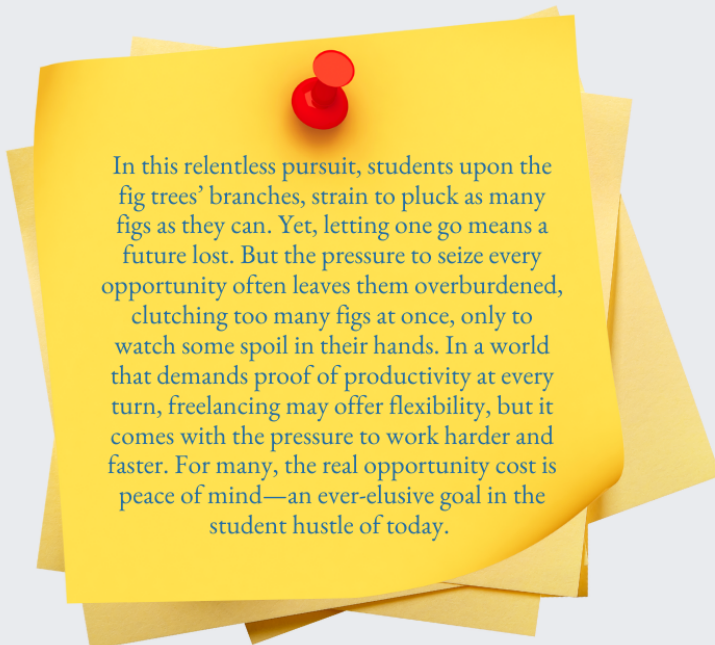
Many students feel they need to balance academic performance, extracurriculars, and gig work, making every hour feel like a potential opportunity lost if it is not “productive.” This hustle culture may offer flexibility, but it can also blur the line between rest and work, leaving students wondering if they’re doing enough even when their schedules are packed to the brim.

Teaching

Baking

Content Creation

Others



In this relentless pursuit, students upon the fig trees’ branches, strain to pluck as many figs as they can. Yet, letting one go means a future lost. But the pressure to seize every opportunity often leaves them overburdened, clutching too many figs at once, only to watch some spoil in their hands. In a world that demands proof of productivity at every turn, freelancing may offer flexibility, but it comes with the pressure to work harder and faster. For many, the real opportunity cost is peace of mind—an ever-elusive goal in the student hustle of today.

THERE'S A GAP IN YOUR RESUME

—Jonathan Joramsa



The plan after completing my A Levels was to move on to university. If I've learnt anything from studying in the local school system for the past nine years, it's that the cycle of study, graduate, and rinse and repeat has been embedded in our culture. That was what all my classmates in Junior College did, and it only seemed natural to follow. I had all the tools at my disposal to make that transition: several university offers, both local and abroad; supportive parents; and of course, a new laptop. But there was still something missing—I wasn't ready enough to open up a new chapter in my life.

Enter: my gap year.

After so much of my life revolving around school, the thought of taking a year out was intimidating. There's so much latent potential waiting to be unlocked in a gap year, but it doesn't come without the fear of uncertainty and the unknown. I took my gap year mostly for mental health reasons, and looking back on it, it was one of the best decisions I've ever made. It was a time to reflect, recharge, and realign myself with the things that truly mattered—not just academically, but personally too. Two years on from the start of my gap year in 2022, I can say that the growth I experienced then has largely shaped my approach to university and life for the better.

My gap year was simple; I didn't backpack across Europe, find a passion for entrepreneurship or learn a new language. But ultimately, there is beauty in simplicity. I still made many personal discoveries, some of which I feel are universal, even for those who haven't gone through a gap year. For anyone who feels pressured to stick to the status quo, I hope you know that sometimes, going against the current is a good thing. If you're still sticking around, here are some things I learnt during my gap year.

Stay Emotionally Attuned

Check in regularly with yourself. Whether it's during the semester when you're juggling between commitments, or during the holidays when you have a breather, life can feel overwhelming sometimes. Though I didn't have a fixed schedule during my gap year, the vast amount of time I had was difficult to navigate. There were days I'd wake up feeling empowered to do what I set out for myself (improving still-life drawing skills, sustaining a vibrato, learning how to cook more than just instant noodles...) and other days I'd rot in bed. My emotions were turbulent, and it didn't help that I'd push them aside in favour of completing my goals for the day.

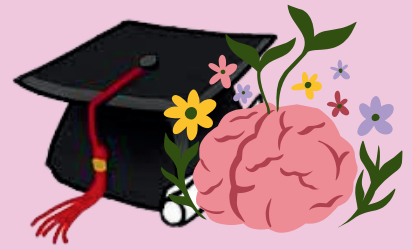
You don't need a breakdown to take your emotions seriously. Your feelings are valid, and it helps to take some time to assess how you felt during the day. If something's off, journal about it. Talk to someone you trust. It definitely helped me to have a good support system in the form of family and friends. Whatever you do, don't suppress your emotions. Find a healthy release, whether it's engaging with hobbies or spending time with people you care about, and don't be afraid to communicate your needs. You'd be surprised how many people you have in your corner to support you.

I had the privilege of having a friend who was going through a gap year at the same time I was, and gradually, "Survive, not thrive" became a constant mantra for us. Rough patches, whether in a gap year, during university, or whatever comes after that, are inevitable. Sometimes, it's enough to get by, especially when factors beyond your control impede on your ability to achieve ideal results.



Find Your Own Rhythm

Everyone goes at their own pace. This was a difficult idea for me to grasp at first.



There's immense pressure to conform to the norm. It's easy to feel like you're falling behind if you're not hitting every milestone at the same time as everyone. I felt left out looking at my other friends scream school cheers at orientation, make new friends in tutorials and complain about schoolwork. When I let my mind wander too long, I'd be plagued by the thought that I was a year behind the people I used to call peers. Taking a year out after high school isn't completely uncommon anymore, but there's still stigma surrounding those who don't follow the norm of the high school-university pipeline. I internalised that.

But you can't brute-force your way through life—lagging behind is sometimes your body's way of telling you to rest. I'd long felt guilty about taking breaks, caught in the cycle of relentless work to seek academic validation—a feeling familiar to many who've been through the demanding local education system. Even during my gap year, I clung to the idea of productivity, which eventually took a toll on my health to the point of collapse. And then I realised that deep rest—intentional rest that helps to quiet the cacophony in our minds—is itself “productive”. True rest restores your physical and emotional health, enabling you to perform at your best. Remember, nothing beats giving yourself that nap after a long day at school.

Embrace Solitude

Learning to be comfortable alone can be transformative. After all, the only constant in your ever-changing, sometimes tumultuous life is yourself. People come and go, and even those closest to you aren't always available. I can't lie and say my gap year wasn't isolating; my friends didn't have time for me as they dealt with their own transitions and university commitments. Our frequent chats turned to occasional check-ins, and I often felt the distance in those silences. I had to negotiate my loneliness, but eventually recognised that loneliness is a step towards being truly self-sufficient.

With time to look within, I discovered aspects of myself I hadn't seen before. It's easy to lose sight of who you are when you're constantly engaged with others, adapting to their energy, or subconsciously seeking their approval. Solitude meant that these external influences faded away, allowing me to find clarity in my own core values and be my authentic self. It's hard to drown out the outside noise, but live your life for yourself, as yourself.

Spending time alone also empowered me with a sense of agency. I learnt to make choices without the influence of others and instead trust my own judgement, even if they lead to unplanned detours. It's liberating to know that I can go for a hike, explore a new part of the city, or revisit an old hobby (like reading!) simply because I want to. I became more assertive and better at advocating for my desires, which made me feel like I was reclaiming my life for myself. You too can find comfort in your independence.

What Now?

I hope that whatever I've shared will prove useful in some way. Regardless of what stage of life you find yourself in, there's always value in slowing down, reassessing your priorities, and advocating for yourself. Maybe you'll find that deviating from the norm to be your authentic self offers immense freedom; we can all do with a weight off our shoulders.



IMPOSTER SYNDROME

AS AN INTERN

AVERY TONG

Transitioning from student life to an internship can be daunting as it involves applying skills that were taught in school to real-world tasks. Stepping into my internship position came with an intense pressure to perform, lest I make a mistake that would lead to broader repercussions beyond myself. This quickly led me to develop imposter syndrome, fuelled by a cycle of self-doubt, a lack of confidence, and the pervasive fear of being exposed as a fraud as stimulated by new responsibilities.

Imposter syndrome is characterised by the belief that success is attributed to luck rather than to talent or qualifications.¹ It affects many individuals. The fear of being found incompetent or less intelligent stems from a belief in one's own inadequacy, despite significant evidence to the contrary. Individuals with imposter syndrome often ignore or downplay positive indicators of their abilities and instead focus disproportionately on perceived failures.² This often results in negative psychological effects like anxiety, stress and emotional exhaustion.³

Despite its negative impact, studies have shown that those with impostor syndrome also have a strong will to succeed where a lot of effort is required, and those who think that hard work can be a substitute for ability derive a motivational benefit from the belief that they lack ability.⁴ Ultimately, evidence that imposter syndrome strongly corresponds with success-driven attributes like perfectionism and a fear of failure is consistent with this motivational benefit to perform well.⁴ I found this to be true during my internship—that the motivational value of a belief in my lack of ability outweighed its subjective disutility, often propelling me to achieve my goals and perform well in tasks I was assigned to.



Throughout my six-month internship, I worked on overcoming my imposter syndrome. The first step I took in doing so was recognising and acknowledging that I was experiencing symptoms of imposter syndrome. By reflecting on my experiences, I realised that my anxiety stemmed from being in the early stages of my role. I rationalised that such transitions took time to navigate and allowed me to gain a sense of the expectations and workload. I began challenging my negative thoughts, reminding myself that I was still learning and developing.

I was able to do so by journaling my progress in my internship before I went to sleep everyday. Recognising that my feelings of inadequacy were a byproduct of my inexperience and high expectations, and not a reflection of my actual abilities, helped me move past and overcome them. I learnt to value my contributions and eventually, I came to appreciate the complexities that came with the role as it gave me the chance to grow by gaining new skills and knowledge.

My supervisor was incredibly supportive from the start of my internship, encouraging me to seek help whenever necessary, constantly assuring me that I could check in with her while I was still learning about the protocols. She guided me through the busy first few weeks of my internship, allowing me to redirect my negative thoughts, establish goals, validate my feelings and reframe them more positively. It's been shown in studies that mentorship and support are crucial through transitional processes.⁵ I relied on the feedback I received from my support network and it helped me to gain new perspectives, ultimately allowing me to work on overcoming my imposter syndrome.

Ultimately, overcoming imposter syndrome requires hope, and reinforcing a daily belief that we deserve success.⁶ This mindset helps us focus on progressing toward our goals rather than dwelling in the past. Hope is a crucial driver of human potential, acting as a motivational force that shifts our perspective, and allows us to see challenges as opportunities for growth rather than insurmountable obstacles. This is especially true when experiencing feelings of imposter syndrome. Personally, I was able to see the physical outcomes of my Mental Health Supporters campaign that I was working on during my internship when it launched everywhere—on the trains, on the buses, on TV, and on Instagram. This allowed me to see beyond my screen and what I was so busily working on during the pre-production phases where I felt the most of my imposter syndrome. Being able to see positive results of my campaign—be it comments of appreciation on our social posts, people looking and scanning the QR codes on the key visuals, or even quantitative data which showed significant increase from previous campaigns—reinforced this hope that my efforts are not futile and are good enough to be well-received by the public. My progress in overcoming imposter syndrome is exemplified by the fact that I am able to look beyond the belief of my own inadequacy and acknowledge the evidence that contradicts this belief, feeling proud of the work I have done. I would not have been able to acknowledge such positive indicators of my abilities, focusing disproportionately instead on my perceived failures at the start of this internship, without reframing my perspective.

When we foster a hopeful outlook, we begin to interpret our experiences, and instead of viewing setbacks as evidence of our failure, we see them as valuable learning moments that contribute to our development. Overall, this reframing is crucial in combating the effects of imposter syndrome, as it helps us to recognise that our journey involves not just successes but also necessary trials and errors that are part of the learning process. By believing in our potential and the possibility of a successful outcome, we can mitigate the anxiety associated with imposter syndrome.

Bibliography

1. Abigail Abrams, "Yes, Impostor Syndrome Is Real. Here's How to Deal With It."
2. Melanie Clark, Kimberly Vardeman, Shelley Barba, "Perceived Inadequacy: A Study of the Imposter Phenomenon among College and Research Librarians"
3. Mona Leonhardt, Myriam N. Bechtoldt, Sonja Rohrmann, "All Imposters Aren't Alike – Differentiating the Imposter Phenomenon"
4. Stephen Gadsby, "Imposter Syndrome and Self-Deception"
5. Stephanie M. Singe, "Navigating Imposter Syndrome: Taking on New Roles"
6. Christina Whittaker, "One thing no one told you about the imposter syndrome"

UNIVERSITY

Apprehension and Optimism

-ANELKA T SALAM

Before university

I have always looked forward to life in university since I was a young boy. The idea may have been forced upon me by my parents but I warmed up to the idea quickly. The allure of creating a desired timetable, learning from experts from various fields, plus the rosy stories from seniors and relatives fuelled this imagination. Motivated, I did everything that would help me turn fantasy into reality. The hard work paid off: I did well enough in my A-Levels to enter university.

With my results, I applied to various universities and accepted an offer by NUS. The only thing now was to wait as National Service (NS) forced me to take a two-year-long “career break”.

For a self-proclaimed nerd, NS was tough. Basic training centred around foot drills, physical training and (very basic) law lessons, a huge shift from my previous life as a student where my only concerns were grades and assignments. Shock turned to boredom when I was deployed as a police officer after basic training as interactions between colleagues and the public could get repetitive. Working shifts meant that for the most of two years, I had no regular schedules, which made it hard to meet with old friends. A mixed bag of colleagues became my only regular avenue of outside contact. The prospect of university kept me going: “Life will get better when I start schooling again”, I told myself almost everyday.



That said, NS was not all bad. Working on ships allowed me to apply the coordinate geometry, kinematics and physical geography I learnt in A-Levels as I interpreted navigational and weather data. I learnt how to communicate ideas better too through regular use of police radio communications. The biggest advantage was that I had no homework! During my free time, I could revise my old Mathematics notes and tutorials in an attempt to prepare for life as a Mathematics major.

Me, receiving a service plaque on my last shift during NS, closing this chapter of life. I was eager to go back to school to start studying again.



Myself (right) in JC in 2021, at the height of COVID-19. To build a portfolio, I joined multiple co-curricular activities like being an Orientation Group Leader in JC.



On 8 February 2024, I was free! I counted down the days to my freshman year with much excitement. I went on longer vacations (which I had no time for in the past few years) and continued revising JC material. As August neared, I attended a freshmen orientation camp and met some of my coursemates, feeding my anticipation for the year ahead.

Starting out

When the new academic year arrived, I was gleaming with happiness. This was the moment I had waited for for so long! Having already met some friends in my major and done some revision, there was nothing to fear. Of course, it did not take long for me to realise that this was just a fantasy.....

I had to start from scratch again. I had to relearn old habits from school and try to apply them in a new life.

During the first few classes of the semester, I was alone. Being an introvert, I mostly kept to myself; I found it hard to reach out to new people. Previous unsuccessful attempts to break out of my shell and the unfamiliar school environment created a wall in my mind that was difficult to overcome.

Apart from that, there was the issue of coping academically. I had read ahead of the course syllabus before lessons started but all my progress was decimated within ten minutes of the first lecture, when my professor caught up to where I had earlier read. I looked around me, lost, while many of my coursemates looked unmoved, as if the content was already familiar. Disorientation turned into worry; doubts filled about whether I could pass the course .

Was university the new low point of my life? Why could I not achieve that ease of schooling I had experienced in JC? However, as Albert Einstein once said, “In the middle of every difficulty lies opportunity”—I decided to take these challenges head on.

Overcoming challenges

Over the first few weeks, I made it a point to converse with someone in each of my classes. By recess week, I had gotten comfortable with a small circle of new friends that I could talk to. While turning these friendships into something close would require long-term effort, these small circles of interaction kept me sane for the past few weeks. In my new friend groups, I realised that I was not alone in my worries: many also faced a steep learning curve post-JC. My revision had no bearing on my performance in the course: it was a level playing field where everyone starts with a blank canvas. Thus, finding new people to talk to and share my worries with consoled me about this new change in life.

With a new phase in life, why not try something new? With the flexibility of the NUS curriculum, I was able to study courses that I am interested in. This semester, I delved into learning a new language – French. I had always been curious about French, given my name is of French origin and the huge influence French has on English. Almost a semester after starting French lessons, I may not be fluent, but it sure beats only knowing ‘bonjour’ and ‘je m’appelle Anelka’.



Outside of studies, I joined various interest groups like RadioPulze, NUS' very own radio/podcasting club! How did I, an introvert, get involved with such a club? Since I love writing, it was only natural to try a new medium of expression: audio. Overcoming that fear of putting my voice out there was a major hurdle. Thankfully, I had a supportive group of friends and seniors whose hospitable nature made me feel comfortable recording our candid discussions for the podcast. At the same time, I picked up useful skills like audio editing and operating a set mixer.



Myself (left), together with the other co-hosts of RadioPulze's 'In The Now' podcast. This was our first podcast but we pulled it off!



A post-recording selfie with hosts and special guests (myself in the middle)!

Reflections.....

Did this semester go the way I had always pictured it? The simple answer is no! I faced challenges like readjusting to an academic setting and rebuilding my social circle. However, I took these difficulties in my stride and found ways to transcend them. Additionally, I went outside my comfort zone; trying new things like learning French and making a podcast series in school. While I still have much more to learn, I do not regret the semester that has passed. It taught me tenacity and the benefits of keeping an open mind. These treasures I have uncovered in my journey from a JC student to being a freshman will be extremely useful for the semesters to come. Bring them on.



*Friends to Strangers
and Vice Versa:*

Navigating Friendships in University

*Reflecting upon the
transience of friendships and
the beauty of memory, how
can we find and maintain
meaningful friendships?*

Rebecca Yong

I met up with an old friend yesterday. We first became classmates in secondary school. Back then, she was a spirited girl with thick side-swept bangs, a carefree attitude and a listening ear ever-ready to lend. From our first crushes to first jobs, we had seen each other through what felt like our whole lives. But looking at her now, I realised that the little girl I'd first met when we were 12 had grown into a vastly different young woman. She brushed her

**“...there exists a
version of myself,
frozen in time, in the
memories of everyone I
have ever met.**

styled curls out of her face and set her laptop bag on the table, telling me about how university life had been for her, and about juggling her double STEM major and her dream career. I caught her up on my latest happenings. Despite

the ways she's changed since then, I glimpsed the same exuberance of her 12-year-old self in her lively reactions. I suppose her passion has never left her, but merely changed in form—from fangirling over boy groups to devoutly studying for her dream course, she had always been a dedicated person.

Our meet-up reminded me of my other friends in primary and secondary school. Even a decade later, I still wonder what my Primary 4 BFF has been up to. I have not seen her in years, and our online communication has more or less ceased. I watch her new life studying abroad across the world vicariously through my Instagram Stories. On my screen, she wears contacts and elegant black ensembles, but in my mind, she's still wearing her red-frame glasses and bright blue uniform. As I wish her happiness, I wonder if she ever thinks about me, hoping to see me again one day, or if she thinks I still have waist-long hair and five pets.

It's bittersweet, but I also think it's beautiful that as I live my life and continuously change, there exists a version of myself, frozen in time, in the memories of everyone I have ever met. And that maybe, every now and then, someone thinks of me and is curious about my whereabouts or if I am doing well.

As my 21st birthday approaches, it comes with uncertainty. How many friends will still be by my side in the next 20 years of my life? How can I form bonds that extend deeper than just “classmates” or “group-mates”?



Some of you reading this might share the same sentiments. Amidst piling deadlines and the looming fear of the future, who has the time to maintain an active social life? What I have come to understand is that relationships—romantic and platonic—are work. Although we tend to chalk off loving as a feeling and friendship as a “vibe”, there are intricacies to what keeps a friendship alive. In general, these are the few rules I try to live by.

Active Listening

A few years back, I read the book *The Art of Loving* by Erich Fromm, and one line stuck with me: “Infantile love follows the principle: ‘I love because I am loved.’ Mature love follows the principle: “I am loved because I love.”

Keeping that in mind, how do we effectively show the people in our life—particularly our friends—that we value them? One crucial aspect is active listening. Harvard Business School’s Robin Abrahams and Boris Groysberg boil it down to paying attention to the underlying thoughts and feelings being conveyed in a conversation, and then demonstrating interest, understanding and empathy.¹

What that also means is remembering the little things—their love language, pet peeves, favourite TV show, or even their coffee order. It seems small, but the amalgamation of thoughtful words and actions reminds those in your friend circle that you genuinely care about them.

Putting Yourself Out There

As a student staying off-campus who has encountered mixed fortune in project group allocations, finding a community and establishing solid friendships remains daunting. Cliché as it is, my best advice is to join a club or student life activities more often. Last year, I decided to join Jazzttitude—probably the best decision I have made in university. Most of my favourite memories and cherished friendships since matriculating were formed through the club, and it has helped me become more comfortable with putting myself out there.



Sometimes I find myself in the awkward juncture of a friendship, wherein the status of our affinity teeters between ‘acquaintances’ and ‘friends’, and it is tricky to ascertain if reaching out to make plans would come across as entirely random. But I have realised that the longer one hesitates, the greater the obstacle becomes. If right now, you are contemplating asking a classmate out to lunch or to study together and your finger is still hovering over the ‘send’ button... this is your sign to cross that bridge to better friendships and start putting yourself out there.

Rekindling Old Friendships

Occasionally, I walk past a familiar face in the canteen, and it takes me a few seconds to process and recognise them. Maybe it’s the girl who used to watch K-dramas with me on the bus in primary school, or the girl on the debate team that aced every literature paper in secondary school. When that happens, it can be an awkward moment. In those few seconds of eye contact, an obvious hesitation fills the air between us like a lingering cloud, waiting to see if the other person smiles or waves first.

I have learnt that more often than not, acknowledging an old friend with a warm smile or even starting small talk is the way to go. In the best cases, it leads to a fuller conversation and a future reunion being scheduled. Just





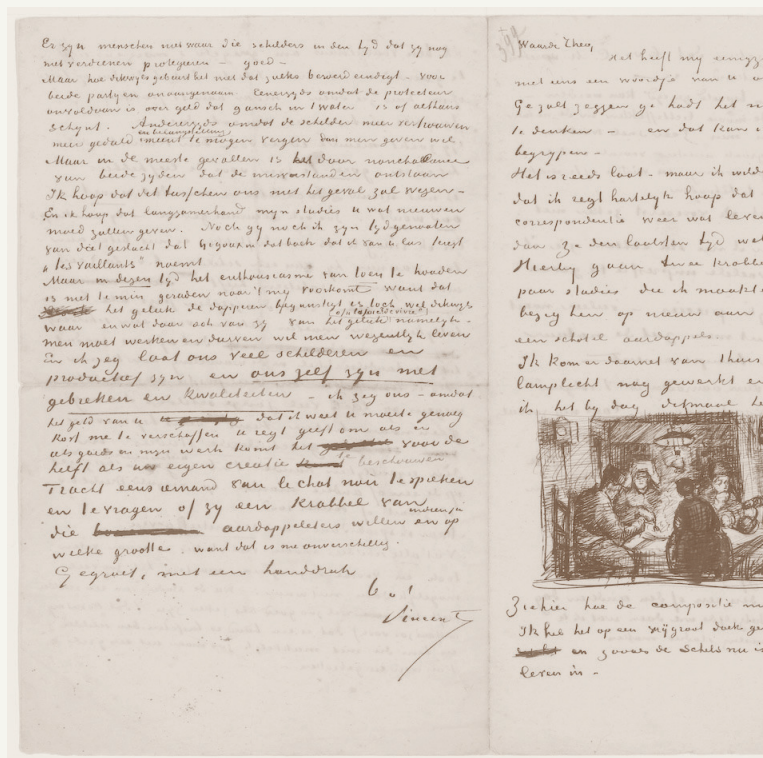
“ I am loved because I love.

like that, you can slowly rebuild a bridge that has crumbled from decay. Similarly, reaching out to a friend with a spontaneous DM is the first step to meeting up again and having an eventful day out.

Once a date is set for a coffee chat or beach day, the next most important part in sustaining a friendship is keeping your promises. The key to being a good friend is showing up. And if something unexpected crops up and you have to cancel a scheduled hangout, take the initiative to reschedule and make up for it. Conversely, if your friend is going through a busy period and can't go out, extend some empathy and a helping hand.

With all that said, remember to make time for your friends in your hectic schedule. Everyone gets caught up in their own lives sometimes, but a relationship is a two-way street. If both of you truly care about maintaining your friendship in the long run, it requires you to take the time and effort to connect. Even a simple meal could work wonders! No matter how lonely it may feel at times, there is always someone out there rooting for you. You just need to take the first step in finding them.

1. Amy Gallo, “What Is Active Listening?”



NUS LAW MOVES BACK TO U-TOWN

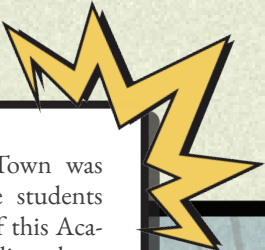
ANISAH RANIYAH QAZI

NUS' Faculty of Law, which is presently situated adjacent to the Botanic Gardens, will be relocating to U-Town in the August of the 2025/26 Academic Year. Shifting from its Bukit Timah campus to the current Yale-NUS buildings, the move will bring the Law Faculty closer to the heart of campus life.

What is being left behind is an area of historic value for the university. The Bukit Timah campus opened in 1928 under Raffles College, an educational institution set up to provide British Malaya with its own local higher education establishment. Briefly in World War II, the campus was transformed into a medical centre before being seized and utilised by the Japanese army as an army base. Eventually, the campus reopened in 1949 as the University of Malaya. After undergoing some shifts in its establishment, it settled in 1980 as the National University of Singapore. In 1981, NUS moved to its Kent Ridge campus, staying there until 2006—when the Law campus moved back to Bukit Timah. Being part of the original University of Malaya campus, the historic Bukit Timah building is a relic of the university's very early beginnings, yet it has also been a place that NUS has historically moved in and out of. Throughout the years, various top lawyers have visited and studied at the Bukit Timah campus, connecting its students to an academic legacy of legal pioneers.

Unlike much of the Kent Ridge campus's modern buildings, Bukit Timah's campus is established around an old colonial-era structure, with arches adorning the perimeter of the campus, and facing inwards to grass courtyards where football nets are set up. Covered walkways are positioned along these arches, so that moving between buildings students have a sheltered view of the courtyards. This particular ambience achieved by the architecture of the Bukit Timah campus will be missed by students in the move. The Yale-NUS building, opened in 2015, is modern and sleek, but it also incorporates its own courtyards in its design. The leafy green centre of Yale-NUS features a self-filtering pond, with koi fish and turtles, and hosts various seating spaces within the greenery. The buildings' interior design imitates a classical wooden academia aesthetic, whilst still appearing modern. The complex is bordered with gates, which afford it extra security and exclusivity whilst distinguishing the Yale-NUS campus from the neighbouring residential and educational buildings in U-Town.





The move to U-Town was announced to the students at the beginning of this Academic Year, providing them with a year's notice of the shift. According to two first-year law students that I spoke to, here referred to as Fatima* and Jessica*, the news of the campus move was broken to them through the form of a brochure, which they received after they had accepted their offer at NUS.

The brochure was brief, and the main takeaway for both students was the understanding that their campus would shrink in size. This includes a reduced number of recreational rooms and chill-out areas available, and fewer studying spaces such as the library. Jessica expressed concerns that certain facilities that law students currently enjoy may no longer be available to them. While Yale-NUS does house

its own gym and library exclusive to Yale-NUS students, both are small in size, and the other study spaces in U-Town fill up quickly as they are shared between students from all accommodations. The students expressed concerns that, as Law courses require large amounts of reading, the limited size of the library will pose an issue that outweighs the benefits of its ambience well-suited to studying.



OH!



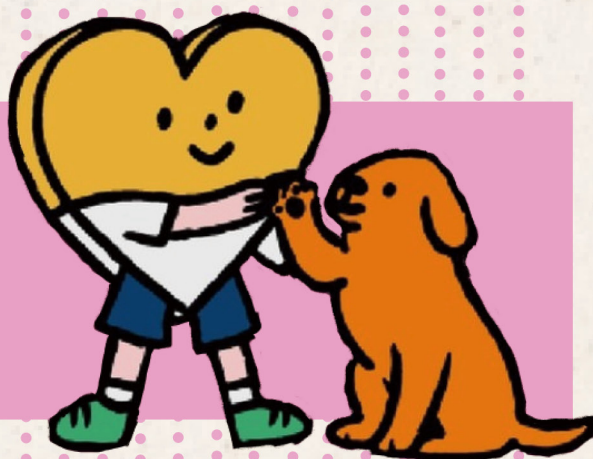
NUS has portrayed this move in their official communications as an effort to more greatly encourage interdisciplinary work and involvement within the Law Faculty, enriching their students' education by moving them closer to the other faculties. This is a move to slightly reduce the insular nature of the Law campus, which Fatima said had at first made her nervous about joining the Bukit Timah campus. Both students agreed that the move would not do very much to promote interdisciplinary study or change very much academically for the students, as the first two years of the course are entirely compulsory modules. The effect will instead be felt on a more social level.



The seclusion of the campus set amidst the Botanic Gardens has created a close-knit community amongst law-faculty students, which appears central to their university experience and is highly valued by the students. By moving to U-Town the law students hope to interact more with students from other subjects, outside of their law bubble. But even this may be overreaching, as Yale-NUS is only adjacent to NUS-College and rather separate from the rest of the faculties, so the framing of this move as an effort to encourage greater multidisciplinary collaboration between the Law Faculty and the rest of the university seems rather unsubstantial.

Will the change of space damage the unique communal relationship that the Law Faculty has developed at Bukit Timah?

Jessica explained that the law community is tight knit and incredibly active, with many internal events. Quite surely, Jessica answered that it is unlikely that the community built up by the students will dissipate or be compromised by the move to Kent Ridge. The consensus seems to be that the Law Faculty will likely remain a vibrant, social environment, but simply in a space which is smaller yet more connected to the wider NUS student community.



The days leading up to 4th August were seemingly innocuous days for most of our friends, but for everyone from their respective friend groups attending NUS, this period was fraught with anxiety and uncertainty. Yet around this cloud, we, the international students, found the silver lining – the prospect of exploring, both geographically and culturally, a completely different country, a place which quite a few of us would not have visited before.

After saying teary-eyed goodbyes to family and friends (who would be going to their respective universities weeks, if not months, after us), we looked out the plane window as the characteristic rainfall of Singapore greeted us. Decorating our rooms on campus with photos from home, books we brought, and stacking our cupboards with essentials (read: snacks, sweets and chocolates), we tried our best to develop a sense of familiarity with this new reality.

La nouvelle réalité

by Prithvi Bhardwaj

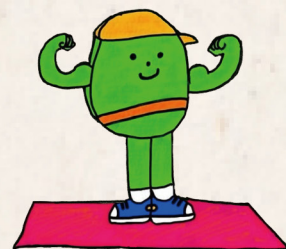
NUS' sprawling 150-hectare campus posed a challenge to us, not just physically as we navigated it for the first time, but also psychologically, as the expectations people held of us finally hit us. However, the various introductory events NUS organised helped us get acquainted with the campus and kindled budding friendships between first-years from around the world and introduced us to our seniors who we could look up to. Through games, challenges and random hangouts, we collectively breached the veil of unfamiliarity separating us to form new, (hopefully) long-lasting relationships.

The initial excitement of arriving at NUS quickly gave way to a whirlwind of orientation activities designed to help us adapt, make friends, and become comfortable in our new environment. Stepping onto the NUS campus felt like entering a world of opportunities. From day one, the university had structured events to ensure we would build connections and feel at home in this vibrant academic community.

Week 0, and the few days prior to that, were characterised by the various orientation programmes which took place over the span of several days and was an intense, but fulfilling, initiation into university life.

These programs were packed with a variety of activities, from icebreakers and team-building games to campus tours and talks from alumni and faculty.

Orientation Programmes organised by our residences (in the halls, houses, and residential colleges) allowed us to interact with people from diverse backgrounds and different academic faculties, breaking down any initial hesitation about connecting with strangers.



From getting to know about the culture of the hall, to the CCAs offered, to playing surprisingly competitive games that ranged from friendly sports matches to problem-solving activities, it



Faculty-organised orientation events, such as the Freshman Finale Camp by SoC played a vital role in helping us feel connected to our chosen fields of study while offering insight into the academic community we were about to join. These events typically began with a welcome session led by professors and faculty members, where they introduced us to the department's culture, resources, and academic expectations. We met other first-year students, as well as seniors who shared valuable advice on navigating the courses and balancing academics with university life.

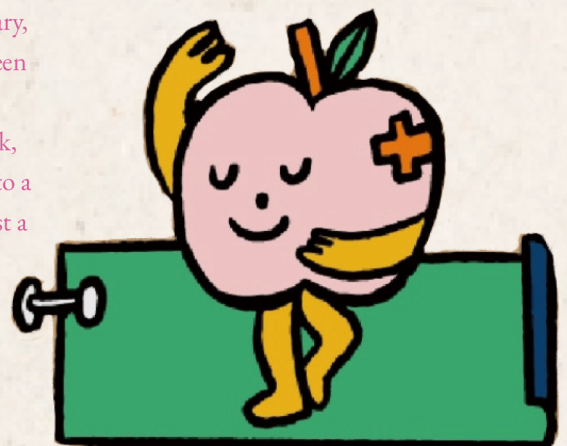
Games like Capture the Flag, Nerf stations, beer pong, among others, helped develop a vital sense of camaraderie which is sure to benefit us. Many departments also hosted themed socials and informal networking events, where we could interact with faculty members outside the classroom setting, ask questions, and make friends within our program. These events not only eased our transition but also fostered a strong sense of belonging, motivating us to be engaged and proactive in our studies from the very start.



From icebreakers, to bonding activities to a pseudo-tourist excursion into the heart of Singapore, the International Students' Orientation (ISO), which had peer leaders leading our groups through the various activities, not only gave most of us what was our first exposure to Singapore, but also helped foster cultural integration. Getting to know where we came from, our favourite dishes, and common phrases in our local languages, and breaking down these barriers was essential to building a sense of camaraderie and mutual respect among us.

As different groups walked through the IKEA at Jurong East, or window-shopped at Clementi, the ISO allowed us to celebrate our differences while finding unexpected similarities, helping us feel more connected and less like strangers in a new place. By sharing stories about our homes, our customs, and even the little quirks of our hometowns, we gradually replaced our apprehension towards each other with genuine curiosity and openness. This process of learning about one another not only broadened our perspectives but also laid the foundation for friendships that would carry us through the ups and downs of university life.

As the semester went on, the unfamiliarity of campus life slowly faded. We found our own little spots on campus—the perfect study pod in the library, the best Mala spot, the most relaxing lounges where we could relax between classes. Friendships deepened as we continued to explore the city, attend events, and support each other through the ups and downs. Looking back, we realised that the anxiety we had felt in those early days had given way to a sense of belonging and excitement for what was to come. NUS wasn't just a university anymore; it had become a place we could call home.



FanFiction: THE GREATEST PLOT-TWIST

BY GLENN NG

Once casual scribbles in niche, subversive fringes of fandoms, fanfiction has evolved into sprawling epics that rival traditional novels in various online sites to become a platform for creativity and career development.

But how did fanfiction get here, and where is it headed?

As polarising as it may be, it is hard to deny that fanfiction can be good for readers and writers alike. At its crux, fanfiction is simply a new work of fiction using existing characters, written by fans who further explore the lives and worlds of the characters they adore. It is much more than what it is misunderstood to be, more than explicit fantasies starring Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy and online forums where grammar does not matter. Rather, Fanfiction exists online in a community of fan readers; it is on websites like FanFiction.net, AO3, and Wattpad where writers can take original stories they love and give them a unique twist for like-minded fans to appreciate.

The Origin Story

First, there was *Star Trek*, whose viewers created self-published journals (then known as “fanzines”) with fiction about its characters Kirk and Spock. Or perhaps, first, there was Sherlock Holmes, whose devotees, hooked by the publication, pushed for more stories, formed clubs like The Baker Street Irregulars, and rewrote the ending of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Final Problem* after he had written the death of the famous detective. Then there was you, who might have written a silly fanfiction piece about the adventures of your favourite band member. Regardless of when you first heard of fanfiction, the term and what it entails is likely familiar to you today. Thanks to the advent of the Internet, where anyone can distribute text for free, and the arrival of such all-ages pop-culture juggernauts such as *Harry Potter*’s Marauders, the availability of fanfiction has grown impressively in the course of these last few decades.

The Notoriety Or Not

Because the fanfiction industry exists outside of the professional literary and publishing sphere, it is understandably seen as plebeian and unrefined. It has been thrown into the same category as no-budget student films and garage-band albums—there may be diamonds in the rough within these archives, but there is no doubt they are all dismissed as amateur pieces. In the same vein, fanfiction is seen as having a low-quality floor. Any professionally published novel is expected to meet bare-minimum standard in terms of spelling, grammar, story structure, and plot (unless for artistic effect à la James Joyce). But with fanfiction, the bare minimum is not there—one can write a giant word salad disregarding every rule of storytelling and grammar, and there is nobody and nothing that can stop it from being published online. Simply put, a bad novel will, at its very least, be readable in the most literal sense of the word—in that one can understand what is written on the page and derive some sort of meaning from them. A bad fanfiction, on the contrary, can be atrocious and unfathomable even if a reader takes it literally. Moreover, by the nature of its origin, fanfiction is seen as derivative and therefore inferior. Creators of original works have put in the effort to create settings, design characters, chart plots, and do the work that makes a fictional world feel immersive. Fanfiction authors, however, use the original creator's work as a starting ground instead of creating from scratch and it is because of that that fanfictions is seen as following the path of least resistance at the expense of originality.

*Cynics would call it training wheels for a beginning author.
The most extreme would call it copyright infringement.*



It is no surprise then that this practice has not always been popular. Fanfiction has garnered negative attention over the romantic and sometimes excessively explicit vignettes between characters—who might be real-life people. Moreover, some authors have expressed discomfort with their characters being rewritten, though fanfiction writers' disclaimers that they own none of the characters have ensured legality in recent years. An example of an author bypassing copyright is E.L. James's fanfiction, *Master of the Universe*, based on Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*, which became so popular online that a publisher picked it up, repackaged the characters, and engineered the title *Fifty Shades of Grey*. This is also an example of fanfiction being a tool for aspiring writers, offering a unique platform where they can first practise their craft in a low-pressure environment. Through using established characters, writers can focus on honing essential skills like character development, dialogue, and pacing without the burden of world-building from scratch. The instant feedback from readers within fan communities fosters a supportive atmosphere and encourages experimentation. Though James profited from fanfiction (and has gone on to create a trilogy), most authors write it because they enjoy it. They receive no money from posting their stories on websites like the Hugo Award-winning AO3. For these platforms, fanfiction is about community. Fellow fans flock to fanfictions within their fandom, sending constructive criticism as well as "kudos" to the author, and so fanfiction acts as a refuge where writers can make mistakes and hone their craft.



The Growth of Fanfiction

Fanfiction has grown more acceptable, but is not entirely mainstream, partly due to demographics. A quick search today on AO3's metadata shows the mean user age of the site being 25.1 years old, which unfortunately supports the existing stereotype that fanfiction consumers are youths creating cringy collections of awkward, explicit romances. It is true that a lot of fanfiction is sexy, and that much of the sex is kinky or taboo. But, fanfiction is also more sex than that. Many of them have no more sex than the latest *Spider-Man* film (which is to say none at all). It is a mistake to see fanfiction only as a replacement for the original. Fanfiction can, of course, pay homage to source texts, and let us imagine more life in their worlds; it can be like going back to a restaurant you loved, and then learning to cook that restaurant's food.

On the topic of its development, fanfiction has been a platform for shifting norms and expectations. Taboo subjects in many fanfiction communities in the nineties: underage, real people fiction, and domestic discipline have been mainstream in the early 2000s, heavily driven by *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings*. Fanfiction readers too have grown to feel less ashamed in admitting they read fanfiction, with fans giving enthusiastic fanfiction recommendations or sharing quotes from pieces that have read, going as far as to performing this "shame" in light-hearted discussions using memes that purport to express fannish shame: for example, "my AO3 history is between me and [G]od". Despite the negative connotations one would derive from that, fantasy and anonymity respectively play a central role in literature in general and are not to be mistaken as unique to only fanfiction.

I am, as a reader, inclined to say that fanfiction has developed and has been much more accepted in the recent decade. One of the architects of AO3, Francesca Coppa, makes a strong point that we are seeing a potentially fruitful collapse between fanfiction and other kinds of literary writing. There is acknowledgement that books written decades ago are kept alive by their fans (readers, makers of "best of" lists, creators of syllabi): and of course, fanfiction. And so, no text is truly great until its fandom says it is, and some fanfiction forever changes earlier works or even displaces them. We readers need to start viewing fanfiction less as an artefact that allows us to study source texts and fan communities and instead situate fanfiction as a literature form which varies from site to site: AO3 fanfiction differs from Wattpad fanfiction, or those within crowdsourced Twitter-fic where people build and share fanfiction concepts tweet by tweet. Though there may be some overlap between these trends and the communities that deploy them, we need to acknowledge them as distinct evolving forms to recognise fanfiction as a literary category on its own.

Fanfiction has come a long way from the days of fanzines. Once a subculture, it has evolved into a powerful storytelling that offers a platform for both established and emerging writers to explore new ideas, experiment with narratives, and engage with vibrant fan communities. As platforms like AO3 continue to grow and more mainstream recognition is given to the value of fan-driven content, fanfiction is poised to play an even larger role in shaping the future of entertainment.

I'm sure that many of you remember being little and imagining your future, often saying, "When I grow up, I want to..." There were so many things we couldn't do back then, and for so long, grown-ups represented everything we aspired to be. They could stay up late, eat as much candy as they wanted, and seemed to know everything! This universal experience of coming of age has been the heart of many films, regardless of genre. I'll be analysing four films to break down what I find to be the four stages of growing up.

By. Isabel

Farewell Neverland:

the Yearning
for Childhood
in Media



Matilda, originally a book written by Roald Dahl, has evolved into many forms of media. It tells the story of a brilliant young girl fighting against the tyranny of unreasonable adults, particularly that of her cruel school principal, Ms Trunchbull. For Matilda and her friends, growing up symbolises freedom from oppressive circumstances.

Her story encapsulates that early desire we all share as children—the yearning to grow up and escape the limitations placed upon us. For a long time, growing up seemed to be the pinnacle of achievements, and we waited with anticipation and ambition for all of the great things we hoped to achieve once we grew up.

The world around us seemed so much larger, and infinitely more complex with rules and limitations that we couldn't comprehend. Our daily highlights came from the simple wonders of a sweet treat, or watching television—little joys that we take for granted today. Though we can no longer return to the simplicity of childhood, we can still carry our childlike wonder onto our next phases of life.

Pixar's *Soul* is an exploration of the meaning of life and what it means to truly live. Most of the film takes place in “The Great Before”, a place where souls prepare themselves for their passage to Earth by finding their spark. One particular soul, assigned number 22, is adamantly against going to Earth, refusing to find a spark and staying in The Great Before for thousands of years. The plot stirs when Joe Gardner, a rather unremarkable person with an untimely death and a desire to return back to life, is mistaken to be 22's mentor. For a good portion of the movie, Joe tries to persuade her into going to Earth so that he can return to his life.

Relating to 22 came as an unexpected surprise to me. We're all, in some way, constantly in The Great Before. Change is imminent, and uncertainty exists in everything that we do. But unlike 22, we can't avoid it forever (or in her case, two millennia). There'll be times that we feel afraid, and even unworthy of the changes coming our way. Running away from them is only prolonging the inevitable. Most of the time, the changes we face can be positive too.

Another relatable theme in *Soul* is the pressure of finding our “spark”. There's a lot of pressure to figure ourselves out in university—we've already chosen a major, and once we graduate, we'll have to decide on a (possibly) related occupation. We have to stand out from the rest of our cohort to be employable, and seemingly commit ourselves to a single career trajectory that has already been defined.

I found a lot of comfort in the resolution of *Soul*, when 22 realises that she doesn't need to know her purpose in life to live. 22 and Joe had been operating under the misconception that a “spark” is their life-long passion, but it is revealed that a spark is simply a desire to live. We don't exist to have a purpose—we can just simply be. The joys of life exist in the small things we experience every day, not from our achievements and accolades.

Matilda – When I Grow

Soul – Fear of Uncertain



Toy Story 3 – Letting Go

Lady Bird – Reminisce

UP

In *Toy Story 3*, we watch Andy, the once-little boy who adored his toys, prepare to head off to college. Woody, Buzz, and the gang, who once meant the world to him, are now relegated to the attic, boxed up and waiting to be discarded. The film poignantly explores the bittersweet reality of letting go of childhood memories and the things we once cherished.

The toys' journey parallels our own process of letting go of the past as we move forward. After Andy leaves his toys behind—including his most beloved Woody, whom he had intended to bring with him—there's no going back. He'll never see his toys again after handing them off to Bonnie.

Andy giving his toys away illustrates the impossibility of ever reliving our childhood again. And yet, the scene where he plays with his toys for the last time is not entirely melancholic.

There's a bittersweetness that comes with closing a chapter of your life for good. You may never experience it in its entirety, with fervour and elation, but those treasured memories will last with you for a lifetime.

Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird*

captures the complex emotions of adolescence and the awkward transition to adulthood. The film follows Christine "Lady Bird" McPherson, a high school senior who dreams of leaving her hometown and her mother's expectations behind to pursue a life of freedom and self-discovery. As Christine navigates the turbulent waters of family dynamics, friendship changes, and her own identity, the film *Lady Bird* taps into the feeling of wanting to grow up faster than time allows.

And when she finally does grow up, materialising her dream of leaving for college, she realises that she had grown up too fast. The movie ends with her monologue, where she reflects on how she viewed her home differently after moving away for college.

She comes to appreciate all the things she was so eager to escape. She realises that the very things she took for granted—her mother's love, her hometown—were integral parts of her journey to becoming an adult. Like many of us end up doing, she looks back with a mix of fondness and regret, realising that yearning to grow up often blinds us to the beauty of the present.

THE DESIRE TO GROW UP IS UNIVERSAL, AND SO IS THE REALISATION THAT ADULTHOOD COMES WITH ITS OWN COMPLEXITIES. THESE FILMS REMIND US THAT GROWING UP ISN'T A SINGLE MOMENT BUT A COLLECTION OF EXPERIENCES THAT SHAPE WHO WE ARE. WHETHER IT'S THE INNOCENT HOPE OF CHILDHOOD, THE UNCERTAINTY OF FINDING OUR PLACE, THE BITTERSWEET PROCESS OF LETTING GO, OR THE NOSTALGIA WE FEEL LOOKING BACK, EACH STAGE OF GROWING UP IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF OUR STORY.



Blurring the lines of Good and Evil in DESPICABLE ME

Grace Leong



The world is often taught in shades of black and white: follow the rules, and you're labelled as "good"; go against them, and you're deemed naughty or mischievous. Cartoons, superheroes, and fables reinforce this mindset, presenting clearly defined "bad" characters alongside their hero-nemeses and moral lessons. This binary thinking shapes childhood mindsets and seeps into our adult perceptions, especially regarding how we label people. For instance, ex-convicts often face ostracism, branded as "bad" for their past actions. While it's true that actions have consequences, this perspective can lead to a dichotomous view that overlooks individual complexity. The *Despicable Me* franchise challenges this notion by blurring the rigid lines of good and evil, positing that a person's morality is malleable and shaped by their circumstances.

Positioning of Gru

As children, we do not automatically think critically about cartoons and hence, cartoons are an easy and entertaining medium to transfer values to children. Some famous shows, including *Barbie* and *Ben 10* always follow a conflict-resolution character arc: there will always be a superhero and a villain, and at the end of the day, the superhero will triumph and a lesson will be learnt.

The *Despicable Me* franchise also does follow that structure, but it is different in the positioning of its character. In case you need a refresher, *Despicable Me* is about a bald-headed man called Gru, whose greatest ambition is to be the greatest villain of all time, and follows the story of him and his Minions, the adorable entities that pledge loyalty to him and follow Gru on his missions. Some of his missions include "stealing the moon" or even being a secret agent to fight off the villains. He is positioned as someone with a tinge of villainy and mischief in his veins, which deviates from the traditional ways a protagonists are positioned. For example, in *Cinderella*, she is positioned as someone that is purely good versus the evil stepmother, who has bad motivations. This presents Gru as someone with flawed ambitions, and we get to see his reformation into someone better.

Additionally, the way the Minions are portrayed as adorable, mischievous but in general good-hearted often blurs the line between playful mischief and ill intent. You can even argue that this is an extended metaphor of how it is like to be human beings, that at the end of the day, we are shaped by different circumstances. One shouldn't judge quickly based on impressions or motivations but to seek empathy and understanding different perspectives.

Reformation and the Impact of Family

As the series progresses, especially after the first movie, we see Gru reforming and becoming a “good” hero, reverting back to a more traditional way of storytelling in cartoons. However, the series seeks to explore the varying factors for why this happened. The spin-off *Minions* explores how Gru came to be a “villain”. In both aspects, it revolved around family. *Minions* showcases the parental neglect of Gru’s parents, especially his mother, which explains why Gru sought validation from other places when he could not find it at home. This echoes similar sentiments of disappointments reflected in *Despicable Me 3*: “You told me my dad died of disappointment the day I was born,” revealing his insecurities and lack of love from his family, and thus fuelling his motivation to be a “supervillain”, as stated in *Minions*, so to avoid being called a disappointment again.

This was why he so desperately wanted to not be a disappointment which shows how easily affected we are by our familial interactions from young. This evidently points to why he wanted to be a supervillain in the first place. This same theme of seeking acceptance and belonging from his adoptive children and girlfriend is the reason for he becomes “good” in *Despicable Me 2*, and is the reason he becomes “good”.

The line “I’m a father now, with responsibilities, and a legitimate businessman. I’m developing a delicious line of jams and jellies.” from *Despicable Me 2* shows the malleability of our own morality and points to the importance of gaining acceptance and love from the right people. This also proves that “evilness” is often a combination of compensating for what you lack and the influence of your environment, which subverts the original narrative of cartoons and superhero movies which tell us that “goodness” is an inherent virtue given to the select few. By exploring the storyline of the “villain”, *Despicable Me* therefore, showcases the huge impact family has on our morality or turning us into the kind of people we are today.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this franchise has changed the way I see the world: in multiple shades instead of just black and white. It is unique in the way it reflects our realities back at us: instead of presenting an idealistic world to us, it metaphorises our human condition, and at the end of the day, we are fighting evil with evil. Out of all the complexities the show has described, it has taught me the power of empathy and to look beyond what people do and to understand their intentions and how they have been shaped by their circumstances. At the end of the day, good people can become bad and bad people can be good, so we should not rush to judge one another, but take the time to understand people better. In a world where things like cancelling culture are rife, it is crucial to evaluate people’s actions with a dash of empathy and to always remember: this is our first time being human, so understanding and hearing people out can really go a long way!



RETURNING TO THE WORLD OF



Artificial Intelligence and Its Implications for the Human Condition

FINN LIP

“If science fiction has a major gift to offer literature, I think it is just this: the capacity to face an open universe. Physically open, psychically open. No doors shut. What science, from physics and astronomy to history and psychology, has given us is the open universe: a cosmos that is not a simple, fixed hierarchy, but an immensely complex process in time. All the doors stand open, from the prehuman past through the incredible present to the terrible and hopeful future. All connections are possible. All alternatives are thinkable. It is not a comforting, reassuring place. It’s a very large house, a very drafty house. But it’s the house we live in.”

~ Ursula K. Le Guin ~

In light of the recent explosion of publicly-available AI, it seems prudent to consider the implications of our present usage of technology and what it could mean for us as we transition to a new technological era. Science fiction films present a powerful medium through which to visualise future worlds, and in this sense, they can prompt us to reflect on our current actions. In this article, I examine Disney-Pixar’s *WALL-E*, a sci-fi film that extrapolates current technological habits 800 years into the future to produce bleak, existential-dread-inducing social commentary. A very cheery filmic subtext perfectly suitable for a children’s film, of course. And I should warn you, before I continue any further with my discussion, that this article goes into film spoilers. To those who haven’t watched it yet: this is your FINAL WARNING!!—and I encourage you to go and watch *WALL-E* as soon as you can.

Directed by Andrew Stanton (2008), *WALL-E* is set in the year 2805, where the Earth has been rendered uninhabitable by pollution and ravaging storms presumably brought on by the effects of global warming. The titular character, WALL-E, is the last garbage-collecting robot left on Earth, spending his days in a “Sisyphean attempt” to clean up the literal mountains of garbage that litter this post-apocalyptic Earth.¹

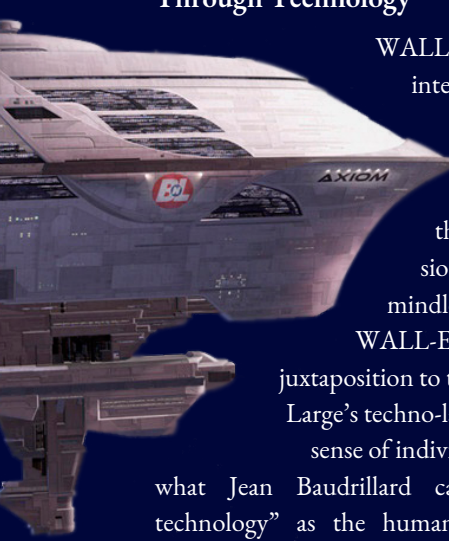
The surviving human population lives aboard the “Axiom”, a massive luxury star-liner that has been drifting through space for the last 700 years, and which is run entirely by robots on behalf of the monopolistic mega-conglomerate “Buy ‘N Large”.

Over the centuries that WALL-E has been cleaning Earth, he has inexplicably “evolved human-like qualities [...] collect[ing] certain objects he finds and bringing them ‘home’ to his shed—including an old copy of the movie musical *Hello, Dolly!* which inspires in him loneliness and romantic longing”.¹ When EVE, a reconnaissance robot sent from the Axiom to check for sustainable life, arrives on Earth, WALL-E is enchanted and immediately falls in love. After showing her a plant he has found on his daily exploits, EVE “stores it away, unexpectedly powers down, and is soon retrieved from Earth by a carrier ship”.²



WALL-E follows EVE to the Axiom, which signals the film's second act.² On the Axiom, the audience is—for the first time—confronted with an image of future humans: they are “comfortably bedded in little hovercrafts in which screens, constantly switched on, stand in front of their faces”.³ The human population here is severely overweight, having suffered severe bone-mass loss in a “reduced gravity environment”.⁴ Social health has deteriorated, and human connection has been thwarted by increasing levels of technological mediation.²

Representations of Artificial Intelligence in WALL-E and Baudrillardian Self-Immolation Through Technology



WALL-E's representation of artificial intelligence assumes two guises—in the form of the technology present on the Axiom, and WALL-E “himself”. Both of these guises highlight a suppression of human individuality with mindless hyperconsumerism. Where WALL-E's humanity presents an ironic juxtaposition to the humans; lack of it, Buy ‘N Large's techno-landscape serves to oppress any sense of individuality. The resulting effect is what Jean Baudrillard calls a “self-immolation by technology” as the human becomes a “prosthesis to technology and information systems”.⁵

To flesh out Baudrillard's “self-immolation through technology”, I'm going to take a brief hiatus from *WALL-E* to introduce mid-20th century existentialist thought #sorrynotsorry.

Jean-Paul Sartre, widely considered to have pioneered the modern existentialist movement, argued for a model of human existence that champions individual autonomy and self-determination, rejecting deterministic perspectives prevalent during WWII. Sartre's ideas on the so-called “radical freedom” of human existence, as well the entirety of his existentialist thinking, are centred on the precept that “existence precedes essence”,⁶ which

“means first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and only afterwards, defines himself. If man, as the existentialist conceives him, is indefinable, it is because at first, he is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be”.⁷

What Sartre provides here is a rejection of the traditional, essentialist thinking that pervaded his period—that man is born with inherent properties which define the course of his life. Rather, he conceived of the human condition as a result of chance or accident, that there is “no meaning or purpose of our lives other than what our freedom creates”.⁶ This led to the creation of another theory stemming from the precept that “existence precedes essence”—that “man is condemned to be free”:

“Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does.”⁷

In his magnum opus *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre fleshes out this notion, articulating his anxiety within the “fundamental project that constitutes existence” in a world that has no apparent meaning:⁸

“I must be without remorse or regrets as I am without excuse; for from the instant of my upsurge into being, I carry the weight of the world by myself alone without help, engaged in a world for which I bear the whole responsibility without being able, whatever I do, to tear myself away from this responsibility for an instant”.⁹

As Sartre argues, man's “radical freedom” to shape his existence is “coupled with [...] [his] responsibility to carry out freedom”.^{8,10} In Sartre's ontology, death, or “nothingness” as the title of his magnum opus suggests, is the only thing capable of terminating freedom in its termination of “being”.¹¹

WALL-E's Inversion of Sartrean Radical Freedom

However, in *WALL-E*, the responsibility of defining human existence has been taken up completely by Buy ‘N Large corporation from the moment a new passenger is born. In fact, the film goes so far as to thematise a complete inversion of Sartre's radical freedom as one of their central aspects of the narrative.¹² Children, from the moment they are able to learn, are taught by robots that brainwash them into adopting a consumer psychology that worships Buy ‘N Large:¹³

“A is for Axiom, your home sweet home. B is for Buy ‘N Large, your very best friend.”

The scene, framed in a type of two-shot, showcases the children's blank expressions, as they stare at the computer screen that brainwashes them with the Axiom's hyper-consumerist



mentality. Radical freedom can be considered as having been removed, because the human responsibility for establishing individuality (or an existence) is replaced with a Buy 'N Large-mandated *essence*, and the human merges into the status quo of the collective consumer conscience. For Baudrillard, this signifies the replacement of the “real” with the “virtual” as the dominant mode of perceiving the world, as “human gives way to posthuman”, referred to as “neo-individualism” by Baudrillard.¹⁴ Thus, rather than “existence preced[ing] essence”, the techno-human condition causes essence to precede existence, a reversal of Sartre’s foundational precept, which indicates the human has been rendered inhuman, into a state of nothingness coincident with a neo-individualist techno-human condition.

The result of this type of brainwashing is conveyed in a later scene, where the adult passengers are briefly interrupted by a Buy 'N Large announcement to “try blue, it’s the new red”. After this, the film cuts to a full shot of two “Axiom shoppers” who let out a synchronous “Ooohh” before promptly pressing a button that “changes their jumpsuit colour from red to blue”.¹⁵ *WALL-E* clearly visualises a simulation culture taking place, as the actions and appearance of all humans are virtually identical. Advertising, rather than attempting to persuade passengers to try a product, has become ingrained as a command into every passenger’s psyche—one to which they consent without any resistance. Humanity has lost the capacity to think and make decisions for itself, giving up Sartre’s radical freedom by superseding the “singularity [...] of the human” with the technological.

WALL-E is an ironic juxtaposition to the humans of the film, represented as being more human than any of them. Where the humans are shown to be mindless consumers that “receive their nutrition from drink brought to them by robot attendants”,

WALL-E seems to harbour a personality and consciousness, imbued with a capacity for “self-determination” that allows him to define his existence as an individual, autonomous self. In this way, *WALL-E* represents the traditional humanist dialectic lost by technological integration.¹⁶

In a Sartrean sense, *WALL-E*’s becomes the Other that revitalises human existence. According to Sartre, the only way humans are able to truly “substantiate their own consciousness” is through the gaze of the Other, with the Other being “a separate entity with consciousness”.¹² *WALL-E*, who inadvertently acts as a force of disruption, is Promethean as he re-individualises the humans on the Axiom by shattering their technology-induced comas in his endeavour to stay by EVE’s side throughout the film.¹⁷

In confronting us with a “terrible and hopeful future”, *WALL-E* prompts us to reflect on our current actions. In an increasingly technologised world that values an unrelenting consumption of information—a constant state of transit from one piece of information to the next—being mindful about what we let into our lives, what we think about, and how we think about it is more and more important. As Ursula Le Guin muses: “if science fiction has a major gift to offer literature, it is just this: the capacity to face an open universe”. The suspension of belief science fiction has us engage in, in representing future worlds, allows us to visualise humanity’s future directions, and prompts us to reflect on what matters to us.

Bibliography

- [1] Tom Jacobs, “WALL-E: Critique That Transcends Ideology.”
- [2] Adam J Gaffey, “Flip the Switch: Virtue, Programming, and the Prospect of Automatic Agency in WALL•E.”
- [3] David Denby, “Past Shock.”
- [4] Ben Marwick, “Self-image, the long view and archaeological engagement with film: an animated case study.”
- [5] Michael Hauskeller, Thomas D Philbeck, Curtis D Carbonell, “The Palgrave Handbook of Posthumanism in Film and Television.”
- [6] D.R. Bhandari, “Existentialist Perception Of The Human Condition: With Special Reference To Sartre.”
- [7] Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism.”
- [8] Julie B. Daniels, “The Philosophy of Anxiety.”
- [9] Jean-Paul Sartre, “Being and Nothingness.”

- [10] John Messerly, “Summary of Sartre’s Theory of Human Nature.”
- [11] Emmanuel Kelechi Iwuagwu, “Death as a Limitation to Human Freedom: A Critical Look at Jean-Paul Sartre’s Existential Position on Freedom and Death.”
- [12] Brett Neese, “The Communitarian Politics of WALL-E.”
- [13] Ashton Treadaway, “The Loss of Humanity through Consumerism in WALL-E.”
- [14] Jean Baudrillard, “Screened Out.”
- [15] Jim Reardon and Andrew Stanton, “WALL-E.”
- [16] Jennifer A. English, “WALL-E’s Rhetoric: An Ecological Sermon from a Strange Preacher.”
- [17] Bryan Seeker, “The HIDDEN message in Wall-E - Video Essay.”



Male Fantasies, Male Fantasies

by. Zander

It's a woman's world and you're lucky to be living in it. At least, that's what Katy Perry sings. In reality, mass media has long focused on the lives and perspectives of men (specifically, men in power), be it in film, TV, or celebrity coverage.



Yet, there seems to have been rising interest in female-focused media within popular culture in recent years—and I don't mean the sloppy Disney attempts to portray "girl power" in their Marvel franchise or animation reboots. Rather, queer female celebrities have taken the spotlight in the 2020s. Billie Eilish, Kristen Stewart, and Chappell Roan are just some names which have seized the (online) world by storm. So... how did that happen?

Through the Eyes of a Woman, Through the Eyes of a Man

In *Transformers*, the camera lingers on Megan Fox's figure as she leans over a car, dressed in revealing attire. Through this lens, we, the audience, look from the eyes of Shia LaBeouf's character, who gazes at her with undisguised desire. When she rattles off about car specifications in an "I'm not like other girls" way, he bites his arm and whispers, "Oh my God". The function of this shot is clear: establish her as a desirable romantic interest.

This is a classic depiction of the "male gaze" described by John Berger and Laura Mulvey in the 70s. At its core, it suggests that "men act and women appear". It presents men as active agents whose independence, conquest, and achievements drive the plot. Women, if present at all, are relegated to support roles or positioned as rewards to be claimed by men. Every act the audience sees is an act of male agency, and everything a woman does is for a man. She becomes a spectacle for voyeurs, the (male) audience.

In contrast, the "female gaze" reclaims female agency by depicting how women act upon their own desires. It was developed by filmmakers Zoe Dirst and Joey Soloway in the 2010s and departs from the plot-driven antics of "male gaze" narratives, focusing instead on emotional growth and character relationships. It's this connection and vulnerability which better reflects the lived experiences of women, even in fantastical circumstances. Look at how Harley Quinn was transformed from *Suicide Squad* to *Birds of Prey*. In the male-directed *Suicide Squad*, she flaunts a skintight shirt reading "Daddy's Lil Monster", tiny shorts, and fishnets. She's a manic pixie dream girl who moves through scenes aimlessly, serving little purpose but to titillate (male) film characters and audiences. She even wears a thick gold choker reminiscent of a dog collar—her identity is tethered to the Joker as his accessory.

In women-led *Birds of Prey*, though, her relationship with the Joker comes to an end. She sports eclectic outfits with bright colours, bold patterns, and playful twintails. She wears a shirt with her own name printed on it. Her appearance alone clearly depicts her as an independent character, and it shows in the screentime she's given to explore her own emotional journey, relationships, and chaotic decision-making. She is no longer something to be experienced, but the one who experiences. Harley no longer serves someone else's story; she determines her own.

But even in stories which are centred around women's experiences, the "male gaze" may linger. Take *La vie d'Adèle* and *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* as examples. Both films explore how lesbian relationships develop, but in *Adèle*, intimacy is portrayed in the form of prolonged sex scenes where the characters don't even look at, let alone talk to, each other. Yet, both their bodies can be seen in the shot as they get it on. It's excessively physical, polished, and reminiscent of porn. They perform their pleasure for the voyeuristic camera and its audience, as if these scenes were filmed solely to excite viewers through the taboo of gay female sexuality. As it stands, it feels artificial, like a male fantasy of what lesbian sex should look like. It does little for the story besides objectifying lesbians (and the actresses) for male pleasure.

Conversely, *Portrait* captures intimacy with subtlety. The only sex scene in this film is gravely unsexy. There's no loud moaning or rustling sheets. They're already comfortably nude in bed when Héloïse smiles and applies a hallucinogenic drug to her unshaven armpit. As she gently applies it to Marianne's, the camera zooms in on the motion her hand makes in the crook of Marianne's arm. It's a tasteful representation of lesbian sex, not a literal one. After they kiss, the scene fades to black. There's nothing to be seen; their love does not require validation from spectacle. Like the shot of Mr Darcy's hand flexing after he parts ways with Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*, it encapsulates the intimacy and emotions felt by the characters in the moment. It's this refusal to be observed which defines the "female gaze".

This isn't to say women-focused media must portray an ideal "female gaze" to be valuable. Rather, I'd argue the opposite. *Sex and the City* was criticised for portraying its four main characters as one-dimensional stereotypes. Regardless of whether they were a hopeless romantic, promiscuous femme fatale, career-minded girlboss, or a staunch traditionalist, these women's conversations revolved around men. It turned viewers off to see them express their desires, and many accused them of being poor role models for young girls. But this discomfort suggests that for women to be palatable to mainstream audiences, they must be sanitised, virtuous feminists who do no wrong. They cannot be obsessed with men, because wouldn't that mean their actions appeal to male voyeurism? Women, real or fictional, are multi-dimensional. They make mistakes, pursue love, and chase ambitions—sometimes messily. Expecting them to uphold a specific form of "female empowerment" undercuts their complexity in favour of patriarchal ideals of acceptable femininity. That's the catch-22: regardless of what women do, they appeal to male fantasy.

Up on a Pedestal or Down on Your Knees

Perhaps it's the "queer gaze" which might allow women to "escape" from male fantasy. These radical character portrayals and narratives distance women from male expectations, both in personality and appearance. *Agatha All Along* portrays women who are unapologetically narcissistic and morally grey. It's refreshing when women see themselves depicted with such autonomy, rather than being expected to be polite and compliant with male needs. It almost "grants" them the "permission" to stand up for themselves regardless of male approval.

Likewise, *Love Lies Bleeding* challenges male perspectives by presenting queered femininity and focusing on queer relationships. Jackie's hulking physique and Lou's unconventional haircut bucks against conventional beauty standards, but it's exactly these traits which make them desirable to each other, to other in-film characters, and to the audience. And while their relationship is integral to the plot, it's not the plot. Just as in real life, things happen. A woman's life goes beyond her relationship status, after all.

Media like these question what it's really like to be a woman, but they exist only because of the work of real, living women. Even before coming out, Kristen Stewart rejected the "good girl" image in her infamous portrayal of Bella Swan in *Twilight*, instead inching closer to the genderqueer, androgynous, queer icon she is today. In her *Rolling Stone* interview, she mentions the relief she felt reclaiming her image after years of public scrutiny. Now, she rejects traditional femininity. On the magazine cover, she wears a jockstrap, her hand in her underwear and chest on display. It's a play on a traditionally masculine pose and look. The rest of the article shows her in varying degrees of masculinity and femininity. It's not her goal to appease men—she's redefining herself. It makes women like her visible.

While Billie Eilish started out with hiding her figure under oversized shirts to avoid sexualisation, it's no secret her recent music has been tinged with a raw lesbian desire which rebels against the "male gaze". Similarly, Chappell Roan's bold drag looks diverge from the "natural" makeup typically expected of women. On one end of the spectrum, there's Eilish in baggy streetwear, chains, and hip-hop caps. On the other, there's Roan's hyperfeminine gowns and glittering ensembles. Neither fit into male ideals of female beauty (no, not even the "tomboy" look). Rather, they emphasise how womanhood can be empowering when tied to a woman's personal agency in rejection of societal expectations.

These artists are just a few standouts among a wave of women-loving-women creatives whose work refuses to pander to male notions of feminine beauty or behaviour. It's natural for their counterculture gender and sexual expressions to gain media attention—as some cynics have claimed, it's "taboo" and "wrong". But in defying the conventions of the "male gaze", they champion an evolving narrative where femininity is complex, authentic, and free. They reclaim the right to tell their stories on their own terms, and they leave the patriarchy fumbling to comprehend their existence. It's a liberating existence.

A Woman (With Herself Inside) Watching a Woman

THE JOURNEY OF COMING OF AGE IN CHINA

KYRA PHAN

Coming of age is a universal journey every youth experiences regardless of where one comes from. However, the ways in which youths in different countries may experience it can differ extensively. In the United States, sweet-sixteen parties mark the start of greater independence and a new journey in life while Japan celebrates reaching adulthood with Seijin no Hi (Coming of Age Day), a public holiday dedicated to those who just turned eighteen. Despite how every youth will eventually reach the age of maturity, the process of growing up is an experience uniquely influenced by cultural norms and expectations, with each culture having its own distinct practices and beliefs that shape how young people grow up and find their identities. In China, the journey of transitioning to adulthood is influenced by cultural values that emphasise academic achievement and respect for one's family, resulting in a demanding path as youths seek to balance their ambitions with traditional expectations.

The Influence of Education and Culture

Many may already be familiar with certain stereotypes surrounding parenting in China, one being the concept of the “tiger mum”, a term used to describe parents who are

strict and highly focused on academic success. While it might seem like a simple generalisation, there is some truth behind it. In traditional Chinese culture, parents have a significant influence over their children's upbringing and are often deeply involved in both their educational and personal lives. The reason for this strong emphasis on academic success lies in the influence of Confucian ideals, which emphasises the values of hard work and filial piety (the concept of showing respect and devotion for one's family). As a result, many Chinese families adopt a strict parenting style, where academic achievement is not just a personal milestone but a reflection of the family's honor.

Nevertheless, to understand the connection between culture and academics, one must understand the importance placed on education in Chinese society. The general consensus is that one must excel academically to secure a successful future. Phrases such as “勤能补拙” (“Being diligent can fix your weaknesses”) show an emphasis on upholding the values of hard work and perseverance and contribute to the belief that one must possess such core values in order to succeed in the future.



The Importance of the Gaokao in Chinese Society

However, for many Chinese students, the stakes could not be higher. A key example would be the infamous *gaokao*, a notoriously challenging exam that determines the university one can attend and by extension, their future career prospects. A single mistake can affect one's chances of attending a top university, which can have serious consequences in a society where attending a prestigious university often provides a competitive edge in China's highly competitive job market.

The Chinese government, having recognised the importance of the gaokao, makes a deliberate effort to ensure the examinations go as smoothly as possible. Through consulting meteorological, earthquake and other climate-related departments, local authorities aim to receive as much information on any possible natural disasters to ensure they are able to respond quickly in the event of exam-related emergencies. The Education Ministry has also assured that candidates would be provided with personalised services in terms of transportation, accommodations and medical care, while stories about policemen and taxi drivers offering rides to students (often free of charge) are not uncommon.

Considering the significant investment made by both the government and their families, it's no wonder students feel such immense pressure. Knowing that an entire country, as well as your own family, is counting on you to succeed can feel incredibly stifling, especially for those who struggle to meet these high demands. Youths who may have learning disabilities, or who develop at a different pace than their peers, often feel the weight of disappointment for failing to meet their family's expectations. This sense of disappointment may manifest in different ways such as anxiety, depression, or even social withdrawal. In the long run, these youths might also face issues of being unable to fully integrate into society as they are unable to conform to societal and familial expectations, contributing to the worsening of the mental health crises in China.

The Conflict Between Filial Piety and Ambition

As Chinese youths enter adulthood, they face a new set of responsibilities that are focused on contributing back to their families in the name of filial piety. In traditional Chinese culture, young working adults are often expected to support their family financially as a way of repaying their parents for their sacrifices. But how sustainable can this be today?

With the growing prevalence of a rapidly ageing population and higher costs of living, youths are finding it more difficult to provide for all members of their households. As such, when faced with the harsh reality of poverty, many may question or even reject the traditional expectations of filial piety. Instead, some adults may choose to focus on their independence and self-fulfilment instead of conforming to their parents' desires, which may impact their relationships with their families and even their reputation in society.

Those who deviate from these traditional expectations often face judgment or isolation as in society's eyes, they are seen as selfish or even ungrateful for not wanting to support their





elders. This is especially so in strictly traditional families, where these young adults might be seen as putting their individual needs above the family's collective well-being. The conflict between one's beliefs versus their family's may result in strained familial relationships with the worst-case scenario being completely cut off. However, others may be more fortunate, having found acceptance within their families or similar communities.

It is a rather punishing dilemma that Chinese youths face upon coming of age: should they follow their dreams and pursue happiness at the cost of possible financial instability? Or should they instead conform to their parents' expectations to follow a fixed path in life that guarantees their family's future social stability? Their decisions will play a huge role in determining the trajectory of their lives, with the risk of a happy future at stake.

Yet, there is reason to hope that these tensions might gradually ease as societal views continue to shift. Some may decide to choose careers that allow them to support their families while pursuing their passions, while others have learned to come to a compromise that balances their familial responsibilities with their own personal dreams. Who knows what the future may bring? Perhaps eventually, Chinese youths will be able to pursue lives that fulfil both tradition and individual aspirations, without feeling forced to choose one path over the other.



10/02/23-TET, SINGAPORE

-DINH CAO TUE



It was an act made on the spur of the moment. Around the stroke of midnight on Chinese New Year's 年初¹, my friend and I decided to stroll through the Central Business District in our Vietnamese tunics later in the day, visiting the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple, and Thian Hock Keng. The former because we FOMO², while the latter because we did not want to be 'basic B's'. The PR had been following her New Year's traditions ever since she was still in the old country. 'Ê, mai t muốn đi chùa,'³ she texted. We had been batchmates since our days at our gifted high school. That school-based scholarship was why we were in Singapore in the first place. 'Can't wish u Chúc mừng năm mới⁴ yet tho, lol,' she continued, 'Tết's in one hour's time back home.'

It's always like this, time in Vietnam one hour behind. Ever since the brief semester breaks of Upper Secondary and Junior College, to go back to Vietnam was to go back in time. I became a ghost in what seemingly was 'my home', haunted by memories of a past before Secondary Three. This has all become a periodic ritual, to float past a familiar tube house in a Saigon hamlet, a familiar grandmother retiring before her TV in a Southwestern town, an old bistro deliciously named 'Angry Noodles' selling hu tieu⁶ broth, and a government gifted high school the palimpsest of a Lasallian institution... My curated Vietnam boxed up in a time capsule far removed from the one that breathes and grows with each moment, running at a pace of its own now I find difficult to catch up, when I was but keeping my sampan buoyant by the shores of an island across the sea. It seemed that all I could do was float. All the while, my mind had been warping in and out of memory lane and reality. So I closed my eyes. For once, I stopped cutting through imagined possibilities, achieved and regretted possibilities, alternative possibilities. I let the currents of the South China Sea carried me above its briny foam. I may have made a prayer to Mazu.

Here was Telok Ayer, once a bay of water. Nearby, acrylic pigments traced impressionist forms of sampans, packed like wooden sardines freshly imported from a Southern Chinese province. Dry brush 飞白⁷ technique brought to the boats to life down to their wooden graininess, as they bobbed on the similarly 飞白 waters. The river shimmered in pointillist streaks, stretched out towards the blueprinted future. Skyscrapers of orange and lilac drew near. The MBS was a jade blue celestial palace, and its white lotus the ArtScience museum.

I stood there by the wall art, like a newly added bas-relief upon the mural. Time and history were collapsed by the mind of its artist. Time froze for the procession of Mazu, the Hokkien guardian at sea. Her golden parasols were hoisted by migrant men in their dated garbs. Their tongues fashioned foreign praises to the goddess, knighting her into their own pantheon of protectors. Among the crowd of figures, our knee-length tunics and turbaned hair would fit right in this rojak⁸ scene. We walked, facing their direction. Perhaps we were just another group of people flowing in confluence with the river down by a bay dried by washes of time. The river's eyes peered up from its depths. Against the glaring sun, blurry and dark our two figures would be, like bronze sculptures, unnamed, years into the future. Our tunics' panels suspended in the wind.





I told my friend I envied her sometimes. I could only imagine feeling secure in one's own belonging to both places, to know one's routes on the motorbike like one would know those of SBS buses, or to be able to catch up at one's form-class reunion of that gifted high school like it was all just yesterday just the way one immediately bonds with other locals in the hostel. I told her, maybe I should have just filled in that ICA form since J1, maybe I should have convinced family members back in Bến Tre¹⁰ why the next two years would be worthwhile who believed in a meritocracy that doesn't see legal identity labels, and that I consumed too much diasporic media... My dear 'you's, whoever you are. How many credentials do I need inked on my tongue, my face, my brain to be trusted enough to enter your spaces? How do I convince you that I want to be the best of both worlds without having to bear that badge of fickleness spelling 'Transient'? Is it through my most grievous fault to unknowingly simulate your prosody, to ask questions, to be here, or to leave on my own accord? Then again, do I even have to explain myself in the first place?

'Nah... what do you mean,' my friend replied, 'don't overthink too much—take your time, be chill.' While I appreciated her baffled yet assuring smile in the midst of a mouthful of bakkwa, I couldn't deny how beyond the mural lay a mixed-media bricolage—a performance art where ebbs and flows of unforeseen circumstances were the only algorithm that propelled our participation. Here was a shophouse revamped to host a halal Japanese ramen restaurant, just as a lady in Burmese sarong speaking Jinghpaw on her phone hurried¹¹ towards an MRT lift. Meanwhile, a few miles away lay a dimly lit air-conditioned Thai massage parlour right next to a steamy sizzling moo-kratha restaurant all within the time capsule of a damp old mall, or that small alleyway leading up to a secret library and gathering space for writers of all shapes and colours, faiths and fates.

And somewhere within this tableaux, two Vietnamese undergraduates studying in Singapore caught a public bus from UTown to Chinatown. During the day, they discarded pennies into blessing cups at Buddha Tooth, then discarded dollars for melon milk (that tasted more milk and less melon) at Chinatown's 7-Eleven. For lunch, they ate Prosperity Burgers with sweet chilli sauce at McDonalds, then ate in the outfits for their own New Year photoshoots. They made a detour into Channel News Asia afterwards, dropping by a hawker centre to drink kopi siew dai inside a TV screen, served by a lady who overshared about how she used to "sell flowers" in a KTV before she became a part-time Computer Science student in NUS—that was, until she finally met her husband via Ah Lim's 越南新娘¹² office. The woman was in a flowing form-fitting Vietnamese tunic with hems so long she nearly tripped with grace upon the greasy floor. She flitted back and forth between English and some language that they couldn't identify as being Thai-accented Cantonese or Singlish-accented Vietnamese. I think at this point we were just hallucinating, though I doubt it was from the coffee. These two students needed a blessed break, so their afternoon was spent ringing the bell at Thian Hock Keng's wishing well for well wishes, and catching a Hokkien puppet show just outside. To enjoy the show after a while was to see it as a cải lương hồ quảng, a Chinoiserie Southern Vietnamese theatre, in the minds of the two Southern Vietnamese people who, in the minds of spectators at this Singapore bricolage, are peculiarly Chinoiserie.





In the evening, my friend decided to have dinner with her boyfriend, who booked out for his Chinese New Year celebration. He was our batchmate who also finished Junior College just the year before. This has been the time of year when I would think about how I hadn't been celebrating Tet at my grandmother's house for the past couple of years, while my old Junior College friends, whether locals or foreigners, scholars or not, were all having their lunar new year celebrations with their own family. At least that is before many of them left for university in other countries. Same goes for my old high school friends in Vietnam, whose whereabouts are now unknown to me, as much as how my whereabouts might have become unknown to them. Perhaps it was the same anywhere, anytime. Things were merely unfolding the way you knew they would some time ago.

Wind blew through the channels of Telok Ayer. I stretched out my arm, and hitched a ride back. My chiffon tunic's panels flapped like sails. I looked down. Below me, waves of the wind flowed through islands and lands, currents sprawled over one field of marbled green and blue. I dropped back on campus. I changed out, and got dinner. I still thought about that field beneath my feet as I munched my *cai png*¹³

1. '年 初 一' (nian zhu yi) refers to the 1st day of a New Year (based on the lunar calendar)

2. 'FOMO' is the abbreviation of the slang phrase 'Fear of Missing Out'.

3. translates to 'Hey, I want to visit temple(s)' from Vietnamese.

4. translates to 'Happy new year' from Vietnamese.

5. 'Tết' is the Vietnamese lunar new year.

6. 'hủ tiếu' is a Southern Vietnamese noodle soup, with influences from Chinese-Cambodians.

7. '飞 白' (fei bai) or 'flying white' refers to the dry brush technique that enables brush calligraphers to create expressive streaky strokes.

8. 'ICA' stands for 'Immigration and Checkpoints Authority'.

9. 'Ben Tre' ('Bến Tre' in Vietnamese) is a Southwestern Vietnamese hometown.

10. 'Jinghpaw' is a language spoken in the Kachin state of Myanmar, where a number of Burmese foreign workers based in Singapore come from.

11. '越南新娘' (yue nan xin niang) or 'New brides of Vietnam' refers to offices offering matchmaking services to Vietnamese women and Singaporean men.

12. 'cai png' or 'economic rice' refers to generally affordable stalls in Singapore hawker centres or canteens, selling rice with various choices of meats and vegetables to choose from.



From *Earth* to *Ashes*

by *Natanya Kee*

I went to three wakes last year. In the first—a Catholic vigil service—I stood in a crowd around the casket with a book of hymns in one hand, an open packet of peanuts in the other. We listened to a priest's prayer, mumbled the lyrics of the hymns to a blaring music track, and then shuffled into the wooden pews of a church room for a service. In the second—a Buddhist wake—I offered a joss stick and observed the body while a monk lit incense around us. In the third, I didn't get to see the deceased at all. Instead, I sat in a room full of relatives, eating and laughing like it was Chinese New Year and not a sombre event.

No one knows what happens after death—it's part of what makes it so scary. Do you go somewhere? Or do you just fade away? What happens to your soul? Many cultures and religions have their own interpretations of what happens after someone passes away, and use these interpretations to honour the deceased and help their transition to the perceived afterlife.

Types of Rituals

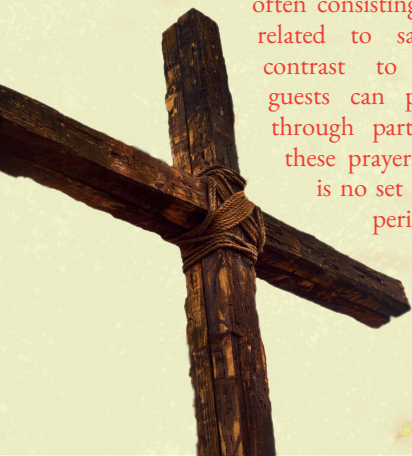
Buddhist funeral wakes and rites are common in Singapore, with over 60% of the funerals conducted in Singapore being Buddhist funerals. Traditionally, a Buddhist funeral would last seven days, although they usually only last three to five days now. Buddhist funerals usually consist of family prayers to a statue of the Buddha, as well as a monk chanting on the funeral day, the first day of the wake, and the last. At the wakes, it is customary for guests to light a joss stick to pay respect for the deceased at the altar. In most Buddhist traditions, the bereavement period lasts for 49 days. This period is treated as a time to conduct prayer rituals, as during this time the spirit would be moving to the afterlife and making decisions regarding rebirth.





This is related to Buddhist beliefs of reincarnation and death as part of a transition from one form to another. This continuous cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth is known as *Samsara*. The aim is to one day transcend this cycle and attain enlightenment, or *Nirvana*. Buddhist funerals are thus not just a farewell, but a sacred practice meant to support the soul's transition and pave the way for a good rebirth.

While Catholics don't believe in the concept of reincarnation, they do place a heavy emphasis on the soul and salvation (or the process of purgatory), believing that after death the soul stands before God for judgement and is either sent to Heaven or Hell. Ideally, the soul would ascend to Heaven for eternal life. This hope for the soul to enter Heaven is echoed in their funeral rites with prayers for the deceased's soul during a service or mass. The service is designed to honour the deceased and commend their soul to God, with prayers and hymns often consisting of content related to salvation. In contrast to Buddhism, guests can pay respects through participating in these prayers, and there is no set bereavement period.



The theme of death as part of a cycle is echoed in Malay Muslim funerals as well, which follow specific Islamic rites according to *Syariah* (religious laws). They include washing and shrouding the body, funeral prayers, and the burial process, which is usually done within 24 hours of the death. The process of shrouding the body after washing is known as *Kafan*, and is meant to protect the deceased's dignity and privacy, and the prayers are usually held at a mosque or at home. Similar to Christianity, Malay Muslims don't believe in the concept of reincarnation. Rather, they believe in the existence of the soul that separates from the body after death to a state of waiting known as *Barzakh* until the day their souls are to be judged.



Religion isn't the only factor that influences rituals conducted for the deceased. There are also many culture-specific rituals related to the perceived afterlife and honouring the deceased. A prominent example would be *el Día de Muertos*, or the Day of the Dead, a traditional Mexican holiday where it's believed that the border between the real and spirit world dissolves, allowing souls of the deceased to return to the living world to see their loved ones again.

With a history dating back centuries, this holiday involves families preparing ofrendas—food as offerings—at decorated altars for their loved ones that have passed away. These altars are often decorated with marigolds, known in Mexico as the Flower of the Dead, and are meant to attract the souls of the dead to the offerings. The bright yellow petals and strong floral scent are also thought to act as a beacon and path to guide family members home, and are often laid along the entrances to houses like pathways.

There are countless other religions and cultures with their own unique traditions and interpretations of death, the afterlife, and how to honour those who have passed on. However, there seems to be a linking thread between all of them: the idea of death as not an endpoint, but rather as a transition to a different phase. Whether that phase is heaven, rebirth, or another realm of being, those who are left on earth to face the ramifications of death seem to take solace in the idea of their loved ones waiting somewhere else, rather than erased forever. This hope of one day meeting again, of being watched over, reflects the emotional nature of humanity. We choose to believe, without proof or reason, and hold dearly onto these traditions not because we are naive, but rather because we care. So much in fact, that holding onto this belief and hope may be the only way to get through the hell that is grief and loss.



Then vs. Now

Like many things, these rituals have succumbed to the gripping claws of time, and changed in many ways from their original traditional practices. For example, many rituals involving grave burials have been foregone as families opt for cremation instead. This is as cremation is now deemed to be more “eco-friendly” and less costly; it has gained its own significance in modern times.

Let’s use China as an example. In the Chinese belief system, it is common to see themes of death as a point of transition, from the world of the living to the land of the dead. While the deceased may have departed from the physical world, their participation in the lives of their living family continues and their presence is believed to remain with the family. The soul of the deceased depends on their living family for sustenance, through food offerings, shelter or money. In turn, the family is protected by their ancestors and deceased relatives in times of turmoil—think of the ancestral altar and tablets in *Mulan* and how they were called upon!

Traditionally, the body is prepared for this transition to the afterlife through rituals such as the playing of music to settle the spirit, or the transferring of money, food and symbolic goods from the living to the dead for sustenance of the soul. Spiritual tablets were also created and placed in the family’s ancestral homes or altars.

However, in modern-day China, we see a new and popular way of mourning: online memorialisation and mournings. Usually, this takes the form of a family member or loved one of the deceased setting up an online website to memorialise the deceased. Visitors of the website can drag virtual fresh flowers, wine cups, food, tea and incense to mimic the real act of offering such goods at altars.

They can also send prayers and respects in the form of messages to the websites as a substitute for visiting during the Qingming Festival, which is when family members traditionally go to the graves for tomb-sweeping. This gained popularity as it allowed family and loved ones who live far away to pay their respects and participate in memorialisation and mourning rituals.

It was also promoted by the government as they found it pragmatic, since rituals such as paper-burning and firecrackers contributed to increased environmental pollution and fire hazards during Qingming. Traffic to cemeteries across China—both human and vehicular—also boomed during such periods, contributing to congestion. The Chinese government thus encouraged citizens to go online, mainly focusing on the environmental and cost benefits in their campaigns.

While one can argue this phenomenon is a bastardisation and corruption of traditional rituals, another perspective to consider is the true underlying meaning behind all these different ways religions and cultures honour the dead. Each of them carry their own traditions and rites, but they all feature common ideas. Ideas of peace, respect, of taking care of each other even after death.

In a world full of hatred and negativity, isn’t the notion of collective respect and peace for the deceased a testament to how humanity isn’t as bad as it seems?

So even if traditions change, if the ideas and intents behind them stay true to these ideals, is change such a bad thing?



Grandfather Clock

Tay Kai Li

the grandfather clock hangs right above my bedridden grandfather's head its
suspended scythe swinging like lapping waves on a beach blade
an oscillating pendulum and I had never noticed it
before but now my eyes fix on its
rusted gears and the squeaking hilt of
its escapement that rests behind the
time's hands aged and faded
as they are and
as it creaked
and chimed
at
the eleventh
hour warning of
the waning moon of
the Reaper's steady march approach
it finally struck me—its history
its ancestry the inevitable nature of its
impending death by the hand of its diseased
deterioration ticking closer each second towards its fall the
coppery stench of oxidation of expiration lingering in the air
sinking into my skin and soon only in my memories for
the old grandfather clock had always been there I had simply never

- Poet's Note -

The last time we visited my grandfather, I was 14. The house was silent, a heaviness in the air, even the box TV quiet and still. Only the ticking of the old grandfather clock, its cuckoo hidden within its chamber. My parents, murmuring in low tones. They disappeared into the bedroom. I crept to the doorway, hovered by the threshold and peered in for the first time.

There, I was stricken by the figure of my grandfather, lying prone on his bed, chest rising and falling in rattling breaths. A heavy presence weighed upon all of us, and it hit me, then, that suffocating stillness—that was death hanging over my grandfather. I heard the grandfather clock chime, the cuckoo crowing 3 times, my parents beckoning me closer to say goodbye. Suddenly I realised, I knew nothing about ah gong, his life or past, where he was from, how he came from China, or why. I knew nothing at all about my own heritage. And now, I would never really know, because my grandfather was taking it all with him.

That was the first time I ever saw death. It was etched into my mind—the moment death became real to me. This is a poem written in the wake of that experience, to navigate the grief of losing someone I never even knew, and the guilt of never having learned the language of my mother tongue enough to preserve my grandparents' stories. The grandfather clock became a symbol of those stories lost to time, the poem's shape and form inspired by the movement of its pendulum, swinging like the reaper's scythe...

THE Waiting Room By Tay Kai Li

"You shouldn't be here, son."

You turn. The old man stares through you. You don't know when he arrived. You don't know when *you* arrived, either. But you've always been here, waiting. You've always been waiting. Not for him, surely. Certainly not for judgement.

"I was here first."

The old man chuckles. "No."

You'd tell him off for laughing, but then you'd only seem childish. You're not—you're twenty-two.

His expression turns serious. Sightless eyes fix on you. You squirm.

"You shouldn't *want* to be."

What right has he to judge? You tell him so. His eyebrows furrow, like two palms clasped in prayer. A worse expression, really. You'd take judgement over pity.

"It's not judgement, son."

"Then?"

"A warning. You're too young to be waiting."

Now you laugh, abrasive.

"What do you know? You're blind."

"Pah! Listen." He gestures at the white tiles, at your worn shoes, the left, tapping a restless rhythm into the grooves of your sole. "I hear your youth."

You stop tapping. Silence.

"How d'ya like my living room?"

You stare at him, perched on his wheelchair. Around you both loom four white walls, the white ceiling, and of course, the white tiles, sterile as the day you arrived.

"This...is a waiting room," you say, slow as he is. Or so you think.

"It's different then." He nods, turning to a corner. He is as blunt as you are sharp.

"The TV wasn't always here. He wanted to watch the news from the kitchen. I wanted to keep our house from burning down." He laughs, like creaking wood. "Of course, in the end I gave in, moved it here. One evening, I came back to the house smoking like a chimney. *Oh*, I never let him hear the end of it. The marks on the ceiling never faded, and the smell, *god*."

He's smiling, though his nose wrinkles and his blind eyes dart reflexively towards a non-existent spot on the ceiling. You hate that you looked, too. It was creeping up on you, some second-hand nostalgia.

You don't have a lover, or a friend, or even a dog. You live

alone in an apartment that doesn't smell of burnt food, with a TV you've never turned on, and the ceiling is uncharred. *That's* your house. *That's* your life. And now, you live here, in this waiting room. You almost wish it were a living room too. But no. You're waiting still, you remind yourself. Nothing in the living room waits for you. Why should you want to go back? If you're not careful...

"-but I shouldn't be here! *Please!*"

You turn. The bride stares beyond you, eyes gaunt and haunted. It's a face of madness. You recoil.

Her ashen veil trails like smoke from a joss stick, embers like jewels lingering in the crown of her hair. Blood runs down her dress, her gown melting into her skin, its train gripping her ankles like a corpse's hands. She staggers towards you, grips your wrists with blood-slicked fingers, and your mouth fills with the tang of copper and acrid flesh, burnt rubber and hot asphalt—you lurch away, retching. She screeches.

The old man wheels forward, palm outstretched. She grips it with both hands, crimson tears running down her cheeks, words spilling just as freely.

"Please, the doctors are saying it's too late but it's *not*. That's why I'm here, right? I'm still in the hospital, I'm okay, I *have* to be. I have to see him again-" she dissolves.

Stricken, you watch. It feels wrong. She's crumbling before your very eyes, and you're watching. You should look away. You *want* to. But you can't. Blood drips from your trembling wrists.

"You'll see him again. In whatever's next," the old man soothes.

She laughs, hysterical.

"There's *nothing* next!"

Her fingers reach up, tearing at her veil. Involuntarily, your feet move. You call out as she stumbles towards the edge of the room.

"Wait-"

"No!" she cries, "He's still waiting, I haven't even said goodbye! I have to- at least- please...*please*."

Her fingers would've clawed at the wall, except the space gives way, and she's falling, screaming, wailing-

Silence.

You can't smell smoke anymore. As if she hadn't been here at all. You lower your hand. No blood. You're shaking, still. Such unadulterated terror...

"What did you see?" The old man asks. Around you, the white walls, the ceiling, the tiled floor.

"Nothing at all."

Time passes. You wait, uneasy, the image of the bride etched into your mind.

"Excuse me, am I in the right place?"

You turn. The groom stares between you and the old man, averse.

"I'm looking for my wife. Well, soon-to-be. We're getting married, see?" He smiles, the ring upon his finger glinting like a gold ember.

"It's just, I've been at the altar so long, most guests have left." He tugs at his suit cuffs, ashen-grey like the tips of incense. "They keep saying they're sorry for me. They should be! Don't they know it's unlucky to wear black? This isn't-" he laughs, and it sounds the same as the bride's, married in madness. "This isn't a funeral, y'know? God forbid."

You wish you didn't know. What does it mean, that he's here in the waiting room with you? You watch as he pulls at the crimson tie around his neck. Your throat tightens.

"You shouldn't be here."

You flinch. You'd forgotten the old man.

"I...don't think I understand, sir."

"No," he cuts, "I think you do." His head turns. He's staring at you. "You. Shouldn't. Be. Here."

For a terrifying moment, you cease to exist, as if your body itself heeds his command. As you return to yourself, the groom breaks.

"Where else do I go?" he sobs. "Tell me, how do I- how can I possibly-"

"You know, son," the old man insists, gentle again, "you already know."

The groom staggers towards the edge of the room, tie swinging from his neck like a pendulum. His hand reaches towards the wall. You brace yourself for the fall.

Time stretches.

Silent, the groom turns. He adjusts his tie, a cool blue shade, striding forward with two plane tickets in his mouth. Then he's gone.

"What did you see?" The old man asks. You hear it now—a test, not a question, one you cannot answer.

"I'll tell you. He's off on their honeymoon."

"Without her?!"

"What else can he do? Drag her corpse along?" The old man sighs. "That he lives is a gift. When they next meet, he'll tell her about the beach at their honeymoon hideaway, how sand and sea meet at the shoreline and how it reminded him of her, how his tears fell into the ocean, and how he hoped that when they rose into the clouds they'd kiss her feet, the way waves kiss the coast."

You don't understand. You tell him so.

"You think she isn't waiting? If he's smart, and lucky, he'll gather a lifetime of stories for her."

"Are you God?"

The old man laughs heartily. He rises to his feet. You gape at him. Heedless, he begins hobbling across the room. Terror. You snatch his wrist.

"Wait," you call, voice shaking, "where are you going?"

"To the station, of course."

In the distance, a whistle. The old man smiles warmly, hand settling briefly on your shoulder. He makes to leave.

"Wait," you gasp, your chest constricting, grip tightening, "don't-"

Don't what? Leave? Wasn't that what you wanted?

You can't breathe. The room is shrinking. Not so distantly, the whistle shrieks twice more. A scream builds in your throat. You feel like a child. The old man smiles at you.

"Shhh," he soothes, "don't be scared."

But you *are*. Once more, he turns those sad, pale eyes on you. Oh. This is not God. God does not pray. The old man's blind gaze cradles your face, a benediction—praying for you.

"You shouldn't be here," he says, and *finally*, you hear him. It's not judgement. It's grace.

"Take me with you, then. To the train. Wherever you're going, I don't care, just-"

The whistle is in your ears, your brain. Your vision blurs. You're going blind.

"Please. I'm not like you. I have no one. Not here, and not..." a terrible keen slithers up your throat. "I can't wait anymore, I *can't*."

"Then don't," the old man says, slipping out of your grasp. "Listen. The train. You're already on it, see?"

"What?"

He's gone. The floorboards rumble under your feet. Distantly, the scent of charcoal.

"Where...?"

The engine roars. You turn. Around you, windows rattle. The train hurtles onwards. It's dark. Night or tunnel, impossible to tell. The stench of smoke thickens. The world shakes. The carriages stretch before you, a tunnel-within-a-tunnel, walls spinning as you stumble forward. Is the train speeding up?

All your life, you'd been waiting—for death, a miracle, change. All that time, the train had gone on. It hadn't waited for you. All that's left to do is...

Front of the train. You grip the door, sliding it open. You stop waiting.

ROAM SWEET ROAM:

OF A

REAMS DIGITAL OMAD

by DANIELLA

As dusk falls over the land and the night becomes a slave to our imagination, where do your dreams take you? Do you fantasise about escaping to a faraway place where the buildings of the metropolitan don't scramble to reach the clouds? Or do you wish for the warmth and sunshine of a lush oasis all around? For our daring digital nomads, these dreams may not be so far-fetched.

If the term "nomad" is unfamiliar, let us travel as the nomads do for a brief introduction. Nomads are groups of individuals with no fixed residence as they prefer to travel around territories. Their simple, pastoral lifestyle has been well-established as a way of obtaining food, finding pasture for livestock, or otherwise making a living.

As for digital nomads, the term was only popularised in the 21st century, following recent rapid developments in modern technology. Those with an itch to travel the world have had no qualms packing up their entire lives into a beat-up suitcase, laptop in one hand and a bottle of wanderlust in the other. And with the invention of the aeroplane, these shifts have become transcontinental.

Having The Drive to Drive Away

Though there are countless reasons to become a digital nomad, they can be distilled into one main motivation: the overwhelming urge to explore. Often hailing from first-world countries such as the USA and UK, these modern nomads take the road less travelled (by ironically going to renowned tourist-friendly areas) and find themselves in places with a much lower cost of living, like Thailand and Mexico.

Digital nomads often have one thing in common—technologically savvy skill sets derived from specialised education. It then comes as no surprise that many of these nomads are commonly employed in the fields of Information Technology (IT), marketing, and other similarly creative pursuits.

In comparison to traditional working styles, digital nomads find having the flexibility to determine their own working hours to be the key to striking a balance between work and play. It has been well-established that the rigid structure of a 9-to-5 job does not meet the needs of all workers, and that the absence of a routine might actually be the key to producing quality work and satisfied employees. Many now find it feasible to be their own boss, unlocking a whole new level of liberation society has not previously observed.

“Slomadism”

You would think, with the newfound freedom they have, that digital nomads would be zipping all around the world, island-hopping to their hearts’ desire. However, this is not always the case.

While the above is indeed true for those with an insatiable restlessness, “slomadism” goes against the grain as subscribing slomads prefer to stay at one location for an extended period of time of at least three months to a few years. Countries like Columbia even offer a digital nomad visa for up to two whole years in an attempt to attract highly skilled workers to stay for an extended period of time.

With the constant hustle and bustle of a constantly changing cityscape being too overstimulating for some, slomads opt to stay put and enjoy the scenery before it passes. This entails being more deeply immersed in the country’s culture, conversing with locals and enjoying life at a leisurely pace.

But the appeal of “slomadism” goes beyond personal well-being; it’s also about making a positive impact. Digital nomads are becoming increasingly aware of their carbon footprint from all the travelling they do. By staying in one place for longer periods, slomads reduce the emissions associated with constant travel, reaching a more sustainable compromise between their nomad practices and a growing concern for our fragile Earth. It’s a lifestyle born not only of convenience, but also of conscious, responsible action.

The Good, the Bad and the Lonely

Breaking free from the constraints of traditional office life can certainly be an opportunity for life-changing personal growth. Digital nomads are forced to step outside of not only their comfort zones but also the bubble of familiarity people often build themselves into. A new community of potential friends-to-be awaits less than a stone’s throw from a nomad’s humble abode, the perfect avenue for intercultural and interpersonal exchanges.

Such a refreshing change in pace can do wonders for one’s mental and psychological well-being. It is this feeling of liberation which evokes a cathartic release from mounting expectations to perform exactly as society instructs us to.

However, digital nomadism is not all sunshine and picturesque travels, as one might expect.

One of the biggest attractions of moving away from home is the opportunity to draw a blank slate, yet it is also one of nomadism’s greatest drawbacks. Forming deep, lasting connections in transient communities can be difficult, leaving nomads feeling isolated and homesick. To make matters worse, the stress of being hundreds—or even thousands—of kilometres away from their friends and family can bring up feelings of extreme alienation, and may even nullify the positive psychological effects of freedom.

Wider Implications

When considering the impact digital nomadism has on societies and countries on a larger scale, we shall turn to observe the economic displacement and gentrification that the influx of foreigners has brought upon their destinations.

The Caribbean has long been a hotspot for digital nomads, particularly in the Maldives and the Dominican Republic. As wealthy and highly-specialised nomads flooded in, the cost of housing and daily expenses rose to become an overwhelming tsunami.

“So, you [digital nomads] come, and you say it’s really cheap...cheap for who?...you’re actually driving the cost of everything up,” explains Mechi Annas Estvez Cruz, a writer and native of the Dominican Republic, to the BBC.¹

With many people in search of an environment that is drastically different from their home, digital nomads frequently flock to hotter climates in search of a tropical paradise. Unfortunately, this subjects the ideal destinations to the dangers of over-exoticism. In overly-romanticised islands like Hawaii, the "exotic" becomes a consumable, distant spectacle rather than a real and lived experience.

Nonetheless, some nomads seek to live it out anyway. As more properties are rented out to digital nomads, entire neighbourhoods can become less accessible to local residents. And this displacement is not just economic—it represents a loss of spaces where local culture can thrive and be passed down through generations. Over time, a homogenisation of communities will emerge, with the needs of wealthy outsiders prioritised over those of local families.

WORK ANYWHERE, LIVE ANYWHERE

In the end, the life of a digital nomad is a mosaic of contradictions: boundless freedom, yet permeative loneliness; endless new horizons, but also an elusive sense of home. The transient nature of this lifestyle might seem untethered, drifting between Wi-Fi signals and exotic locales, but it is precisely within this liminality that digital nomads find their magic.

As the night blankets another unfamiliar skyline and the stars map out yet another destination, the digital nomad does not merely seek a place to rest. They create it, moment by moment, in the in-between spaces of both the physical and digital world. Roam sweet roam indeed, an ode to wherever the heart decides to wander next.

Bibliography

1. Lynn Brown, "How has the digital nomad trend evolved over the years?"

Mass Rapid Transit

Gerin Lim

The doors shut. An airtight lid, sealing closed bodies compressed like cargo. There is no space to gasp for air; the windows are all closed and there is nowhere to go. There is no space for my reflection in others' eyes, closed in defeat to the now, how can there be no space, must I surrender and let go—

There is no fight, there is only flow. One path: it twists, it turns, as if to deny that the destination is not prescribed, or maybe they think these thrill rides are more fun? After all, who cares about the journey once it's done?

"You worry too much, your life's just begun," words birds that fly overhead, I cannot hear
I'm drowning, head under roaring water, I'm—We're—

Salmon, swimming up waterfalls, upriver in the prophesied death game of nature deciding the king of the hill and the cowards. What does it matter? Floundering onward won't reverse gravity's push downwards. We're

Stagnant water. Static bodies. Glazed eyes, faces turned towards the sky, still trying to follow the path they promised would feel the least hollow. Oh, how gullible. We didn't yet know

That our fins could be talons, clawing open paths of clouds to soar above their molehills, free and never afraid to fall. Our scales so bright we wouldn't need their moon pulling our tides. We could have become dragons, born to swim in skies hearing wind rushing by in our many flights, not tunnel walls rushing by day and night.

Yet here we stand, freeze-dried under white lights. Packed like sardines, shipped off to factories. Forced to swim in their glass boxes, or be stranded on land. The doors open at their command and a school of us move forward. It's our stop.

Nettle Song

by *Laetitia*

I.

Life feels real under the thickets.

In the dark no one can see us,

or the stinging thorns like teeth

shoaling skin into a blooming red sea:

we are again babies.

I was the first to point out the sky

and you the last to trace its outlines.

What if we are survived through the pain?

Our forest of hurts heal under the spell

of our fingertip's worn flesh. Night, sky,

skin and when you cry, I am reminded

even love can live in the warmth of darkness.

II.

When I wake, I tell you my dreams

on the walk to school. Your eyes follow

my mouth like a dog on a leash but I know

your mind is to be found elsewhere in the

fields of your youth. Long ago, you loved me

exuberantly, a child unearthing endless treasure

buried in another like herself. Now, the old laughter's

bottled, new secrets shelved, the bed left heaving

under the weight of our full-bellied lives.

Still, I listen to the music of your breathing,

waiting for the day to descend and

our mother to open the door.

"Night, sky, skin and when you cry, I am reminded even love can live in the warmth of darkness."

I

I am in the same dream. A gate. A gap in the foliage. Then, I stand at the edge of a soapy pond. Falling, I find my body. A door-knob turns and a burst of birds. They scream my name. Crows, and I know they have found their master.

II

I never expected to be here. The room is small and bare. People in white speak to me as if I understand. It is vertigo, but they don't have to know. Today is a Saturday and I took the train to town. Underground, and I know where I am headed but I can't see through it; can we ever see it through?

III

My mother says I stirred inside her like a terrapin. I still love water but she means I marked her. Listen, she tells me when I see her: Love is not one act, but an endless play. You are the actor, director and critic, all at once. Your only audience: the child. I walk away heavier but I will remember.

IV

I look out the window and think to myself how women are chambermaids. Her world a world of sheets, shit and realisations. But does the world around her realise she's abandoned her cottage for the castle? Then, I feel you for the first time and I cannot let go of the growing fear.

V

I tell myself that when you arrive it will be different, my fear efferent. What will live of me? He will say it is you—you who are both of us made materially true. No, but what of me, I want to say. He holds my hand, as if he understands.

VI

Hands of his become foreign. There is a word for loving, a dance I have forgotten. He works his wood, fuelling the furnace. You are lodged in me like a lump of burning coal.

VII

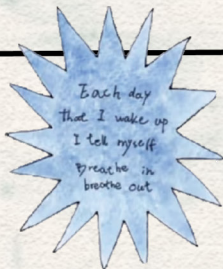
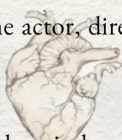
One day you will find this book of fears. My dreams, the dark things I think will be your property. Maybe you will smell the tears, lick the pages for the last drop and understand. Maybe you will forgive me as I have chosen to forgive my mother.

VIII

In the park, I see a vision of us. Light roams over a rockpool of free creatures. You and me; two bodies. Your little hand clutched in mine.

IX

Hours. The clock is a conch. I hear time pass but never do I breathe in the salt of the sea. Suddenly they pull you out of me like a memory. I cannot say what will be, this that begins. But I am at the gate, the water's edge frothy with your first order.



Movements

VIVENNE TSUI

Bites of Change

How Our Food System is Evolving

Food systems¹ are structures that guide how societies produce, distribute, and consume food—basically everything from seeds and fertilisers to delivery trucks and supermarkets. But have you ever wondered how food systems emerged, and how they are evolving? From the efficient yet resource intensive practices of industrial agriculture, to the more sustainable approaches of regenerative agriculture that focus on restoring ecosystems and innovative methods harnessing technology to create synthetic foods—what do these shifts reveal about changes in societal trends, in terms of economic growth, climate change, and animal welfare?

Tracing the Roots of Systematic Food Production

For at least 90% of human history,² humans were hunter-gatherers who relied on foraging and hunting for survival. The nomadic lifestyle was based on the availability of wild plants and animals as well as knowledge of seasonal cycles and natural habitats. It was therefore sustainable only for small groups due to the complexities of managing larger groups, limiting population growth and the establishment of permanent settlements.

Around 12,000 years ago,³ humans began to domesticate plants and animals in various regions like the Fertile Crescent of the Middle East, the Andes in South America, and China. This transition to agriculture enabled communities to cultivate crops like wheat and barley and raise livestock, providing more reliable and consistent food sources. As a result, people started settling in one place, which gave rise to permanent villages and eventually complex societies.

As agricultural practices flourished, communities often produced crop surpluses so that they could store food for later use. Advancements in food storage technologies like sealed containers and meat curing also made producing a greater variety of preserved goods possible, further supporting larger populations.

With increasing specialisation in crop production, organised trade networks emerged during the Iron Age and the reign of the Roman Empire,⁴ marking the beginning of a systematic food system.

Industrial Agriculture: Efficiency at a Cost

Fast forward to the 18th century, when industrial agriculture⁵ emerged to respond to the growing food demands of increasing populations. Monoculture practices aimed at maximising crop yields and streamlining agricultural processes became crucial, leading to significant agricultural innovations. For instance, the seed drill⁶ was developed to sow seeds at equal distances and proper depth, and mechanical threshers for removing seeds from stalks and husks were adopted. The identification of nitrogen, potassium and phosphorus as essential nutrients of plant growth paved the way for the manufacture of synthetic fertilisers. As a result, agricultural production across the

world doubled four times between 1820 and 1975, making food much more accessible and affordable for all.

However, this transformation came about not without a cost on our planet.⁷



Industrial agriculture is extremely resource intensive, requiring vast amounts of water, energy (primarily from fossil fuels), and industrial chemicals. It is currently responsible for a quarter⁸ of the world's greenhouse gas emissions. Not to mention, the reliance on chemical fertilisers and pesticides has led to the depletion of arable land and freshwater resources. For instance, industrial farming practices promote soil erosion⁹ at rates of 10 to 100 times higher than soil formation. Runoff contaminates both ground and surface water with harmful substances, including insecticides, fertilisers, and animal waste. It echoes, in many ways, with the long standing pattern of societies compromising ecological integrity in the pursuit of economic development since the 1900s.

A Slow Transition to Regenerative Agriculture

In response to the challenges posed by industrial agriculture, regenerative agriculture emerged in the late 20th century as a holistic approach focused on restoring and enhancing ecosystem health, ultimately aiming to leave our land, waters, and climate in better shape for future generations. While the term “regenerative agriculture” is relatively new, the underlying principles have been practised for millennia by indigenous communities.⁹ With its core philosophy being farming in harmony with nature, it involves practices like crop rotation to grow different types of crops in the same area across seasons, agroforestry to incorporate trees into agriculture, and reducing the use of synthetic chemicals. It is, therefore, no surprise that the few remaining indigenous lands globally are home to 80% of the world's biodiversity,¹⁰ whereas modern industrial agriculture is responsible for 80% of global deforestation.¹¹

Though industrial agriculture is currently still the dominant food production system¹² in many regions, particularly in North America and Europe, a noticeable shift toward regenerative agricultural practices is emerging, especially by large food corporations (despite their greenwashing attempts). For example, Nestlé¹³ aims to source 20% of its key ingredients through regenerative agriculture by 2025 and 50% by 2030.

This transition shows a growing awareness of environmental stewardship, recognizing that sustainable food production is not just about maximising yields but also about maintaining the vitality of the land for future generations.

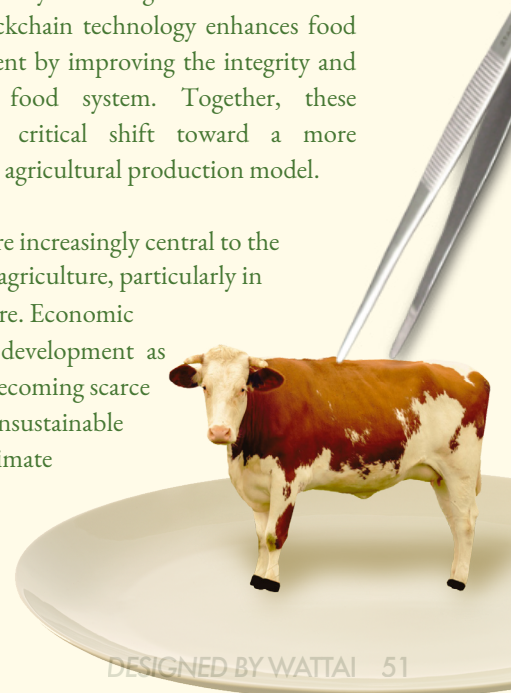
However, despite the United Nations putting food, energy and water¹⁴ at the heart of sustainable development, pressure on achieving these goals will intensify as the global population continues to skyrocket in the coming decades. This makes scaling regenerative agriculture challenging, given industrial methods are still the most efficient in large-scale food production. While reversing the longstanding damages of climate change with regenerative agriculture could be hard in the near future, it represents a vital starting point for environmental conservation.

When Technology Meets Agriculture

Apart from regenerative agriculture, innovative agriculture has also evolved in recent years, driven by technological advancements. Rising global food prices, exacerbated by extreme weather events and geopolitical tensions like the Russia-Ukraine war, have intensified the urgency for effective solutions. The number of people facing acute food insecurity has more than doubled between 2019 and 2022, to 345 million people worldwide.¹⁵ This underscores the need to improve the resilience of our food systems, increase access to nutritious food, and improve production efficiency without compromising environmental integrity.

Agri-tech solutions¹⁶ are at the forefront of this transformation, with around 39% farmers¹⁶ worldwide already adopting or planning to use at least one tool from 2022 to 2024. For instance, precision agriculture uses drones to capture aerial images of crops, providing valuable insights into growth patterns and nutrient needs, ultimately boosting crop yields. Automated harvesting technology employs machinery to navigate fields autonomously, significantly reducing labour costs and time. Additionally, blockchain technology enhances food supply chain management by improving the integrity and transparency of the food system. Together, these innovations signify a critical shift toward a more sustainable and efficient agricultural production model.

Ethical considerations are increasingly central to the evolution of innovative agriculture, particularly in promoting animal welfare. Economic motivations drive this development as well — with resources becoming scarce due to depletion from unsustainable farming practices and climate change, synthetic food production emerges as a viable solution.



Lab-grown meat,¹⁷ or cultured meat, is produced entirely outside of an animal's body by using the animal's stem cells, combined with amino acids and carbohydrates, to grow muscle fibres. It has significant environmental advantages compared to conventional beef, with lab-grown beef requiring 45% less energy, 99% less land, and generating 96% fewer greenhouse gas emissions.

Plant-based meat, like Beyond Meat, is another great innovation. When dealing with carbon emissions alone, they are up to 120 times more carbon efficient than meat products. Plant-based patties¹⁸ have a 77% smaller climate change burden than beef patties, and use less land and water too. As synthetic and plant-based meat technologies mature in the coming years, the production cost is expected to be greatly lowered and made affordable.

Conclusion

From the historical roots of agriculture to the industrial methods that dominate current farming practices, each agricultural phase reflects insights about our changing priorities. The emergence of regenerative and innovative agriculture signifies a pivot toward sustainability, highlighting the importance of environmental stewardship, ethical considerations, and resilience in light of global risks.

Ultimately, the future depends on our collective responsibility—a hopeful vision where producers and policymakers advocate for sustainable and resilient practices, while consumers like you and I take accountability for the impact of our food choices. By fostering a culture of awareness and responsibility, we can bring this vision to life and co-create a more equitable, resilient, and sustainable food future—one that nourishes both people and the planet.

Bibliography:

1. Grace Hussain, "What Is a Food System?"
2. Wikipedia contributors, "Hunter-gatherer"
3. National Geographic, "The Development of Agriculture"
4. Hueston Will and Anni McLeod, "OVERVIEW of the GLOBAL FOOD SYSTEM: CHANGES over TIME/SPACE and LESSONS for FUTURE FOOD SAFETY."
5. Wikipedia Contributors, "Intensive Farming"
6. Lumen Learning, "New Agricultural Tools | History of Western Civilization II"
7. Courtney Lindwall, "Industrial Agricultural Pollution 101"
8. Jennifer Mishler, "The Promises and Pitfalls of Regenerative Agriculture, Explained"
9. NRDC.org, "Regenerative Agriculture 101"
10. Gleb Raygorodetsky, "Indigenous Peoples Defend Earth's Biodiversity—but They're in Danger"
10. Anja Bless, "'Regenerative agriculture' is all the rage—but it's not going to fix our food system, says researcher"
11. ScienceDirect, "Industrial Agriculture - an Overview | ScienceDirect Topics."
12. Rachel Nguyen, "Nestle's Regenerative Agriculture Initiatives - Regenerative Transitions Made Profitable for Smallholder Farmers and Buyers"
13. Un-Water, "Water, Food and Energy"
14. BW Businessworld, "People Facing Acute Food Insecurity Reach 345 Million Worldwide: WFP"
15. Ben Jones, "10 Examples of Modern Technology in Food Production"
16. GCFGlobal.org, "The Now: What Is Lab-Grown Meat?"
17. CAS Science Team, "Going Green With Plant-based Meat Sustainability"



The Green Paradox of MODERNITY

by Jazmine Lin



When we think of urbanisation, towering skyscrapers and bustling city life usually come to mind. Yet, how many of us would associate nature with this human-led development? Contrary to expectations, many modernising cities have actually begun complementing nature with urban, man-made spaces.

This goes against many of our preconceived notions on development, and with good reason. Urbanisation usually follows industrialisation, the process where an agricultural economy transforms into a manufacturing one.¹ However, industrialisation has been notoriously harmful to nature; it is one of the major causes of deforestation and increased pollution.

Ironically, deforestation of nature for industrialisation has been followed by urban reforestation as urban green spaces rise in popularity amongst developed nations. This curious development made me wonder whether urbanisation changes our relationship and perception of nature. In the process of development, have we learnt to value nature more over time? If so, what role does nature now play in urbanised countries? Let's take a look through the lens of Singapore.

Singapore: The Garden City

As one of the top cities in the Green City Index, Singapore is a great example of how nature has become integral to urban planning. However, the abundance of greenery in Singapore hides its not-very-green past. In the 1900s, both the colonial authorities and the PAP government transformed mangrove swamps, primary forests and beaches into industrial estates, housing blocks and reclaimed land. Singapore's newfound independence meant an emphasis on providing full employment and adequate housing, so environmental issues took a backseat.² As a result, Singapore's primary forest has been reduced to less than 0.2% of its previous area, resulting in extinctions of native flora and fauna.³ Yet at the same time, Singapore has many tree planting programmes targeted towards reforestation, and is working to increase nature parks' land area by 2030.⁴

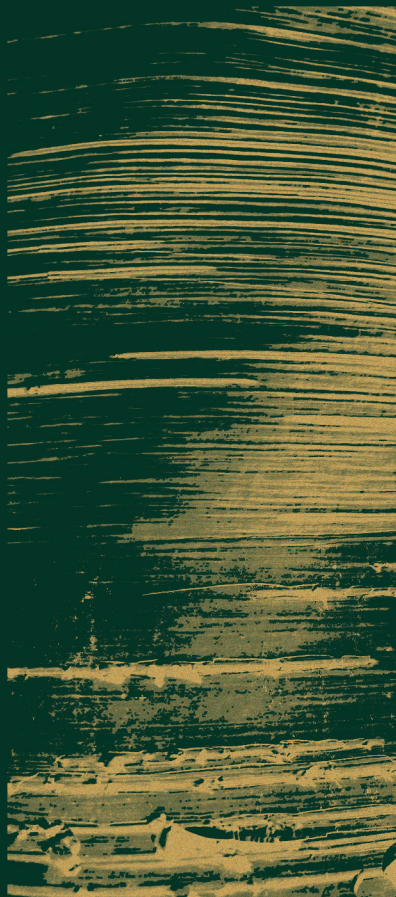
This turnaround is not unique to Singapore, but Singapore's branding as a Garden City highlights this odd relationship with nature especially well. By deforesting then reforesting again on our own terms, nature becomes a side piece to man-made structures—something to frame and decorate our buildings and streets, but not allowed to get in the way. The nature which urbanisation seeks is one that is tamed and complementary with nation-building goals.



The idea of nature as something to be tamed is rooted in the nature-culture divide, where humans and nature are often seen as opposite ideas. However, tamed nature challenges this dichotomy, as it falls between both categories. Thus, there has been further differentiation between “wild nature”, which denotes spontaneous nature absent of human influence,⁵ and tamed nature. Wild nature, instead of nature in general, thus becomes the foil of culture. This theoretical debate sheds some light on developed countries' relationship with nature. By removing the dichotomy between nature and culture, it signals how nature has become partially subsumed under culture, which urbanisation, as a human-led development, is a prime example of.

Nature as Branding

The growing climate emergency also plays a part in urbanisation's relationship with nature. According to Peoples' Climate Vote 2024, 53% of people worldwide are more worried about climate change now than they were a year earlier. Most respondents show high levels of support for a range of climate actions, including nature restoration, rapid transition from fossil fuels and climate education in schools.⁶ With increased public scrutiny, it is no wonder that sustainable cities have become a goal for urbanised countries to work towards. Unfortunately, sustainable cities take time to create. For example, shifting to clean energy and developing sustainable methods of waste management are long-term projects. They are also not directly visible, since many of these processes are managed by specialised departments, and its effects may only be felt by the public years later. Thus in the short term, progressing towards a sustainable city might not satisfy immediate public calls for more climate action.

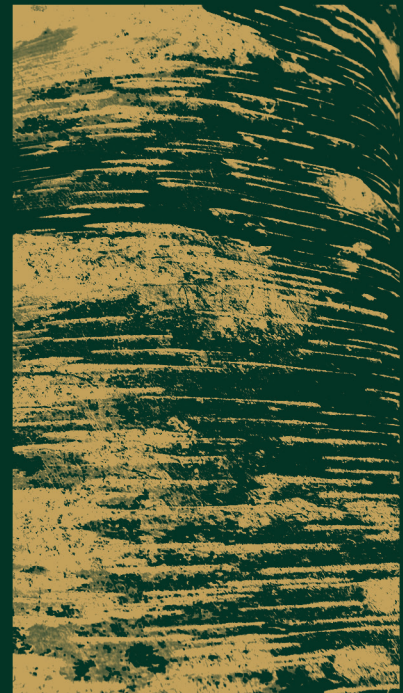


In this case, the quickest and most visible way to demonstrate a shift towards sustainability is by having more greenery. Tree-planting movements, for example, are easier to implement in the short term, and as the public can take part in such events, this visibility creates an impression that governments are actively pursuing greater sustainability. Though trees take time to grow, since they are planted in public spaces, it is a good short-term fix before the impacts of long term investments begin to take effect.

Using nature as branding not only boosts the government's local image, but also portrays the country in a good light to the international community. Development doesn't just stop at boosting gross domestic product (GDP). Having a global image that the country's thriving and growing is equally important, especially if the country is outward-oriented. Sustainable cities' rising popularity means that using nature as branding is a possible approach to improve global image.

Though I mentioned that development goes beyond boosting GDP, it is undeniable that stronger economies have the ability to take nature as branding much further. Developed countries with stronger economies have more funds to invest in such environmental projects. Though developing countries can benefit from investing in nature, the reality is that during development, environmental goals often take a backseat to other priorities like housing and trade. This causes a "green inequality" where global North cities benefit more from greening urban areas than global South cities.⁷

Singapore is one of the countries which benefits from using nature as branding. Beyond helping the environment, it helps boost international engagement. As an export-oriented and growing economy, Singapore quickly embraced nature early in its independence. Singapore's Garden City vision perfectly highlights the idea of nature as branding.



The "Garden City" vision was introduced by then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in 1967 to transform Singapore into a city with abundant lush greenery and a clean environment in order to make life more pleasant for the people. It was also envisaged that the presence of ample greenery in an environment clean of litter would signify that Singapore was a well-organised city and hence a good destination for tourists and foreign investment,⁸ which was crucial in its early days of independence. Nature was thus used to promote Singapore globally, and became a tool for economic and development goals.

When I Googled "garden city Singapore", it immediately struck me that the top images were of nature in Gardens by the Bay and Jewel Changi Airport. It is no coincidence that these are both popular tourist attractions in Singapore, and largely consist of well-manicured greenery. This reinforces how the "Garden City" vision is interwoven with economic aims of international branding and development, both of which necessitate the taming of nature into aesthetic.



Us and Nature

Let's return back to our original question—do developed countries value nature more? On the surface, urbanised nations' move towards greater sustainability supports this idea, but if we value nature only as a tool used in the urbanisation project, is it truly valued then? Nature was subordinated during industrialisation, yet this seems to be continuing in developed countries which have passed the industrialisation stage. It is similarly being used to advance countries' development, just that its presence is now worth more than its absence to developed countries. As we transit through different stages of development, has our fundamental mindset of viewing nature in terms of economic utility remained stationary?

Bibliography

1. Annika M E Noreen & Edward L. Webb, "High Genetic Diversity in a Potentially Vulnerable Tropical Tree Species Despite Extreme Habitat Loss."
2. Holmes Rolston III, "Natural and Unnatural; Wild and Cultural."
3. Investopedia, "How Does Industrialization Lead to Urbanization?"
4. Kopi, "Before & After Pictures Show How Deforestation Has Changed Singapore."
5. National Library Board, "'Garden city' vision is introduced."
6. Rasmus Attrup Bille et al., "Global patterns in urban green space are strongly linked to human development and population density."
7. SG Green Plan, "Our Key Targets for the Green Plan."
8. UNDP Climate Promise, "The world's largest survey on climate change is out – here's what the results show."

MOULD

By TD Nguyen

"To be barricaded in a mental realm is to be grounded in the present: the distant past too painful to reminisce, and the far future too painful to imagine."

Crash!

Raindrops flare up in sharp unison, bleeding down the cracks that run towards the windowpane's rusting hinge. For a furtive second, a pile of empty snacks can be seen teetering on the edge of the shadow, encircled by a round of curious black ants. Another jolt quickly follows. Now, heaps of discoloured clothes flash beside the bed, their rotten smell unravelling into smoke and collecting on the mouldy ceiling. The flash scores a line onto his thigh. With great caution, he gazes over the window, his irises treading along the beads. Like little traffic, the raindrops slither across the opaque pane, and he thinks about that time Mother took him atop their apartment building, how the world below stretched like an ever-expanding orange quilt as its people, like sparks of ember, bustled amok in a distant hecticness. He can still smell the amber smog that permeated the city then, and feel the petrichor that numbed his sinuses. Far away, perched right before the evening horizon, he sees a glimpse of blushing firs, colours and names that have long been washed away by the plaguing shower.

With all his might, he extends a hand towards the sky. But immediately, as the tips are soaked in sunlight, he senses a knot in his stomach. His belly is sinking into itself. His breath bates fast. A sharp quiver trickles down his spine as hot bile surges up, coating a bitter film across the dome of his throat. He panics around for the remote. Press. Press. Pressing. He presses and stops at the right moment. A drone-like voice emerges, barely effacing amidst static white noise—the 8 o'clock news. Relieved, he swallows a deep, sludgy sigh, letting the noise burrow down from his ears onto the bruised arm and land on the purple patches on which green-black spots cinch around his wrist. Mould, not something worthy of attention nowadays. All he knows now is that the blanket cannot handle another accident.

The pain, though, has started to bother him. With sweat streaming down along the contour of his bulging leg, he plants a foot on the invisible floor, shuddering as his ankle grazes the jagged ridge of a broken plate. Inch by inch, the soles scout the rugged landscape, his hands clasp at the blackened void until a cold, metallic touch prickles his fingertips. Should be the fridge handle. He dangles on the swinging door and, quick as he can, reaches inward until a numbness takes over his palm. As he fumbles to retrieve the ice packet, tucked deep behind the stack of rations, a putrid sludge drips down between his toes. He has gotten used to the smell, for things no longer have taste in darkness and there is no need for energy. Not here and now in this tiny apartment. The ghastly glare of the fridge, however—*that* he must avoid, and that is exactly what he has so exhaustingly accomplished.

All nestled and calm in the burrow of his blanket, he lets the bruises soak up the numbness from the ice, ears drowned by the TV's muffling drone. The shadow of the rain bleeds over the walls, coating the furniture a fathomless grey as his eyes slowly falter, and soon enough, only the throbs along his forearm veins remain palpable in the silent, all-consuming darkness.

When he wakes up the pain has migrated atop the shoulder blade. As usual, he turns rightwards facing the downpour, pupils roaming to readily latch onto and savour the tiniest speck of sunlight, any that could have escaped the rain and strayed into the apartment. But once more the rain falls coldly, drenching the world in an oozing black that spreads and spreads along the bicep into a stream that collects at the back of the hand. The agony has caught up to him. He tries stretching the left arm before sensing a searing gash dragging across the pulped skin, its unspeakable colours hovers like a lightless void in his mind. But there remains no point in doing anything—the only method he knows of has failed—and at once he returns to staring blankly beyond the flat screen: developments on synthesising rations, armistice in the East... He no longer counts how long the news has repeated itself. The drone-like noise is about to finish its dulling of his senses, but not before a distant ringing from the wireless phone mangles the mucky stillness.

Only two people in this world know his ID. The landlord with their duties and Mother, whose voice he can still discern amidst the howling rains. It matters not who is on the other side, for what he longs for is just a sign of others, of someone not himself. Eyes glued to the far vacuum from where the sound emanates, he stiffens the frail muscles on the good arm that is now shaking fervently and brings his upper body forward. Sweat congeals like hail on his forehead, soiling the tattered blanket which he then hurls towards the floor. Comfortable with the merciful terrain, his sore feet pick up the pace when suddenly a numbing pain washes over the left and, before his proprioception even registers, the whole left side has slammed and almost cracked open against the concrete floor. His eyes roll to the back of the head as his lanky torso convulses in pain, dry gasps choking from his throat as if to suppress a scream that alone will rend the vocal cords apart. No. He can lose anything but his voice now. The ringing casts its grey stare at him from overhead, drilling itself at the base of his skull.

And so with what remains of his willpower his chin leads the way, driving bluntly into the concrete, up the wall, and with a gulp of pain he raises the bruised right arm and guides it to the answering button, gently grazing it.

...

Hello, who's there?

...

Hello...? Can you at least say something?

...

Just speak, please! Anything... Please...

...

PLEASE!

The gash seems to relish the petrifying disappointment, for it squirms and stretches, as if to murmur: that's... alright, I'll always be... you no matter what... are no matter where.. He stares into the infinity that severs equally him from the bed and the wireless phone. A solid, impenetrable void. No longer can he return, nor can he reach forward. What seems like an eternity collapses on his shoulders, and everything gradually blurs into the silent lights like sap bubbling from his glass eyes as he lies there, frozen. Outside, only the cruel rain and its merciless thunder and its everlasting blows finally offer him a remnant of solace.

From one side of the ridge looking down he can see the coniferous forest, where sun-soaked dew like amber drops linger on still-tender cones. On the other side the rain still falls, but behind the layers of grey is her silhouette, an engraving from which tangerine radiance extends like arms among the thickened sky. He looks down. He can choose to go down either way, but who is to tell him that the greenery is not a mirage, an artifice of the sun onto his parched eyes, or that the light, once touched, will surely embrace him like he would? He looks down. Life doesn't always pay out what you strive for. To realise everything without the price of ever grasping them, that alone is good for him. And so from the edge of the mountain he decides to stay there, looking down, looking down.

When he wakes up, the wireless has already rung for a while.

Honey, is it really you? How long has it been? How are you?

...

Honey? Can you hear me? It's all noise coming from you.

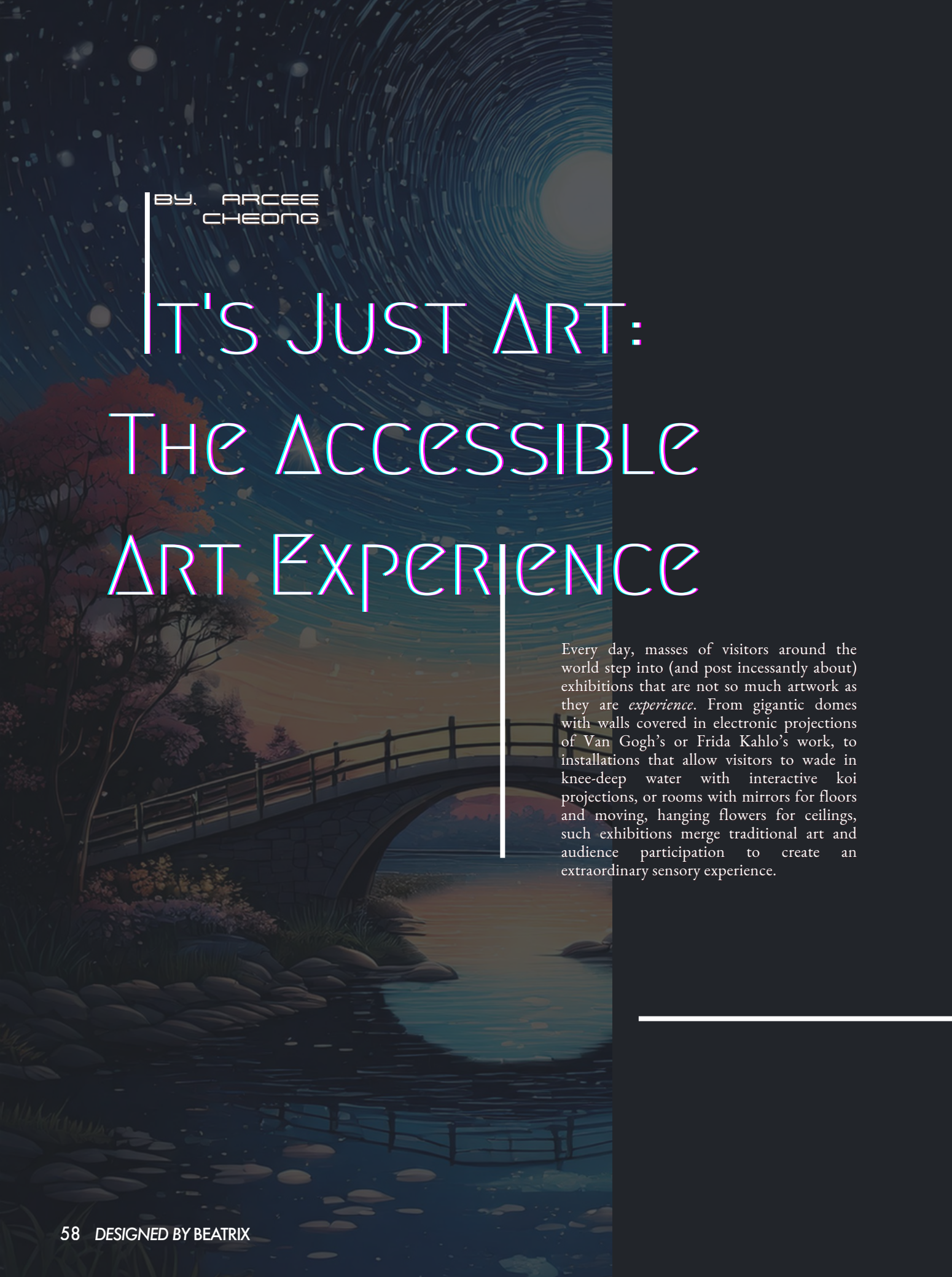
...

Is everything alright there?

...

He drops the line. Molten pieces slither down from the corner of the lips, drooping loosely in front of the necrosed jaws into the trachea where tiny flowers green and grey have blossomed, next to the left chest which has stretched into a translucent film with each murmur of the heart, its outline taut against the skin as if eager to be severed from the hollow, rotting husk. On the right side, a bed of mucus gathers on the floor, slinking its rancid fume towards the nearby piles of clothes, next to which an circular ball rolls around like a pebble skipping across a forever-expanding pond, from afar the ball looks like it's hovering in place.

One day in the future when everything becomes the past, sunlight will perch on the windowsill and illuminate the room, in which one can see a ball rolling forever.



BY. ARCEE
CHEONG

IT'S JUST ART: THE ACCESSIBLE ART EXPERIENCE

Every day, masses of visitors around the world step into (and post incessantly about) exhibitions that are not so much artwork as they are *experience*. From gigantic domes with walls covered in electronic projections of Van Gogh's or Frida Kahlo's work, to installations that allow visitors to wade in knee-deep water with interactive koi projections, or rooms with mirrors for floors and moving, hanging flowers for ceilings, such exhibitions merge traditional art and audience participation to create an extraordinary sensory experience.

WHERE DID THIS TREND COME FROM?

Often called immersive art experiences, these emerging cultural phenomena—technology-driven, “interactive” alternatives to conventional visual exhibitions—have already proven their mettle as both cultural and economic giants. For example, Japanese arts collective teamLab’s Tokyo exhibition *Planets*¹ welcomed over 2.4 million visitors in 2023 alone, with ticket sales profits on par with the box-office revenues of the Met and other curatorial cornerstones. They’ve been saluted by many for their ability to pull mass audiences in from a wide spectrum of demographics in a time when both museum attendance and funding have witnessed unprecedented decline.

Yet, despite their efforts in making art more “accessible” to a wider range of casual visitors, in doing so they have irreparably altered the medium of art. The masterpieces of dead artists have been taken out of their original—and literal—frames and copied into a setup they were never intended to be viewed in. Given its recency, there’s no better time to question the merits of this particular evolution of art: will conventional exhibitions still be relevant in fifty-years’ time? What implications may a trend like this have for museums in both our near and far future? And whose responsibility is it to ensure that museum exhibitions remain not only accessible, but sustainable?

While installation art using non-traditional materials has existed since the advent of post-modernist art in the 1960s, the prevalence of these commercial large-scale, projection- and digital technology-reliant exhibitions has only begun to manifest in the mid-2010s, with teamLab’s permanent *Future World* exhibition in Singapore’s Art Science Museum opening in 2016 and Yayoi Kusama’s *Life is the Heart of a Rainbow* in 2017 drawing record-setting crowds to the National Gallery Singapore.

Much of the growth of interactive art can be attributed to the influence of social media and the globalised internet on museums: museums feel forced to shrink their “content” into bite-sized, marketable bits to cater to an audience that increasingly demands accessibility in easy-to-consume, pleasurable amounts. This artistic industrialisation often leads to the implementation of “Art Stack” models. In these, technology companies collaborate with artists to facilitate wide-scale, monetisable experiences whose vertically integrated systems of production resemble the process of creating a mass-marketable product more than it does an art piece.

¹ Felix Barber & András Szántó, “Immersive Art Is Exploding, and Museums Have a Choice to Make.”

WHAT COULD THIS MEAN FOR ART?

Perhaps a more pressing implication of this trend is its reframing of the conventional art exhibition. By simply touting themselves as “immersive” and “accessible”, these immersive art experiences inadvertently label regular art as being “un-immersive” and “highbrow” by default, conforming to the already popular assumption that the appreciation of art—especially conceptual, post-modern pieces—requires some sort of formal education or academic prerequisite. The Internet also perpetuates this misunderstanding: ever seen one of those “pointing at works we think we could make” TikToks, or someone saying that they don’t understand a Pollock or a Rothko?

However, this is a notion that remains blatantly untrue, and is limiting in its definition of what “appreciating an artwork” can accomplish. Using aids such as informative wall-text, visual-audio guides, and purposefully-curated layouts, conventional exhibitions aim to both educate the audience on new perspectives or information about the world, as well as challenge the way they’d previously viewed an art form or subject matter. They are, at their core, historical and pedagogical projects: works which highlight the historical contributions of an artist instead of their aesthetic values, and which aim to impart insight into the significance and context of the work onto its audience.

In comparison, “immersive experiences” marketed on their newfangled technology or impressive visuals may risk underrepresenting or glamorising the history behind their exhibits, creating no drive for challenging the audience’s intellectual or philosophical boundaries, and erasing the societal circumstances in which these artists originally worked. Furthermore, immersive experiences, which are often catered towards families and the younger generation, may constitute many people’s first experience with art titans like Van Gogh or Monet. By overly aiming to please these crowds without challenging or taking them out of their comfort zone, these experiences may stifle people’s long-term enjoyment or investment in the arts, leading to a long-term fall in the general public’s appreciation of art as these trends are replaced by other, more exciting, and “immersive” opportunities.

THE ARGUMENT FOR A MIDDLE GROUND

Despite this, the hard truth is that museums have to adapt to the audiences of their time, and there’s no denying that some form of capitulation to profits and popular demand is required in our increasingly volatile and capitalist society. What remains key to the artistic merit and success of these exhibitions, then, is to adapt the original artists’ works with care. Cheap adaptations of two-dimensional works simply aren’t going to work by principle: they destroy the framing of the artwork and alter the relationship with space and viewer that previously allowed the work to be effective.

In doing so, the legacy of the post-impressionist artist, whose bold experimentation with colours despite restriction to the limits of canvas and paint played a key part in forming the movement’s iconic identity, is tainted. Van Gogh’s famous *Sunflowers* are, in part, powerful because of how the painting’s original size is reminiscent of a real vase of flowers, and because of the depth and texture created by his thick, characteristic brushstrokes. By blowing a picture of it up and pasting it on all four walls of a room, it just becomes nothing but an image.

The onus, ultimately, lies on curators and museum coordinators to keep the integrity of their “experiences” in mind—in the same manner that they would for any exhibition. And there’s no time like the present to watch this develop. As world-renowned museums begin to heavily integrate virtual technology into their exhibition rosters and programmes, curators will have to choose wisely and carefully to ensure both the preservation of their represented works and artists’ merit, as well as manage their reputation (and profits) as important cultural institutions. The medium, format, and narrative through which their content is presented must value the artist’s legacy and provide meaning to the audience that can culminate in something beyond a pretty Instagram post or a novel, entertaining experience. These experiences of art mustn’t just be “accessible” nor “immersive”, but wholly and uniquely meaningful.

OUR TEAM



Chief Editor

ANGIE TRUONG HAI HA

Deputy Chief Editor

TANIA HO

Editors

AKSHITA JAIN
KOH YING XI ZANDER
RACHEL LEONG

Head of Design

MAH XIAO YU

Head of Marketing

WONG YEE CHING

Writers

ANANDAN VISHNU VARDNI
ANELKA TAY SALAM
ANISAH RANIYAH QAZI
ARCEE CHEONG
DANIELLA BONITA RULIN
DINH CAO TUE
FINN ANTON LIP
GERIN LIM WEN TING
GLENDAS NG
ISABEL LIM
JAZMINE LIN
JONATHAN JORAMSA
KYRA PHAN HSUEN RONG
LAETITIA CHIO WEI LING
LEONG JINGYI GRACE
NATANYA KEE
PRITHVI BHARDWAJ
REBECCA YONG
TAY KAI LI
TD NGUYEN
TONG AVERY
VIVIENNE TSUI

Designers

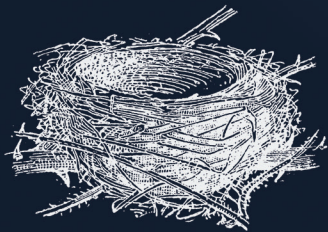
BEATRIX CHEN
CHEW JING YI
KAILY TING
MARIE OEI
PAN YUAN
PHYLLIS ZHANG
WATTAI BAN
YUVIKA JHAJHARIA

Marketers

HUANG KAI
KIM YUHA
NICOLE FELICITY NATHAN
SUFIIYA NAJEEB
TRAN NGUYEN THAO ANH
WAI FAI WONG
YUVIKA AGARWAL

Finance

KHERIA AVYAYA
SAMAIRA GUPTA
YUVIKA JHAJHARIA



THE RIDGE

@NUSSUTHERIDGE

THERIDGE.SG

COVER DESIGN BY MAH XIAO YU
PHOTOGRAPH BY ZAC ONG

NUSSU