Editing across cultural borders in Southeast Asia

Ilsa Sharp

About the author

Ilsa Sharp is a freelance editor, researcher and writer. For three decades she worked first as an editor for newspaper groups in Southeast Asia, mostly for the *Straits Times*, and subsequently as a Singapore-based freelancer. Ilsa has written a number of books on culture, on local history and on nature within that region. She commutes there regularly on assignments. Ilsa is also an active environmentalist. She currently lives in Perth, Western Australia, where she runs Ilsa Sharp Editorial Services.

Introduction

A disclaimer first: I have referenced this presentation broadly to 'Southeast Asia', admittedly a large and diverse region. Much of what I have to say is indeed applicable in part if not in whole to the region. However, for transparency's sake I should make it clear that the bulk of my experience has centred on Singapore, Malaysia and also Hong Kong, with only a few side forays into Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines.

I lived and worked in Singapore and Malaysia for a total of 30 years from 1968 to 1998 and have continued to commute in and out of the region on assignments since then. I have written, co-written or edited some 25 books about aspects of the region, mostly on historical heritage or on natural history heritage. Most of these have been produced on commission for publishers or corporate clients based in Southeast Asia. It has been a challenging but always fascinating journey, full of memorable 'aha!' moments.

Deceptive appearances

Urban Southeast Asia can be a bit of a minefield for western professionals, precisely for the reason that the modern Asian today is often highly sophisticated, English speaking, and ostensibly cosmopolitan, well-travelled and well-educated.

Or that is how modern Asians may appear to you when they put their westernised hats on, which they are adept at doing. But frankly, this impression is often little more than a mirage. In reality there are always cultural factors working under the surface, whether or not you can actually see them. To be truly effective when in Southeast Asia, you need be sensitised to these cultural factors, otherwise you will forever be politely treated as a stranger and a guest. You will be subtly isolated from the social and cultural undercurrents that really direct the country you are working in, and that inform the works you are editing.

So that we can better understand this situation, I have divided my analysis into four major categories or spheres:

1. **Culture and society**: social norms, and multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-lingual elements, including superstition and religion. These are all powerful factors influencing editing and editorial practices in the region.

2. **Language**: divergence from 'standard English'. Even societies like Singapore and Malaysia, ostensibly English speaking, on closer examination reveal deep divergence from 'standard English' in usage and in their understanding of English. This divergence includes the widespread use of strongly idiosyncratic local dialect English. All of these factors again affect 'standard' editing practices if effective communication is to be achieved.

3. **Government and politics, law**: the nature of Southeast Asian governments and democracy and their relationship with communication media. These, combined with a body of controlling legislation, ensure even more watchful editing practices than usual.

4. **Professional environment**: the weakness, or absence, of professional associations, literary agencies and other support groups. This environment leaves editors more or less isolated in the Southeast Asian context; frequently also, job descriptions are conflated so that one individual will act as both writer and editor, at the same time as liaising directly with a commissioning client as project manager, possibly even without a publisher intermediary—this can impact specifically on editing practices and efficiencies.

Culture

Despite all my experience in the region and my Leeds University degree in Chinese Studies, I find I can still be brought up short every now and again by some new professional experience in Southeast Asia that will demonstrate how great the cultural gap can sometimes be. There is always something new to learn.

Superstition and society

I will start with one of my favourite stories to illustrate the cultural issue:

I was commissioned in 1996 to work with Singaporean university biologists on a book celebrating the biodiversity and history of one of Singapore's nature reserves. The reserve is set on a hill, as its Malay name *Bukit Timah* implies, since *Bukit* means 'hill'. I hear your snorts of incredulity: you can hardly believe there is any such thing as a 'nature reserve' in densely populated urban Singapore. Funnily enough, most Singaporeans are so irrevocably urbanised that even they are not aware of what is in their own backyard, but in fact there are several quite high-value forest reserves on the island, and they are all the more precious for being found almost in the heart of a city!

But I digress. A wealthy sponsor—a Singapore-Chinese real-estate development company—funded this book's production. The sponsor already had some properties grouped under the umbrella corporate name *Summit*. Looking for a catchy title for the book and considering the hill-top location of the forest reserve, I came up with *Summit with a view*. Only to be gobsmacked when the Chinese tycoon owner of the sponsoring company sent back a message saying that this title was unacceptable owing to the 'number of strokes' required to write out the title, which amounted to an unlucky number!

You may be aware of how important lucky numbers can be to the Chinese and you may also know that in Chinese calligraphy, Chinese characters are written in a strictly pre-ordained sequence of brush or pen strokes, left to right and top to bottom. These strokes can be counted so reliably that the total number of strokes in any one character is the basis of how you locate that character in a Chinese dictionary.

But, I protested, this book is in English not Chinese! However, the sponsor was not for turning. He had counted how many strokes the English words entailed and that was that. I spent the next few days puzzling over how I could preserve the essence of my book title idea and yet still come up with a luckier number of strokes. Finally, I came up with *View from the summit* and this was duly pronounced 'OK'.

A VIEW
from the
SUMMIT

The Story
of
Bukit Timah
Nature
Reserve

I have never been able to figure out how the sponsor counted those strokes nor what number they threw up, but I can tell you, I was mightily relieved to get rid of this thorny problem that for quite some while had held up the book's production schedule! This was certainly one of the more bizarre incidents in my life as an editor in Southeast Asia.

Respect for authority

Societies like Singapore and Malaysia, despite being outwardly westernised and modern, still cleave to traditional values and what are vaguely termed 'family values' or indeed 'Asian values'—and this latter term is about as imprecise as the one we use when we declare something or somebody to be 'un-Australian'.

In a word, Asians are largely conservative. Respect for authority, be it in the form of elders and parents, employers or government, is still a strong value, as are hierarchical structures of authority—the separate executive toilet and the closed-door office are still accepted perks for the boss class of the region. There can be dire consequences following any perceived critical reference to many figures of authority throughout the region.

This deeply ingrained attitude was splendidly articulated by Singapore's former Minister for Information, Communication and the Arts, George Yeo, in 1995:

'Remember your place in society before you engage in political debate … debate cannot degenerate into a free-for-all where no distinction is made between the senior and junior partner. You must make distinctions—what is high, what is low, what is above, what is below—and then within this, we can have a debate, we can have a discussion.'

These kinds of values compromise even the smallest details of writing and editing: for example, because of Asian respect for authority and honorifics in general, especially those denoting education, such as 'Doctor' or 'Professor', it might be considered very difficult for an Asian text to dispense with the title 'Mr' before all names, and very hard to downgrade a cap 'M' Minister to a lower-case 'm' minister.

The idea of addressing a minister by their first name as happens routinely in Australia would utterly outrage and embarrass any Asian. And that poignant photograph of a kerbside noodle-seller might well be the standout picture to illustrate text or to dramatise a cover in your professional judgement, but such professional assessments can never prevail if the noodle-seller picture will upstage or displace a portrait of the book's sponsoring captain of industry, or worse, the Prime Minister or the President.

Telling it like it is

Candour, directness and openness are not admired in Southeast Asia: they look more like rudeness and shamelessness to most Asians. Sex, for example, is not easily discussed in public, or in writing. You need to choose your words carefully. Such brushing of the hard stuff under the carpet can also lead to instances of almost touching and possibly perilous innocence.

I well remember, back in 1978, the bawdy guffaws among western-educated editorial staff when Singapore's premier English-language daily *The Straits Times*, a notoriously conservative publication, came up with the memorable front-page heading '*How to get the best out of the 69*' attributed to a speech by the then Foreign Minister S Rajaratnam. When the penny dropped, the heading was amended to … *get the best 69* in later editions.

The reference was in fact not sexual, but political, since there were then 69 seats in the Singapore Parliament. But no western editor attuned to the potential double entendre would ever have let such a heading escape into the wild. The saving grace in this case is that the vast majority of Singaporean newspaper readers could not spot the joke anyway because they would not have understood it—or would have refused to understand it—even if you had pointed it out to them.

The interpretation of written communication in societies like Singapore and Malaysia has long been characterised by the need always to 'read between the lines' simply because nothing is ever said directly. Oblique has been the norm.

If you write only about the positive and constructive, these societies seem to think, it will become real. It is very similar to the sympathetic magic practised by early cave painters who believed that if they drew a bull being speared, their hunts would be successful. So in Asia writing about negative realities becomes a jinx, a kind of black magic—unless of course, such public negativity has actually been encouraged or sanctioned by the 'powers that be', in which case the respect for higher authority overrides the negativity phobia, and anything goes! (Which is why, if you are an Asia analyst and you spot any such attack, you then need to dig to find who or what is really behind it). In general however, what you say in private is quite a different thing, but anything in the public arena, anything spoken or published, must be formal, polite, positive and constructive. Hence the inability to tell it like it is becomes what in the West is perceived as institutionalised hypocrisy.

Another appropriate metaphor for this complex mindset is the *wayang*, the ancient theatre of Southeast Asia that draws both on the shadow-puppet epics of Java and the histrionic posturing of Chinese street-opera. The *wayang* or shadow play of public—and published—discourse has no relationship with everyday reality on the ground. It is just shadow play.

The often-discussed eastern concept of 'face' plays a large part in this cultural attitude.

The internet and in particular personal blogging as well as Facebook have begun to change this picture, but in the halls of government and commerce, in the corridors of power, this schizophrenic tussle between 'truth' and 'face' continues to be a major factor in any writer's or editor's professional life. And the price of ignoring these hidden rules can be far more costly than it would be in a western society. The Asian seeks consensus in preference to a constructive argument, and abhors outright disagreement—aggression even more. This leads to what westerners might see as shillyshallying, the failure to take a firm position, an Asian addiction to sitting on the fence, to achieving balance rather than expressing an opinion. From the western point of view, this can lead to very weak forms of expression; but if you as editor attempt to strengthen them, to make them more forceful, you may be crossing the cultural line a step too far, and could get yourself into hot water.

Language

Many of you may remember a very good example of the serious problems that can be caused by cultural misunderstandings arising just from language. Back in 1993 Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating called Malaysia's Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamed 'recalcitrant' for not attending the first summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation Forum, causing uproar in Malaysia and a near breach in diplomatic relations.

Recalcitrant

A major factor in this kerfuffle was the translation of the word *recalcitrant* into Malay that at that time rendered it as *kurang ajar*. But this phrase is intensely insulting to a Malay and carries far more acrimony than the original *recalcitrant*. It is tantamount to calling someone an uncivilised brute or a low-class peasant—in essence it refers to a bad upbringing and therefore by implication also insults your parentage. Even the alternative Malay translation *kepala keras* (more or less 'bone-head') is pretty insulting when applied to a country's prime minister. It was the nuances of language and culture that together brought about one of the coldest chills in Australia's relationship with Malaysia in recent times.

English as she is broke

Why 'as she is broke'?[1] Singapore is 74 per cent ethnically Chinese, 13 per cent Malay and 9 per cent Indian but ostensibly is English-speaking, so the above particular miscommunication might not have occurred so easily there. In Malaysia, the use of Malay as the premier national language has produced quite low English-language standards, whereas Singapore has consciously cultivated English as the key to globalisation and economic advancement. This has been done alongside Singapore's other three designated official national languages, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil.

Nonetheless, the longer you work in Singapore and with Singaporeans, the more you learn that the English language runs only surface deep there. True, many of the older generation educated under the British colonial regime when there were still British expatriate teachers in Singapore schools, and also those educated in the still transitional era of the 1960s when many of the local teachers themselves had the benefit of colonial teachers, have a relatively firm grasp of the language.

Singlish

But there has always been a vibrant street patois usually labelled 'Singlish' and this has now escaped from its once informal habitat into the formal zone. Back in the 1960s and 1970s most English-educated Singaporeans knew how to switch from one zone to the other at

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1   I owe this charming pun to my good friend Singaporean author Sylvia Toh Paik Choo.

will, using Singlish only in private among themselves, but turning on a slightly more formal English when addressing foreigners or people in authority over them.

The difference today is that many younger Singaporeans do not even know they are using Singlish, and use it freely at all times. Combined with the new emphasis on proficiency in Mandarin among Chinese Singaporeans since the early 1980s, this situation has led to a decline in standard English, both spoken and written. It is a decline that manifests itself in the national newspaper of record, *The Straits Times*, as well as in all media, but can also be found among teachers, and in speeches by the political leadership. As a result, the decline is snowballing because of students' flawed role models. The authorities know this and worry about it. Why else would editors like myself still be working in the region, and why else would Singapore periodically run *Speak Better English* campaigns?

Editors working in this environment are challenged constantly, not least because the majority of Singaporeans truly *believe* they are speaking standard English, and can easily be offended if it is suggested that they are not! Hence the editor's role is not only to effect the actual editing of local texts but also to assuage wounded feelings—a job that requires quite different, people skills.

Let me digress here for a moment to say that Singlish in the right place at the right time is utterly delightful, a creative and dynamic fusion language borrowing both vocabulary and structures from Malay, from Chinese dialects, from Tamil and from English, to produce an expressive creole that is well worth 'learning'—just sit quietly on a bus in Singapore one day and listen to the heavily accented conversations around you. You will not recognise it as the English it actually is. Yet no standard English could possibly match the vitality of comic exchanges such as, 'Wah! So *manja* like dat one, she one kind *lah*! Don' play-play!'

Translation: 'My goodness! (*Wah!* being a Chinese-dialect exclamation, and *lah!* being a Malay emphatic suffix) she's such a total flirt (*manja* being the Malay word for coquettish behaviour, fluttering one's eyelids), seriously!' (the doubling up of the verb 'play' deriving from the Malay phrase *main-main*, to fool or play around).

As far as I am able, I use Singlish myself to smooth communication with ordinary Singaporeans. To this day, I will gleefully announce to all that I have *chope* or reserved a seat in a restaurant or theatre by plonking a packet of tissues on it while I am away from it, a quintessentially and sometimes irritating Singaporean custom!

Indeed, Singlish is such an extraordinary, and still evolving, phenomenon that I have attached a short list of some key publications that describe its unique features and vocabulary, for your interest. There is also a substantial body of academic work on the topic both by Professor Anthea Fraser Gupta of the School of English at Leeds University in England and by David Deterding at the Universiti Brunei Darussalam. And you will find an extensive entry on the subject in Wikipedia as well as a further bibliography on the website <www. singlishdictionary.com/>.

Once upon a time, Singaporeans only said that they would '*on* the light' (switch on the light), '*horn* you' (toot the car horn to let you know that they have arrived at your place) or '*tap on* you' (tap your expertise or advice) in the spoken vernacular; today they will also write it down quite happily in a formal text. And if you query them, they will probably reply in Singlish, '*Why you worry?*' which means 'What business is it of yours?'

Under these circumstances, the editor has to make decisions daily about whether or not to allow local words and phrases such as *shiok* (Malay-origin, meaning 'terrific!' or 'great!'), *shake legs* (to be idle, loll around), or *goondu* (possibly of Tamil origin, for a fool or an idiot). My own strategy has been to gear texts to the expected audience or readership, according to whether it is international, regional or purely local. In other words, I allow more Singlish in texts destined for purely local audiences.

The situation is complicated by the fact that Singlish is mutating over time and is becoming more and more sinicised as a natural consequence both of the growing power and influence of China and of increasing Chinese immigration into Singapore. This change has also been reinforced by the imposed mingling of all races during the national rite of passage for all Singaporean males—compulsory national service in the armed forces, in place since 1967.

In this environment, the Chinese majority and its own particular vernacular tends to dominate and to disseminate its own version of Singlish across the races. Malay and Indian Singaporeans speaking English with a 'Chinglish' accent is becoming a common phenomenon. So the Singlish of today differs from the Singlish of the recent past. There is a coming generation of Singaporeans that does not even understand the *pasar* (bazaar or market) Malay that up to quite recent times was the lingua franca of multi-lingual Singapore's backstreets. Already, local media like *The Straits Times* are 'translating' quite simple Malay terms such as *makan* (food) and *mee goreng* (fried noodles) inside explanatory brackets for the benefit of its own population.

Government

Books do not have to be banned if the objective is to control them. Laws that penalise the importers, distributors and sellers of certain types of books with certain content can do the job just as well; editors may also be held as culpable as the writers. The caution thus instilled may prompt the trade itself to withhold a title from the market without any ban ever having been pronounced. This in turn rolls back to dictate caution to the publishers and the writers at the other end of the chain, who would rather get their book onto the market than not.

Freedom of expression

The level of press freedom in a country is often an indicator of the general environment for written communication and therefore affects the work of publishers and editors too. In contrast with its wealth and apparent sophistication and evolving democracy, Singapore ranks 149th out of 179 countries on the 2013 edition of the World Press Freedom Index <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2013,1054.html> managed by the international Reporters Without Borders group, while Malaysia stands 145th, Thailand 135th and Indonesia 139th.

This means that between last year and this year Singapore has slipped 13 places, and Malaysia has slipped 23 places in the index, in contrast with Thailand and Indonesia whose ranking has improved slightly.

Self-censorship

Apart from deterrents to the local press such as renewable newspaper registration requirements and the survival from colonial times of one-time emergency laws permitting detention without trial, Singapore's Newspaper and Printing Presses Act also contains provisions against foreigners, including journalists, 'engaging in the domestic politics of

Singapore'. Australian author-priest Jim Minchin is one of the more recent casualties of this provision, having been only recently refused entry to Singapore at the airport despite longstanding ties with Singapore. In environments like these, suffice it to say that all writers and editors learn to measure their words carefully.

'OB markers'

The phrase 'OB markers' is commonly used by writers, journalists and editors in Singapore. It features in the title of a particularly revealing memoir recently published by Cheong Yip Seng the former Editor-in-Chief of the Singapore Press Holdings umbrella group that holds the daily *Straits Times* newspapers and many others[2].

The term 'OB markers' refers to the 'Out of Bounds' limits to freedom of speech that have been set in a kind of pact between the media and government. Singapore's former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong referred to them directly in 1994 when replying to an attack on government by feisty local author Catherine Lim. He said, 'I have to set the out of bounds markers clearly so that everyone knows the limits of openness and consultation. They do not include demolishing the respect for and standing of the Prime Minister and his government by systematic contempt and denigration in the media.'

These were pre-Facebook times. The tone of internet dialogues is far more lively these days, but these 'OB' principles still underlie many publishing decisions in Singapore. Some of the primary OB markers focus on race, religion, sex, security and defence. But the very problem with the OB markers is that they remain informal and not clearly defined, leading to understandable caution and self-censorship among writers. In his book, Cheong Yip Seng himself reports a bewildering array of OB markers encountered during his time as editor, including Stanley Gibbons the stamp dealer; carpet auctions; monosodium glutamate or MSG; *feng shui*, and unflattering pictures of politicians!

Professional environment

There is a scant supportive ecosystem for editors working in Southeast Asia, little oxygen to breathe. You are pretty much on your own.

Professional associations are few and far between—no Institute of Professional Editors counterpart even in superficially sophisticated Singapore, for instance, and no training courses or colleges, although there are about three targeted degree courses in Malaysia. If you look at the Singapore Book Publishers' Association website <www.singaporebookpublishers.sg/index.html>, you will note that where there is any information about careers in the industry, desirable qualifications include everything from good language skills to organisational ability, but no mention is made of the need for professional diplomas—chiefly because such diplomas are few and far between.

Such training is largely subsumed under journalism or mass communications degrees, while professional development is largely achieved on the job combined with periodic workshops and seminars, many of which are offered by the non-profit National Book Development

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2   Cheong Yip Seng (2012). *OB markers: my Straits Times story*. Singapore: Straits Times Press.
    ISBN 9789814342339.

Council of Singapore <www.bookcouncil.sg/index.php>. Much of the Council's work however seems to focus more on writers, content creation, and publishers, with not much specific attention to editing. The Council does however nurture the avowed mission of positioning Singapore as an Asian publishing hub and has recently been working more vigorously towards that objective.

The conflation of editorial roles

It is quite common for writers in this region to experience only minimal editing when processing their work through publishers, so there is a heavy burden on writers to get it right the first time. It is even more common for writers to double up as their own editors and proofreaders, with either a publisher or a commercial commissioning client such as a corporation or government department dictating the broad parameters of what can and cannot be said. And believe me, they do indeed dictate that! The client's, or even the publisher's desire to control content and style is a natural outcome of the unique Southeast Asian socio cultural and political environments described earlier in this paper. Often clients will try to rewrite draft texts themselves, causing chaos with style, flow and structure.

Project management

That desire to control can approach anal-retentive or obsessive-compulsive behaviour at times. There is very little trust in or respect for the professional editor. Another natural outcome of these unique environments is that both private and public clients will pick over the text of any work destined for publication relentlessly, commonly bulldozing the writer or editor into multiple drafts, four drafts being the minimum. Personally, all my contracts in Asia carry a clause stating that any major revision after the first revision for a second draft will attract a surcharge on the fee for every revision! I also always structure my fees as progress instalments, including an upfront advance before beginning a project, since one never knows what is going to happen, nor when! A bird in the hand, I say …

Publishers' and clients' briefs to writers and editors can be imprecise and minimal. It is often a case of 'We'll know what we don't like when we see it.' When the chosen writer or editor cannot produce exactly what the client wants, they will be removed and another one hired, ad nauseam. I have seen books go through three or more complete publishing processes as a result, spanning anything from three to five years, with completely different teams working on each new phase, before publication is even possible. The potential for camels designed by committees need hardly be stated. The cumulative costs can only be imagined.

This leads me naturally to the subject of the extraordinary manifestations of private and public wealth. Southeast Asian clients, especially in Singapore, show a stunning willingness to waste their own money. They are capable of closing down entire book projects, regardless of the investment and expense already incurred, regardless of how much time has elapsed on the project, and regardless of how close to publication the book has got. I have seen hundreds of thousands of dollars go down the drain this way. Editors' and writers' contracts need to be crafted to reflect this distinct possibility by building in contingency fees for sudden and unexpected project closure, or a dramatic change of editorial direction.

This can happen simply because the project has been personality-driven all along. Typically, the chairman of the board who first wanted the book retires, moves on, or dies in the middle of the process. The new chairperson will almost always be a new broom intent on sweeping clean. It can also happen because the wider political climate changes.

Conclusion

So there you have it. Southeast Asia is not the easiest environment to work in but it remains sufficiently challenging to be always exciting, never boring. I am still going there regularly, begging for more! I would unhesitatingly advise anyone from Australia with the chance of experiencing it firsthand, 'Go west, young man (or woman)!'

Selected texts on Singlish

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Non-print

An excellent professional blog on the media and writing in Singapore is run by Associate Professor Cherian George (a Singaporean) at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore: <http://www.cheriangeorge.net/>.