

UNCW PLS FACULTY ABROAD

Faculty: Paige Tan

University: National University of Singapore

Country: Singapore

Duration: Academic Year 1991-1992



Photo: Downtown Singapore, postcard view

What did you do abroad that you couldn't do at your home university?



Study abroad changed my life in more ways than one. It helped me to discover one of my life's passions, the study of Southeast Asian politics. I was fascinated with how one-party dominant regimes like Singapore's and Malaysia's continued to hold power even as economic growth barreled ahead. The ideologies (communitarianism) and tactics (manipulation of law, threats, control of information, etc) of the regimes are eternally interesting.

At left: Opposition politician Chee Soon Juan reading the Singapore Constitution in public. He was arrested for doing so. Singapore, 1998.

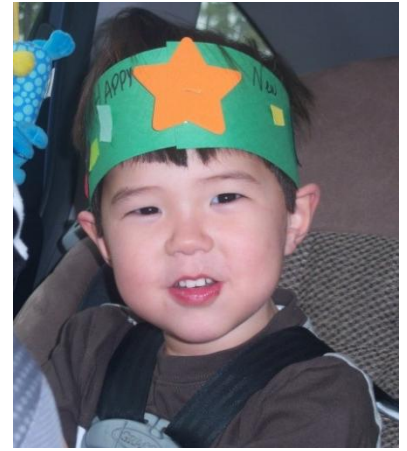
The time I studied in Singapore was also a time of great change. The Cold War had come to an end, and Asians were scrambling to figure out what to make of the new world. Who were friends? Who were enemies? Was the world lapsing into trade blocks or evolving into an era of multilateral cooperation? To watch as the answers to those questions were developed was an amazing intellectual journey, one I am still on.

I also got to travel as I had never done before. I visited almost every state in next door Malaysia. I saw the Moorish architecture in Kuala Lumpur; I visited the high-tech island Penang. I travelled to the ancient city of Melaka, once one of the most advanced trading nations in the world. I remember going to Taman Negara (National Park) on an overnight train one night. The train dumped us at a whistlestop named Jerantut in the dark at 5am, and my roommate and I had to make our way through an overgrown jungle path for over a mile to the jetty to catch a boat that would take us further into the country's interior. The journey and the jungle were unforgettable.

What was different in you when you returned from study abroad?

I fell in love with Singapore and eventually a Singaporean. After my study abroad year, I went back to Singapore later to work at the university. I met my husband that second year in Singapore. Later, I went back to Singapore for a third year and had my son, who is a dual Singaporean/US citizen.

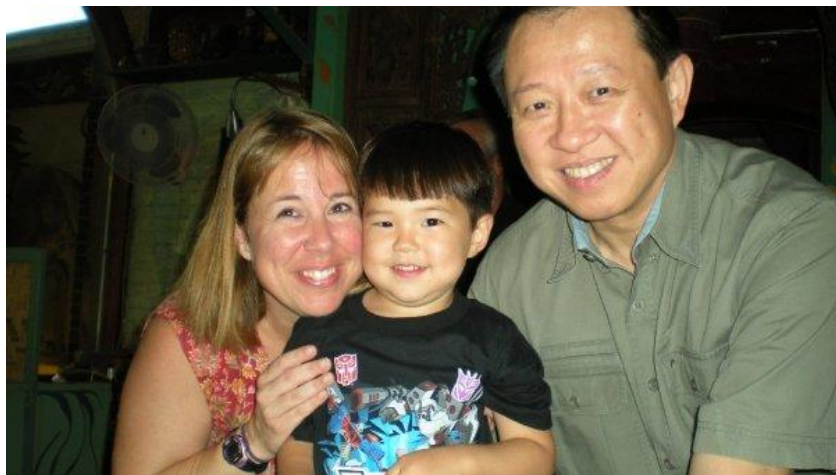
I also learned to see my own country in a new light. There are some things that are better in the US. However, there are some things that work better in Singapore. Narrow parochialism is one of the first things to fall among thoughtful participants in study abroad.



At right: Dr. Tan's son Pierce, age 3, 2009

Any other comments about study abroad for UNCW PLS students?

With the zeal of a religious convert, I want all of our UNCW PLS students to experience what I did in study abroad. You don't have to get married to someone you meet on study abroad, but travel, open your mind, read another country's news, talk to people about what makes them tick, make friends from all over the world, expand your understanding of what's better abroad and what's better at home, master a new language, study a new religion, learn an ancient form of dance, visit beaches and jungles, ride an elephant. The world is waiting . . .



The Tan Family: Paige, Pierce, and Tay Keong, Wilmington, NC, July 2009