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Making futures? Technology start-ups in Singapore

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“Come to Asia, Singapore is the Future!”

Aspirations of Scale

1. Introduction. Geographies of Technology Start-up Futurities

“The future is already here—it’s just not evenly distributed,” famously said the science fiction writer William Gibson, capturing the idea that there is a geography to technological and other advancements typically seen as futuristic. During the exploratory pilot stage of my research, when I travelled from Indonesia to Singapore, from Malaysia to Burma, I quickly came to realise that Singapore played a crucial role in the start-up scene, certainly in the experiences and imaginations of technology enthusiasts around Southeast Asia. Technology geeks I met in Indonesia talked excitedly about the times they visited Singapore and were impressed not only with the dazzling skyline but also with the technology and business community there, from which they adopted specific organisational practices. Malaysian web start-up founders explained that it is much more reasonable to incorporate their businesses in Singapore because the legal processes are much faster there, and the tax regime is more favourable. One Malaysian founder, who had worked in Silicon Valley before returning to Malaysia and starting his company, explicitly stated that running a business in Singapore compared to Malaysia would be like facing the ‘real world’. For him, Singapore had the predatory competition and flow of finance that he associated with business in the ‘real world’. While in Burma, many web technology enthusiasts’ stories circulated around the aspiration to move to Singapore for work because of the wealth and quality of life they felt it would offer them.

The sense was that Singapore was perceived as being more in *real-time* with ‘the world’ or more into ‘the future’ as compared to the rest of the region. Perceived temporal difference between Singapore and other locations in Southeast Asia was also stressed

when people said that *time flies* in Singapore as compared to where they are from, or as one of my Indonesian friends remarked - “Even escalators move faster there.” People also scoffed at the Singaporean laws, for example, forbidding jaywalking or chewing gums, which were often described as ‘petty’, and noted that Singapore is too organised to be enjoyable. Despite these remarks, the general sense was that in the perceptions of the people who were passionate about new technologies and technology businesses, Singapore was *ahead* of the rest of the region and moving at a different *speed*.

Once in Singapore, the narratives about Singapore’s future were much more diverse and contested. On the one hand, many of the people whom I met proclaimed that this is the ‘Asian century’ and Singapore is the perfect location from which to capitalise on the emerging global future. As I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter, this very dominant narrative, especially amongst the many Western expatriates in the tech scene, combined with the excellent living conditions that English-speaking Singapore offered, was part of the reason why many of them had moved here in the past years following the 2008 financial crisis. A couple of my interlocutors from Western Europe even explicitly argued that “Europe is dead” and “the future is here” (i.e. in Singapore/Asia). On the other hand, many technology-focused people in Singapore were also very sceptical about the creative potential of Singapore’s future. They argued that when it comes to technology and entrepreneurship, Singapore needs to ‘catch up’ with the West to compete in the global economy. Singapore was described as too sterile for innovation, too small for starting a high-growth business, and/or the people too conservative to be willing ‘to do what it takes’ to create or support a genuinely innovative technology business. In these stories, the future was implicitly located either as an exclusive property of Silicon Valley or seen as attainable through cooperation with other countries in the region and by major shifts in the norms and values of the society. These narratives lamented the lack of liberal culture in Singapore and saw it as a crucial part of success in the high-tech economy. Overall, both the optimistic and pessimistic narratives shared a common feature - they assigned temporal categories to geographical spaces - associating some places with the future, others with lagging behind, and, importantly, attributed value to being more in the future. Exploring these discourses, showing their historical trajectories, and the work they did is the central task of this chapter. In this chapter, I will explore the work this imaginary geography my interlocutors drafted was doing and asking in whose favour it worked. I will examine the production of this discourse at regional and local technology start-up conferences and Singapore-based blogs catering to this audience.

To combine such narratives about the geographies of technology start-up futures, I use the notion of ‘imaginative geographies’ (Said 1978). This term highlights the ways in which the imaginative aspect of thinking in terms of the future is linked with spa-

tial geographies. It thus opens the space for a discussion of discourses' material consequences. In my application of the concept, however, I rather refer to them as imaginary geographies to emphasise the fact that they are created through imagination, not that they are necessarily creative, as the term 'imaginative' would imply. This also aligns with the way the term is used in science and technology studies when discussing, for example, sociotechnical imaginaries (see, for example, Jasanoff and Kim 2015).

Imaginary geographies and scale-making

The concept of 'imaginative geography' was famously developed by literary critic Edward Wadie Said in his work on Orientalism published in 1978, where he analysed how Europe had discursively produced 'the Orient' as its primary 'Other'. Said illustrated how, rather than understanding space as an objective phenomenon, instead it gains meaning beyond what is empirically known about the place. The meaning is socially produced and deeply embedded in power relations. Therefore, the concept of 'imaginative geography' also allows me to talk about the production of knowledge in the context of global power hierarchies and examine what role different spaces are expected to play in relation to one another. In this approach, I am picking up the baton from anthropologists studying globalisation, who recognise that "spaces have always been hierarchically interconnected" (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 8) and social change then is not something that happens when 'different cultures meet', but instead concerns itself with how the existing perceived differences are re-articulated in the connection. This chapter then addresses the question of how to study futurities ethnographically by offering to explore the temporalities of global sociopolitical imaginaries. What is Singapore's position in this geography of start-up futurities? What connections are re-defined, and how and what power relationships are re-established?

The concept of 'scale' is central for geographers (Massey 1998; Marston 2000; Bird et al. 1993) who tend to see it as a principal way for spatial differentiation, denoting various levels such as "body, home, community, urban, region, nation, global" (Neil 1993, 101). While geographer Neil Smith suggests that scale "defines the boundaries and bounds the identities around which control is exerted and contested," (Bird et al. 1993, 101), I tend to agree with Doreen Massey (1998) who points out that social life is far more complex to be divided in clear cut and distinct scales. Instead, what I, following Tsing, am interested in, is an exploration of 'scale making' - the claims about the existence and often access to, the importance (or non-importance, for that matter) of certain scales, which underlie imaginary geographies - such as 'local', 'national', 'regional', or 'global'.

In relation to understanding the ways in which space and temporality are intertwined and constructed Tsing's approach to studying scale-making and conjuring is instructive because it allows to explore how certain localities are created as sites of aspirations for a variety of differently situated players and how these aspirations can both enforce their claims as well as create moments of friction (Tsing 2000, 2004). Therefore, to study futurities ethnographically, I suggest exploring what scales they require to imagine and what needs to be unimagined for these futures to seem viable. I connect Anna Tsing's notion of 'scale making' to futurities because temporality is an inherent part of any scale-making project. In this chapter, I will show how, through start-up conferences, blog discussions, and other publicly discussed contexts, narratives about Asia as the future and Singapore as a convenient location from which to access this future materialised. These narratives evoked the scales of Singapore as a 'global city', 'regional centre', and partaking in 'global start-up culture'. The concepts of scale making and conjuring (Tsing 2000) are useful as they reveal the limitations of such global claims by showing when, how and by whom such images are crafted within various projects. At an analytical level, this allows us "to find the specificity and contingency of the global" (Tsing 2000, 120). Singapore positioning itself as a 'global city' is a very particular claim on geography and a very particular expression of imagining Singapore's position and relationships in the world. Likewise, claiming something to be part of 'global start-up culture' is a particular claim on relationships, connections and disconnections alike.

Scales are not neutral ways of viewing the world, but "must be brought into being: proposed, practiced, and evaded, as well as taken for granted" (2000, 120). Tsing points out that the more scale-making projects intersect, the more dramatic the performance and the larger the likelihood that people will believe in the viability of the particular future image. However, the possible overlapping of multiple scale-making projects is a contingent process rather than something that can be prefigured and predicted.

I will discuss how entrepreneurs, investors and entrepreneurs aligned in their support for these scales, which depicted the rising middle classes and digital consumers of populous Asian countries as conveniently accessible from Singapore. This narrative was crucial for attracting capital, people, and ideas to Singapore. Yet, I will also show how, despite Singapore's convenient location, one could only unlock the so-called 'Asia Opportunity' by applying Silicon Valley's practices. These scales relied on creating temporal differences between the 'more in the future' West aka Silicon Valley and 'not yet in the future Asia'. Crucially, scale-making and conjuring highlight how these processes of imagining rely on generating difference and perpetuating inequality.

The chapter questions this imaginary geography in which Singapore stands central vis-a-vis Silicon Valley and Asia. I ask what sort of temporal relationships and social and historical contexts generated and sustained the appeal of this geography and explore

the limitations of this futurity ethnographically. Then, I will argue that the narrative of 'The Asia Opportunity' relies on a much older discourse of 'Asia on the Rise', which is re-cast in a way that allows a select few to join in and benefit from the rise of Asia. Asia' is implicitly seen as less developed, and the future of its development provides spectacular growth opportunities. This essentially was a neo-colonial capitalist and techno-orientalist imagination of the future where development would happen through inclusion in the market. It shows that old geographies of power have not necessarily disappeared but underlie and inform the new geographies of technopreneurship and innovation futures. I will conclude by examining a practice called visa runs and argue that 'the entrepreneur' was oftentimes placed precariously in this imaginary geography.

2. The Asia Opportunity

In 2011, in a video published on youtube.com, Wei Yung Huang , the co-founder of The Accelerator, invited aspiring entrepreneurs and hard-core technologists from around the world to follow his example and come to Singapore and start their businesses with the support of The Accelerator's incubation programme. According to him, moving to Singapore is a smart decision for the following reasons:

"The reason we are doing this here in Singapore is because Singapore is a great place to start a business - it's easy to get funding, and it's easy to get talent. Come to Asia - Asia is the future, and Singapore is the dot com capital of Southeast Asia. This is a great place to be."¹

Wei's words emphasising Singapore's strategic position were reinforced by images of Singapore's spectacular skyline in combination with more traditional Chinese shop houses, people rushing on well-paved streets and riding a shiny, clean metro, overall giving a sense of a modern, dynamic metropolitan hub with a hint of 'Asian' history. Earlier in the same video, Wei's business partner, Oscar Fisher, had already explained that it is Singapore's strategic location in Asia that makes it *the* location for start-ups, where

"within something like four hours flying time of Singapore we've got about a third or half of the world's population."

¹ References to the quoted videos and websites here and elsewhere are removed with the interlocutor's privacy in mind and can be provided upon request.

The interplay between Singapore's 'future readiness', accessibility of talent and financial capital, and location vis-a-vis the rest of Asia in this video established Singapore as the location from which to capitalise on the future that was emerging in Asia. This was one of the two promotional videos for The Accelerator program they had made with professional video production and circulated online to attract start-up founders to apply. The other, titled "The Asia Opportunity", featured well-established technology entrepreneurs and investors explaining why they are locating themselves and their businesses in 'Asia'.

In their description of Singapore as desirable through its location in relation to the countries surrounding it, Wei and Oscar reproduced a narrative endorsed by the Singaporean government. In his 2001 National Day Rally speech, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong had invited people to think of Southeast Asia as the 'hinterland of the past' and instead think of Singapore in relation to 'greater Asia', a hinterland which can be reached within seven hours of flying time (Yew 2011, 275).

The entrepreneurs Wei Yung Huang and Oscar Fisher weren't the only ones suggesting 'Asia' as the destination for the young and ambitious. A few months before The Accelerator had shared their videos on YouTube, The Economist had featured an article, "Go East, young moneyman", explaining that Asia, and in particular locations such as Hong Kong, Singapore and Shanghai, became the prime destinations for graduates from prestige business schools in the West. This trend has intensified since the financial crisis of 2008 ("Go East, Young Moneyman" 2011). While The Economist mainly discussed young people in finance (which is predominantly young white males, see Ho 2009a), seasoned technology writer from San Francisco Sarah Lacy, in her book "Brilliant, Crazy, Cocky: How the Top 1% of Entrepreneurs Profit From Global Chaos" (2011) described a similar trend amongst aspiring technology entrepreneurs. In the book, Lacy introduces the well-educated youth from the USA who have relocated to Beijing with the goal of starting their technology companies. Lacy points out that this would be exactly the type of crowd which would have come to Silicon Valley in the 1990s. Yet now these "opportunists, pioneers and risk takers" have discovered China, which is

"the bright homing beacon for the Western world's profit-seekers looking to get their piece of the explosive 1.3 billion-person-strong Chinese dream." (69-70)

A popular American investor named Jim Rogers in 2007 had moved to Singapore, announcing that "If you were smart in 1807 you moved to London, if you were smart in 1907 you moved to New York City, and if you were smart in 2007 you moved to Asia" - a quote often repeated by the various players in Singapore's start-up ecosystem (see, for

example, Cheok 2015). Similarly, in 2012, the Economist wrote:

"The financial crisis of 2008, followed by the various excitements of 2011—the American debt-ceiling fiasco, the euro zone's interminable wrangling, riots on the streets of Western capitals—seemed to mark a tipping point. Asia's rise looked faster than anyone had expected." ("Tiger Traps" 2012)

Singapore, with its population of 5 million as of 2010, was clearly not China. Still, its location at the tip of the Malaysian peninsula, surrounded by some of Southeast Asia's most populous countries, and the concentration of capital in it easily inspired people to call it the capital of Southeast Asia. Alternatively, people would often refer to Singapore as 'Asia lite' - 'Asia' because of Singapore's ethnically diverse population and location in Southeast Asia, but 'lite' because it was 'easier' to live and do business in Singapore than maybe any other Asian country due to its high living standards, English speaking population, and pro-business government. I put 'easier' in inverted commas since Singapore was certainly not an easy place to live unless you were well off. At the time of my fieldwork, it was ranked as the world's 5th most expensive city to live in, and just a few years later, it topped the charts as *the* most expensive one (*Worldwide Cost of Living* 2014). For the better off, though, Singapore indeed seemed an 'easy' place to be in. 'Everything functions here', one of the British interlocutors explained to me on May 23, 2012, after we ran into each other on the metro, having met earlier in one of the technology meet-ups. In describing why Singapore 'was great', he emphasised the rule of law and orderliness of the urban space. At the time of our conversation, he had been in Singapore for seven months and cheerfully explained to me that 'he totally loves Singapore,' which to him felt 'futuristic':

Here in Singapore, they are creating a country with no history, and everything is new. Here, it just feels like living in a computer simulation- no breaks in the code - everyone is walking properly, everything functions.

He compared this to the computer game Sims; for him, it was undoubtedly a positive comparison - a technologically constituted utopia, infinitely malleable. On top of that, he said he was enjoying 'the white men advantage' here, which he explained to me as 'being able to do everything without anyone saying anything bad'. As it happens in quick chats while commuting, I didn't have a chance to enquire more. Still, these themes of Singapore 'feeling like the future' and being portrayed as such on the one hand, and

the power inequality within which this attractiveness of Singapore was established, on the other hand, is the wider theme I will address in this and the following chapter.

Moving to Singapore

It was the perceived differences in development that, to a large degree, informed the identification of ‘where opportunities lie’. Both British Oscar Fisher and Singaporean Chinese Wei Yung Huang identified themselves as ‘serial entrepreneurs’ and investors who have spotted the opportunity “which is currently being ignored by much of the start-up community in Europe and America” (The Accelerator’s video). Oscar’s education was in physics, and he spent most of his life in movie production, while Wei received his education in computer science, contributed to the open-source email standards and co-founded two Silicon Valley-based web companies. They both had moved to Singapore and jointly started The Accelerator as a business, but also explained that their larger mission was to develop Singapore’s start-up ecosystem, which I explore in detail in Chapter Three. While Wei had returned to Singapore to reunite with his family after living most of his life in North America, Oscar chose to move with his wife and young son after developing an understanding that ‘Europe is done’. Many of the other entrepreneurs in the technology and media industry who had moved to Singapore argued that Singapore offers them present conditions and future opportunities that are not accessible from where they were before.

One of the most well-known such moves was made by the billionaire and co-founder of Facebook - Eduardo Saverin, who moved to Singapore in 2009 and renounced his US citizenship. Forbes’s article titled “Why Eduardo Saverin moved to Singapore” argued that this move could be linked to two times lower income tax and no tax on the capital gain in Singapore in the wake of the upcoming initial public offering (IPO) of Facebook. As additional reasons, the article introduced the comfortable celebrity lifestyle Saverin enjoys in Singapore and the returns on investment in the region, with growth rates exceeding the ones of the West, concluding that “From high returns on Asian property investments to the easy access to other booming markets in the region, it makes sense for financially-savvy investors to move to Singapore” (Tulshyan 2012).

Another example indicative of the type of argumentation that located futures in Singapore came from Derek Sivers, a highly respected USA-born entrepreneur who also moved to Singapore in 2011. In a blog post on his website, he explained that his move was motivated by the easy access to a range of countries which can be characterised as emerging markets, ease of doing business in Singapore (referenced to the World Bank’s Ease of Doing Business Index where Singapore ranks as #1 since 2006 when the

ranking was started); and “amazing people from NUS, Hackerspace, e27, EDB, and INSEAD”, which he later summarised under the term “entrepreneur scene” (Sivers 2011).

It was a common theme amongst the Western expatriates in the technology start-up scene, predominantly males in their late 20s to early 40s, who argued that this was ‘the Asian century’ and Singapore was the perfect location from which to capitalise on the emerging future. It was the perceived possibility to ‘create’ a market - to introduce a product or service not known in the respective countries and to develop a business of a potentially large scale, that allured many entrepreneurs. For example, one of the seasoned entrepreneurs interviewed for one of The Accelerator’s promotional videos had moved his business from the USA to Singapore and explained:

“The next billion people who are gonna be on the Internet - they are not in California, they are not in Beijing, they are not in Tokyo, not in London. They are in Jakarta, Surabaya, they are in India, they are in Africa, they are in Cambodia, Thailand, Philippines. This is where the next billion people to be joining the Internet are. Their experiences will be different to the first billion. In the same way, the East Asian experience is very different to the North American experience. There are many different consumer behaviour issues and structural issues about [how] the industries work in this region that make this place particularly special, and I’m very excited about that.”

Interestingly, as I noticed, the mere presence of such expatriates in the technology space was also often taken by Singapore-based entrepreneurs to be an indicator that the future of the Singaporean tech space is promising.

Asian century and techno-orientalist futures

In understanding these narratives, it is crucial to see them in a longer historical context and examine the global power inequalities that shape them. The ‘rise of Asia’ or the ‘Asian Century’ has been a powerful, well-known discourse since at least the early 1980s (Anagnost 2013, 11). Techno-orientalism, “the phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in hypo- or hyper-technological terms in cultural productions and political discourse” (Roh et al. 2015, 2) has been a strong part of these discourses and clearly evident also in the encounters with my interlocutors described in this chapter. As scholars have argued, techno-orientalism emerged as a reflection of the West’s unease and worries about losing the cutting edge at defining modernity (Morley and Robins 1995) and

thus has gone hand in hand with the economic rise of countries in Asia, originating and first being articulated in relation to the rising power of Japan. Since the mid-1980s, it has been reified in relation to China's economic development in terms of sinofuturism and the economic development of India as well as Asian Tigers in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Sommer 2006; Morley and Robins 1995; Roh et al. 2015).

While Orientalism, as articulated by the West, imagined the East as pre-modern, stuck in time and backwards, within techno-orientalism, the "futurised" Asia is depicted as technologically advanced. Yet this portrayal doesn't challenge the West's dominance but reinforces it by suggesting that even a technologically advanced East contributes to a narrative where the West remains central and pivotal. Rather than seeing 'Asia' as a threat, techno-orientalist narratives I encountered amongst predominantly Western interlocutors set on capitalising on the emergent future in Asia remodelled it as an opportunity for themselves. So, if Asia is the future, then let's capitalise on it. As Roh, Huang, and Niu have argued, techno-orientalism should be seen as: "part of the West's project of securing dominance as architects of the future, a project that requires configurations of the East as the very technology with which to shape it." (Roh et al. 2015, 2) As Gabriele de Seta has argued, both sinofuturism and techno-orientalism deny coevalness in similar ways:

"The future functions exactly as the past does in orientalist arguments: as a temporality through which otherness can be safely managed and problematic interactions steered away from." (De Seta 2020, 91)

As this chapter will show, Singapore's position in this futurity relied on embracing these techno-orientalist narratives where they supported its future aspirations and strategically managing to propose itself as a broker between the 'West' and the 'East'.

Techno-orientalist narratives, especially in relation to China and India, have focused on the vast, comparatively cheap labour resources readily accessible to businesses in the West. However, among the technology entrepreneurs I worked with, the attraction of cheap labour was of rather low importance. Instead, the primary attraction was the imagination of the potential of the emergent consumer markets, fuelled by the vast young populations in the region, eager to consume digital objects and embrace digitally enhanced lifestyles that promised scalable growth for many years to come. This rendering of 'the Asia Opportunity' was therefore rooted in an imagination of an emergent 'Asian consumer', which could be both the rising middle classes with their increasing buying capacity, as well as the large populations living in poverty that might never become middle class but form 'the fortune at the bottom of the pyramid' (Praha-

Linear time, pre-determined future and temporal incongruity

As I encountered it, this particular blend of techno-orientalism relied on particular temporal relationships, configuring futurity in a specific way. Morley argued that Japan was increasingly seen as a threat to the USA and Europe because it destabilised the common assumptions about time and space where the West was modern and the others were behind (Morley and Robins 1995, 160). Now, some 'others' were living in the same time or even more modern and thus more in the future than the West. Through the affinity between progress and modernity as the passing of time and thus entering the future, and through the affinity between progress and technology, technology and future have become linked into a relationship where the new technology signifies the future, times to come, and vice versa.

In the 'Asia Opportunity', futurity, progress, and social change rested on a union of technological and market determinism - the idea that inclusion in the market, which will supply new technologies, will be the basis of social change in Asia which will lead to 'development' and modernity. Development, progress and modernisation within this idea are imagined as inevitable forces washing over the region. Some countries deemed in need to 'catch up' more than others to become 'modern'. The arrival of modernity goes hand in hand with expanding the market and, thus, new business opportunities for investors and entrepreneurs embracing the 'frontier spirit'. It was the perceived differences in economic and technological development that largely informed the identification of where the market opportunity was. The perceived temporal incongruity and, in particular, the imagination of a 'frontier zone' (Tsing 2003) ensured the circulation of people, ideas and capital.

What structured this imagination of 'Asia Opportunity' as I encountered it in my field then was a form of temporal distanciation - an imagination of people living at the same time as inhabiting different temporalities - some more in the past, some more 'modern'. As anthropologist Fabian, in his seminal work "Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object" (Fabian 1983), has argued, this rejection of contemporaneity and simultaneity is a "denial of coevalness", which is a highly political move. Such temporal distanciation, which was also the basis for many of my interlocutors arguing that Singapore is already living the future (or not for that matter), has been characteristic of modernisation and development theories (Ferguson 1999). Even though modernisation theories have been criticised in social sciences, they nevertheless inform the way people interpret their lifeworlds, and Singapore is often conveniently imagined as "a

strategically sited access point for trade between the industrial west and the pre-industrial east.” (Bishop et al. 2004, 8).

Lindtner, who researched the maker culture in China, has pointedly argued that:

“the displacement of technological promise onto what was once imagined as the periphery of technological future making is a discursive move with material consequences, providing legitimacy for the reordering and restructuring of space and people, the flow of investments into certain spaces and technology practices rather than others, the casting of certain people as deserving while continuously keeping others on hold, framed as not (quite) ready, not capable of their own self-investment.” (Lindtner 2020, 5)

Indeed, as this chapter will describe, the discursive construction of Asia opportunity had material consequences as it was used to direct and legitimise the flows of people and capital to Singapore and required a reimagination of people and places in specific ways. Such geographical imaginaries based on temporal differentiation seem to be not only structured along the lines of what Lucy Suchman has called reproductions of “neocolonial geographies of centre and periphery” (2011, 2) but also actively inform people’s understandings of the world and the decisions they make with regard to their lives (e.g., moving to a particular location, setting up a business in one location rather than another, engaging in certain activities rather than others, etc.).

While the broader popular discourse of the rise of Asia and the demise of the West gave a frame for entrepreneurs and investors to argue their preference for locating to Singapore, I suggest that the identification of “Asian opportunity” and how it connected to Singapore was a complex overlap between particular understandings of economic progress, Singapore’s government’s endorsed narrative of Singapore’s history, nation branding, and policies, and, equally important, also a particular ethos associated with entrepreneurship that requires imagination of a ‘frontier zone’ (Tsing 2003). As Tsing has pointed out, these scale-making projects gain a particular strength at the moments when they overlap (Tsing 2000), and it is the overlap between multiple scale-making projects by different actors who forge sometimes unexpected allegiances that Singapore becomes the capital of Southeast Asia and the centre from which to capitalise on the ‘rise of Asia’.

A limiting aspect of evoking the notion of techno-orientalism is that it relies on the oppositional division between the ‘West’ and the ‘East’. While some discussion recognises self-orientalisation as a co-constitutive dynamic, such a large-strokes division doesn’t allow to address the power dynamics in more nuanced detail. Therefore, in the next sections, I will discuss the balancing my Singapore-based interlocutors performed

in embracing this imaginary geography that required them to navigate between Silicon Valley and Asia.

3. Singapore as a Global City and Regional Hub

The vast room was dark and cold. Aggressive music was blasting rhythmically along the video projected on three large screens...blue capital letters exchange one title after another: "Singapore's Tech landscape", "73% internet penetration", "64% mobile internet penetration"... "2hrs10mins on social media daily"... "Where do you STAND?" I snuggled deeper in the soft conference chair and was glad that with this question, the trailer ended. Startup Asia Singapore - an annual technology start-up conference that would take place in Singapore in the upcoming two days would educate, discuss and provide all that one supposedly needs to know about doing technology business *in the region*.

The music stopped, and a young lady walked on stage in a confident, wide stride. The room with close to 500 people burst into applause and ovations. Gwen was a well-known figure in the technology start-up scene in Singapore and beyond. She founded and, until 2013, ran one of the first and best-known technology entrepreneurship blogs called SG Entrepreneurs (SGE) when it was acquired by their rival Tech in Asia - the conference organisers. Among other things, she has represented Southeast Asian and Asian start-up scenes as an expert, panel discussant, jury member, etc., regularly at various events in Singapore and around the world.

"Asia is big and difficult, and we are here to help you," said Gwen, welcoming the audience. It consisted of both established and aspiring start-up entrepreneurs, venture capitalists, bloggers, students, government officials and employees from multinational businesses. Later, on their blog, Tech in Asia published an infographic detailing the participant demographics - from 1458 attendees, 1118 identified themselves as males and 340 as females, all from a total of 44 different nationalities. 706 people from Singapore, 163 from Indonesia, 104 from Malaysia, and 106 from Japan.

Tech in Asia's Startup Asia Singapore conference was not the only major technology start-up conference that took place in Singapore, nor was it the only one to position itself as the repository of knowledge about Asia, but it was a good example of such events and the work they did in constructing scales and materialising narratives about Asia Opportunity. In this section, I will discuss conferences like the Startup Asia Singapore and the work done by the Singapore-based start-up-focused online media platforms to show how, through their activities, they both drew from as well as reinforced

the imaginary geographies of technology futurities in Asia and Southeast Asia. At the time of my research, three notable local online news media covering start-up news in the region were operating in Singapore. SGenpreneurs, e27, and Tech in Asia were publishing start-up business news covering not only Singapore but also start-ups from many other countries in Southeast Asia, Asia, and occasionally elsewhere. All three, first established by students, had, over the years, become venture capital-backed, professional and influential news sources respected and referred to by the entrepreneurs and investors I worked with. At the time of my fieldwork, Tech in Asia acquired SGenpreneurs. All the platforms engaged not only in reporting about various start-up events but also in organising them. For example, e27 organised annual conferences titled Echelon and smaller events called Satellite events around the region, as well as more frequent smaller-scale 'Founders Drinks'. Tech in Asia organised the annual Start-up Asia conference. While SG entrepreneurs at the time didn't have their own signature conference or event, they were actively involved in organising events for others, such as the Demo Asia conference.

These conferences operated using and also reinforcing these imaginary geographies with a specific understanding about Singapore's position in it. I will show how such a proposition to learn about Asia through Singapore made by Gwen can be understood in relation to a longer history of how Singapore has positioned itself in the region.

Singapore as a global city

The narration of Singapore's future by its political elites has relied on a very specific depiction of Singapore's 'natural' and 'indisputable' reality - its small size, lack of natural resources, and its geopolitical position amidst an often turbulent region. It wasn't long after the establishment of independent Singapore, something I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter, that Singapore's foreign minister, Mr. Rajaratnam, detailed the vision of Singapore as a *Global City* for the new island state to 'survive' (Rajaratnam 1975). Conceptualising Singapore as a *Global City* at the time allowed political elites to overcome the perceived problem of being expelled from the Federation of Malaysia, where Malaysia's territory until the expulsion was commonly considered Singapore's hinterland. Mr Rajaratnam proposed: "Once you see Singapore as a global city, the problem of hinterland becomes unimportant. For a global city, the world is its hinterland." (Rajaratnam 1975, 8).

With the turn of Asianisation in Singapore's politics since the 1970s, Singapore has been increasingly introducing itself as an *Asian* hub or *regional* hub (Hong and Huang 2008, Clancey 2012, Crang 2009) positioning itself as a "switching centre for goods ser-

vices, capital and information and people.” (IT2000 as quoted in Crang 2009, 16). Indeed, Singapore is surrounded by the largest and most populous Southeast Asian countries - Indonesia (with more than 237 million inhabitants according to the 2010 census) and Malaysia (more than 28 million inhabitants) and within close reach of countries such as Vietnam (close to 90 million inhabitants), Cambodia (14 million) and Thailand (67 million).

Similar to how then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong argued in his 2001 National Day Speech that everyone should “regard all the countries and cities which are within 7 hours of flying time from Singapore as our hinterland” (National Day Rally Speech, 19 August 2001 as quoted in Yew 2011, 275), the entrepreneurs I worked with invited similar imaginations of Singapore located at the very centre from which to capitalise on Asia, and more specifically Southeast Asia as a region of emergent opportunities. Perhaps precisely because of such flexibility in how Singapore defined itself in relation to the rest of the world, it is even more important to ask - what kind of imaginary geographies enabled and shaped the new digital economy in Singapore? What connections needed to be forged, and how were relationships structured for these purposes? As discussed in the previous section, Singapore embraced techno-orientalist narratives, which relied on temporal distancing between those who were ‘developed’ and those who were ‘still developing’ through the inclusion in the market.

Aligning with the Singapore government’s imagination of Singapore having to be understood as expanding beyond itself, also in the entrepreneurial imagination, Singapore gained its meaning only in relation to the broader region, which was often discussed as ‘Asia’, but even more often than that as ‘Southeast Asia’, which was imagined as Singapore’s hinterland. Singapore had to claim these scales of being a global and regional city to attract capital, people and ideas and ensure its position of power in the region. This was brought home to me very clearly during a shared drive through Singapore sometime in March 2014 by one of my core interlocutors. We were driving past a large, dark building, and Caishen pointed at it and said he feared Singapore would become like this place. Since I had caught only a glimpse of an empty space on the ground floor featuring a ‘for rent’ sign, which in many parts of Europe had become the icon of recession at the time, I asked if he meant the ‘for rent sign’. No, he responded. What he meant was

“A place between places where none goes. Where none knows what is inside, and when you enter, it is all dusty, sad and filled with some obscure hairdressing saloons for middle-aged ladies.”

According to him, if Singapore doesn’t grasp the economic reality and establish

itself as a hub, then all the capital and people will flow to places like Jakarta and Bangkok. Singapore, in turn, will become a dusty building where life ‘merely goes on’ rather than growing. Caishen was not the only one amongst the entrepreneurs, especially the ones involved in investing, who was concerned about such a future scenario.

For example, in 2011, Willis Wee, the CEO of what became later Tech in Asia, wrote an article titled “Drop your arrogance, Entrepreneurs”, arguing that:

“Singaporeans tend to dismiss tech companies/startup founders from other Asian countries. To most Singaporeans, only Silicon Valley is cool... tech companies in China, India, Indonesia are not. (...) But with Asia rising up fast, shouldn’t we take a closer look at our markets? How many people bother to understand what’s happening in Asia? (...) Don’t cry saying that we don’t have a market – Indonesia, India, China, Taiwan, Malaysia – all are out there, up for grabs. In fact, more and more Asian folks in the U.S are moving back to Asia to exploit the opportunities here.” (Wee 2011b)

His blog post invited entrepreneurs to focus on Asia’s economic opportunities. Otherwise, investors will go to the ‘big markets’ directly without Singapore’s intermediary role. Willis explained that he identified the opportunity to blog about technology in Asia, thus setting an example for other entrepreneurs. A similar personal experience-based example with a similar message was shared in another post by a colleague of Willis - Bernard Leong. Bernard felt he wanted to add to this discussion Willis had raised about expansion and thus followed up on his personal blog that was later republished with an article “Advice to startups: Get out of Singapore ASAP”. There, he directed the founders to think in the following way about the region in relation to one’s ambition:

“If your company specializes in a web-tech solution for the emerging economy, Jakarta (Indonesia) and Manila (Philippines) are probably your best bet. If your appetite is big and massive, China and India are on the list.” (Leong 2011)

In that post, he explained that Singapore can play a ‘test market’ role before one proceeds to build the business elsewhere in the region. The idea of using Singapore as a ‘test market’ affirmed a belief in technological and market determinism and universalism. Both Willis and Bernard’s articles expressed two common points. Both agreed that Singapore was too small to be considered a primary market, and both suggested that an entrepreneur should look outside Singapore and preferably go to neighbouring Asian

countries. While Bernards' article stressed this as a business prerogative because scaling was a way to build a big business, Willis also pointed out that unless Singaporeans embrace the emerging opportunities in the familiar region, they will lose out.

The same but different: Singapore and the construction of the region

Singapore's recognition as a Global city and *the capital* of Southeast Asia relied as much on its cultural affinity with the other countries in the region as on being framed as their *opposite* when it came to the rule of law, lack of corruption, and efficient infrastructure. Exploring the scale-making processes and the various motives and aspirations of the different players who engaged in conjuring particular scales and the moments when these processes clashed allow us to avoid the pitfalls of trying to subscribe to some culturalist explanations, such as, for example - Confucianist values, which might or might not bind the East Asian countries.

Leong Yew (2011) argues that Singapore's positioning is essentially one of uneasy variations between Singapore as a 'global hub' and Singapore as an 'Asian hub'. Arguing that such culturalisation of geography is inherent to the knowledge economy, he points out:

"Because of the state's geographical and cultural proximity to Asia, it has attempted to marry physical convenience with its role as a knowledge comprador. Its location meant that knowledge workers and companies had easy access to regional subjects and local capital, while its new culturalism suggested that Singapore possessed the regional knowledge on the one hand and on the other the skills to interface with the global knowledge network." (Yew 2011, 271)

Even more so, Yew also points out how the construction of *Asia* is nowhere near being stable:

"Asia has been flexibly represented as an entity Singapore should differentiate itself from, as an economic competitor, while also embracing it as a place for Singaporeans to invest in or as an entity collectively cautiously venturing into the knowledge economy." (Yew 2011, 274)

It was through the perceived differences in capital, people and ideas that Southeast Asia was constructed as a region. Illustrative here is Koh Jit Siong's, one of the start-up

conference Echelon organisers quote in an interview with Forbes. In it he discussed how they decided where to organise the Satellite events - a series of events in various countries around Southeast Asia leading up to the central event in Singapore, and how they differ from the main event in Singapore:

"If you see on the bigger picture, we want to connect the ecosystem, in terms of business opportunity, market access, investment, hiring opportunities. Every country has its own strengths and weaknesses. [In] Singapore we have a lot of capital, forex is very high. If you go to Indonesia, it's a big market. Mobile is huge with lots of good developers. You go to every cities [sic], there are key set of strengths and weaknesses. We do consider these before we set-up a satellite event there, because they have to contribute to the entire ecosystem." (Lim 2012)

Central to this imagination of regionality was Singapore, which was reflected in how the events were hierarchically structured. The first two Satellite events were Indonesia and Malaysia in 2011. Every year, more and more countries were added, including the Philippines, Hong Kong, Thailand, Taiwan, Japan, and India. At these Satellite events, start-ups would present themselves and be evaluated by a jury. The winning start-ups from these Satellite events then presented themselves at the central Eschelon in Singapore, and this way, besides the monetary prize, they gained exposure to influential venture capitalists.

Singapore's position in these events is showing Singapore as the centre of activity and allowing the satellite events to reach out to start-up talent in the region. Mohan Belani, one of the co-founders of e27 and the CEO of e27 at the time of my fieldwork, explained in an article:

"If you want to feel the heartbeat of the Asian tech ecosystem, if you want to attend THAT one event that will give you amazing experience, Echelon is the one to be at. It is [sic] the most credible, most up to date event that will give you a true picture of the Asian tech startup ecosystem." (Lim 2012)

While Startup Asia didn't seem to structurally differentiate between its conferences in Singapore, Jakarta and Tokyo, the difference was notable in the agendas. For example, in the Singapore chapter of the conference, issues of the state of the art of entrepreneurship around Singapore were at the centre of the event and were supplemented by strategies for expanding in various markets. For example, both Startup Asia Singapore

as well as Echelon 2014 featured 'market expansion tracks' - special sessions about expanding in various 'markets' around the region that were divided along the national borders - Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, and others. However, in these what sometimes would be referred to as 'regional' events, a subtle but meaningful difference in the topics could be noticed. Rather than discussing general business practices and 'Asia opportunity' topics, they focused on the various business experiences one would have within particular countries.

An illustrative example of this subtle difference was Hugo Barra's appearance at both Startup Asia Singapore and Jakarta conferences in 2014. Hugo Barra was a highly successful Vice President and product spokesman of Google's Android division. He left this position in 2013 to work for a rapidly growing and highly popular emerging Chinese mobile company, Xiaomi. This move, in combination with the rising popularity of Xiaomi, which was often dubbed 'the Chinese Apple', seemed to affirm the 'Rise of Asia' in ways that made the entrepreneurs around me very excited about both Xiaomi's rise as well as Barra's talk at the Startup Asia Singapore conference. At the time of his presentation, the room was so packed that people had to sit on floors and stairways of the auditorium. While in Indonesia his talk was titled "Fireside Chat: How Xiaomi is Trying to Push All the Right Buttons in Indonesia" and focused on Xiaomi's business expansion and technology customisation in Indonesia, in Singapore the talk was titled "Fireside Chat: How Xiaomi Became A \$10 Billion Startup In 2 Years" and discussed Xiaomi's strategy of growth and logistics across the different countries. Looking through the prism of start-up events, Singapore's role as the centre for capital and business knowledge, rather than the market itself, becomes clearly visible. The sociality that was brought to life through start-up events, with its power hierarchies, norms and values, is the focus of Chapter Three; for now, it is important to emphasise that by bringing the various players together, a certain flexible regionality was enacted through these conferences. Singapore has a prominent role in this imagination - a point where knowledge and capital are concentrated in the hands of selected people, who could, from Singapore, gain access to places around the region that were constructed as 'markets'. Such a position of Singapore promoted through these bottom-up organised start-up conferences was very much aligned with the proposed vision of Singapore's government, which was occasionally also present at these conferences. For example, the 2014 Startup Asia Singapore was opened by the Minister of Trade and Industry Teo Ser Luck, who started the conference by explaining that Singapore wants to become a 'regional start-up hub' and even if Singapore is not the market itself, it is linked to the world through the start-ups who access the markets through Singapore. The notions of Singapore as a 'Gateway to Asia' and 'Launchpad to the region' were ever present during the discussions at the conference, just as they are online on Tech in Asia, e27, and

before the acquisition of SG Entrepreneurs (SGE).



Setting up for Startup Asia Conference in Jakarta.
Photo by author.

Perceptions of temporal incongruity were central in the work of constructing the countries in the region as ‘markets’. The ability to claim a future in the start-up space relied on access to capital and absorption of Silicon Valley knowledge. This allowed players such as e27 and Tech in Asia to capitalise on their position by becoming ‘knowledge brokers’. The same principles operated at an individual level. I started the introduction of this dissertation with a recount of how Seth, an entrepreneur from the Philippines, came to Singapore and, in a way, felt that he ‘experienced’ a future. Despite having left the start-up he cofounded in the Philippines, his experiences were sought after because he had been in Singapore. This was a common pattern for many of my interlocutors who returned home to countries typically imagined as ‘less developed’ than Singapore in specific domains.

For comparison and to illustrate how particular was the fact that the circulation of people, ideas and capital in this start-up futurity relied on constructing and reifying differences between the countries in the region, I can offer an insight from Beng Huat Chua’s analysis in studying the production, consumption and circulation of popular cultural products such as Korean TV dramas. He argues that it was the perception of ‘coevalness’ between populations in East Asia, including Singapore, that ensured the circulation of goods and even possibly promoted a common identification (Chua 2004). Interestingly, in relation to studying the production, consumption and circulation of popular culture, Singapore seems to be located as part of *East Asia*, yet when it came to technology start-ups, the regionality that I encountered in the field was predominantly

Southeast Asian where Singapore was imagined to be closely bound with Indonesia and Malaysia. If nothing more, this point further illustrates how regionality was socially constructed in circulation and brought alive through the various discussions and meetings taking place, which is what I aim to discuss more in this chapter by focusing on the start-up conferences and start-up blogs.

In the 1990s, a range of technology pundits argued that with the rise of the new, immaterial economy, geography became irrelevant under the assumption that knowledge could now be produced and accessed from anywhere in the world with the help of digital technologies. Over the years, this has proved to be an illusion more than reality. Globalisation, capital and the associated opportunities do not cover the world as a wave, even though the process is often imagined as such. Instead, “they jump point to point, and huge areas are simply bypassed” (Ferguson 2008, 379) in favour of the more resourceful areas, which change over time. Singapore, in that case, and the discussion of ‘geographies of future’ provides an opportunity to study both the ‘fixity and mobility of capital’ (Sassen 2000).

Singapore’s position in the geography of start-up futurities was closely tied to its proximity to the countries around it, which were experiencing rapid growth of their middle classes with particular consumption patterns (Pinches 1999). Singapore aimed to function as a base for capital accumulation, ensuring highly comfortable living conditions for entrepreneurs and organised infrastructure with a stable government, the rule of law, and the supply of capital. Thus, the entrepreneurial depiction of Singapore as in the centre of Asia and also as a “comprador” for understanding Asia (Yew 2011, 271) echoed the narrative endorsed by the Singaporean government. To summarise, in order to establish this particular geography of start-up entrepreneurship, it predominantly relied on differentiating Singapore from the rest of the region based on its economic and governance development. It claimed an affinity with the region on the basis of proximity and shared cultural knowledge. The next section will explore another direction, towards Silicon Valley, where Singapore also balanced the scales of being a global city and a regional hub.

4. Balancing Between Silicon Valley and Asia

In relation to the development of Singapore’s biomedical industry Clancey (2012) has pointed out that Singapore’s position endorsed “regionalism that was at the same time both an affirmation and critique of the global,” (Clancey 2012, 30) as Singaporeans attempted to contribute to the ‘global’ body of biomedical knowledge through excep-

tionality of 'Asian' bodies. Likewise, Singaporean historians Hong and Huang have argued that "The official Singapore discourse on self-representation thus relies on the strategies of Occidentalism and self-Orientalisation." (Hong and Huang 2008, 207)

A similar tension between Asia as exceptional yet simultaneously with global potential was evident in entrepreneurial circles. For example, The Accelerator positioned itself to be in the business of developing "Asian Technology for Asia", suggesting that there were limits to the universal application of technology. At the same time, the company's promotional material featured investors endorsing The Accelerator's approach to building 'global' businesses. Despite the hopeful assumption that with the 'rise of Asia,' countries in Asia have a chance to determine their own parameters of modernity (see, for example, Roy 2009; Bunnell et al. 2012), in my experience, Silicon Valley had a largely hegemonic control over technology entrepreneurship futurities.

Silicon Valley and the San Francisco Bay Area in the USA, the birthplace of the microchip and personal computer industry and home to many globally leading web technology companies seemed to be defining what the future was supposed to be for most of the technology entrepreneurs I spoke to. This overarching influence was exemplified by the pervasiveness of references to Silicon Valley and will be evident in every chapter of this dissertation. For example, entrepreneurs in Yogyakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Manila, Yangon and Singapore routinely referred me to blog posts written by San Francisco-based superstar entrepreneurs and venture capitalists to explain to me their own actions. Posters with motivational quotes from Steve Jobs and other legendary Silicon Valley entrepreneurs frequently embellished the walls of start-up and co-working offices across the region. In addition, it was in comparison to Silicon Valley that Singapore's bright technology future was commonly questioned. Singapore was described as too organized for disruptive innovation, too small for starting a high-growth business, and its people too conservative to be willing "to do what it takes" to start or support a truly innovative technology business. This tension and its historical roots will be discussed in more detail in Chapters Five and Six, yet here it is important to stress that such an imaginary geography where San Francisco was seen as the definite holder of the definition of innovation and start-up business practices also created space for establishing connections and making local interventions. Not only the entrepreneurs themselves looked up to San Francisco, but also Singapore's government and educational institutions actively facilitated learning from San Francisco through a variety of programmes that sent people from Singapore to Silicon Valley as well as lured specific types of people from San Francisco to Singapore trying to facilitate that Singaporeans learn how to 'think and act global'.

The Accelerator programme, like Singapore's government, had to emphasise Asia's exceptionality in order to position itself as a necessary point that could connect Silicon

Valley's practices, know-how and finances with the potential scale of Asian consumers. This embrace had to extend to Silicon Valley's hegemonic hold of start-up futures in order to find space for Singapore. Let me present two examples of how The Accelerator both embraced and attempted to challenge Silicon Valley vis-à-vis Asia in order to create space for themselves in this futurity.

In the days leading up to the opening of the first run of the accelerator program, Wei brought a package into the office. It was filled with freshly printed A5-size books. Opening the box, Wei passed one of the books to me to see. The glossy cover was adorned with The Accelerator's name and titled "What Silicon Valley Knows About Asia". I opened the book to see empty pages. In trying to understand what it was and how to react to it, my first guess was that it was empty because it was a notebook that Wei had custom-made for the mentors soon coming into the program - a handy thing for making notes on what they would learn here from start-ups participating in the program. 'Smart!' I said, thinking he was anticipating the mentors' needs. Wei smiled, seemingly pleased and walked away to place the books on The Accelerator's bookshelf. Only after Wei had left for the bookshelf did it dawn on me. It was not a notebook. It was a finished book! It was Wei's cheeky way of saying that Silicon Valley knows *nothing* about Asia. The book illustrated the non-existent knowledge. Indeed smart, Wei!

At the same time, Wei, just like most entrepreneurs, embraced most discussions coming from the US and San Francisco Bay Area and popularised them as examples of how business has to be done. For example, he filled the already aforementioned bookshelf with books written by predominantly US-based entrepreneurs and venture capitalists on how to think about innovation, developing a product and running a business. The Accelerator popularised this reading list in its blog posts and asked the applicant teams to consider those to be the 'expected readings' prior to joining the programme.

Wei had also printed inspiring quotes that he had placed at various locations around The Accelerator's working spaces. Outside on one of the office windows, visible to everyone passing, was a quote:

"Silicon Valley isn't a place. It's an idea. And whether you're making toilet paper in Rwanda or building gaming companies in Asia, **you're part of it."** (Emphasis in original, Quoting Arrington 2011)

This idea of Silicon Valley being an idea, a mindset more than a specific location, had been popularised by two venture capitalists based in the US - Vinod-Khosla: "Silicon Valley is not so much a place as a state of mind. It's a way of doing things that can be done anywhere" (Khosla 2014 and Andreessen 2014).



The quote on the top left: "Silicon Valley isn't a place. It's an idea. (...) you're part of it." Inspiring quotes posted on windows, readable to anyone passing down the hallway at Blk 71. Photo by author.

I've never been to San Francisco, but I have to admit that Silicon Valley had never felt so accessible as when I was doing my fieldwork in Singapore. I often wondered how bizarrely 'close by' San Francisco felt. Intimately and casually referred to as 'SF' it mostly felt like it was physically 'just around the corner', attesting to the density and frequency of the connections that were established between these two places almost literally on the opposite sides of the planet. Someone was always either on their way to 'SF', or had just arrived from there, dealt with the jet lag, or shared the newest insights, told stories about with whom and whom from the industry they had just met, or explained what of the many often government-funded exchange programs to SF they had benefitted from.

One such program was run by the National University of Singapore, called National Overseas College (NOC), which funded selected students to spend from 6 to 12 months in Silicon Valley and other places with high start-up activity, such as Pennsylvania, Beijing, Shanghai or Stockholm working for a start-up. Many of the very active organisers and known entrepreneurs in Singapore had participated in this program, and most of them directly referred to their NOC experience as the key inspiration.

For example, what was known as "e27" was started in 2006 by two students from the National University of Singapore, Mohan Belani and Justin Lee. They had attended the NOC program in the San Francisco Bay Area, and after their return home to Singapore, they were active in the university's incubator Garag3, organising 'unconference' events and Barcamps. Along with the events, they started the blog "Entrepreneur 27 Singapore: Web 2.0 Unconferences, Sites & Cool Tech", where they shared news about technology, start-ups and related events. Their slogan back in 2008 was "We live to

make geeks cool and their code-craft in demand. Both male and female. Since Jan 2006." The "About Us" section of their site at the time is quite telling of both their influences, as well as how they see Singapore and their own roles.

First they explain how the name captures their beliefs:

"The "27" in Entrepreneur27 (E27) really means "<27". It reflects our beliefs in youth and entrepreneurship and a hope for a new generation of innovators and thinkers who grew up with ubiquitous internet and mobile infrastructures."

And then in a section titled "How can we take part in changing our world for the better?" They explained that

"At E27, we hope to imagine the future for people as we make sense of an increasingly digitized world. We do so in the context of entrepreneurship and we speak the language of innovation."

The last section detailed their inspiration and how they saw Singapore's problems and opportunities in this new age:

"Our exposure to the entrepreneurial culture of Silicon Valley culminated in an appreciation of the importance of an open knowledge-sharing culture that was pervasive among Silicon Valley innovators, entrepreneurs and investors. Such a culture was found to be lacking in Singapore upon our return.

The technology industry in Singapore is small but promising. Historically, Singapore's technology industry has been second-tier to Silicon Valley: we are best known as contract manufacturers and channel distributors for foreign-based technology firms and lags behind in organic innovation.

However, the advancement of the internet infrastructure, in terms of speeds and reliability, has leveled the access problems to markets, knowledge and talents and created a cottage industry of enterprises tapping upon the business opportunities available. This is an opportunity for Singapore-based enterprises.

E27 strongly believe in the entrepreneurial opportunities in the web and mobile sectors. "27" represents our youth focus on entrepreneurs below 27 years old. It is more a figurative expression of our beliefs in promoting youth entrepreneurship rather than a binding rule towards our target attendees and members.

We believe that the younger generation, having grown up in a time

when internet and mobile phones transcended obscurity to achieve ubiquity, possess the tech savviness and cultural awareness to create the successful enterprises of tomorrow.”

What stands out to me beyond the youthful excitement about living at the time of perceived radical change is that for one, the reference point for ‘how things should really be’ for these young, inspired founders of e27 (Their youth-oriented bias was characteristic of the start-up space and it is something I will address in greater detail in Chapters Five and Six) was Silicon Valley techno-culture which they had soaked up themselves during the NOC program. NOC was set up with exactly the explicit goal of learning from start-ups in Silicon Valley. Now, they had returned home to transfer the method of fostering innovation to Singapore. In this process of defining this relationship between Singapore and Silicon Valley, they also re-defined Singapore’s former advantages - being able to fulfil large manufacturing orders and act as a distributor as irrelevant in the innovation economy. There was the promise of a global start-up culture, which could now be implemented in Singapore through participation in sharing ideas.

Later, they would re-articulate their statement as:

“We are devoted towards Silicon Valley-style, community-driven advocacy of technology innovation in Asia. We combine our online media with offline events to influence, discover and evangelize upcoming technology innovations from the startup communities around Asia.”

A lot of the events and start-up aimed programs incorporate references to Silicon Valley in their tag lines or logos as many of them were local chapters of US-based programs; for example, the Founders Institute’s tagline was “Globalising Silicon Valley”, Plug and Play “Silicon Valley in the box”. All of these seemed to suggest that Silicon Valley, indeed, is more of a ‘practice’ that can be replicated anywhere in the world by absorbing the knowledge of innovation and market principles with the assumption that they can be applied universally. As this dissertation will show time and time again, this ideal was very hard to sustain in practice and caused a lot of tension in the process.

5. Don’t Drink the Southeast Asia Kool-Aid

The chapter so far has focused on the business scalability and growth opportunities that had to be imagined in order for the scale-making projects to bring different players

together. This section will focus on what needed to be unimagined in the process, as imagination and unimagination had to work hand in hand for successful scale-making and future conjuring processes. Through a depiction of a discussion regarding the actual fragmentation of the region and practice called 'visa runs,' I will show how much struggle and work waited for those who wanted to pursue start-up futurities. This complicates the easy imagination of Asia on the rise and Singapore's imagination as a Global city as inevitable, natural futurities and highlights the work and the friction that was part of these futurities.

I think it is necessary to search for a more nuanced answer about what really invited this imagination of Southeast Asia. Whose interests were served the best when such imaginary geography was evoked? To what kind of expectations regarding appropriate ways of being and doing business did such geographies lead? Because in everyday life, this idea about Southeast Asia as being a joint 'package' was contested.

Even in the same start-up conferences that brought the region to life, the idea of such an 'Asia' or even 'Southeast Asia' was also challenged. In the closing keynote of Startup Asia Singapore 2014, Wei Yung Huang invited the audience to reflect on why six market expansion tracks took place in different rooms rather than one during the conference.

"(..) why is there a Market Expansion track for each country? Why shouldn't we just have one [emphasis] market expansion track for all the Southeast Asia? But we are not there yet. So in theory we are supposed to have an ASEAN Economic Community by 2015 (..) but I think in practice it is going to be up to the private sector to lead a lot of this stuff - whether its logistics or payments or language translation."

According to him, unlike the USA, which is united by language and currency, and unlike Europe, which is united by currency, Southeast Asia, with its 11 countries and more than 50 languages, is a 'fundamentally hard' problem to tackle for entrepreneurs wanting to scale up their businesses across the region. This reflection illustrated to me that while the 'Singapore as a capital of Southeast Asia' scale-making project was aligned with the government's vision, from the perspective of an entrepreneur, this scale was not self-evident. Wei's talk showed the belief in entrepreneurship as the driving source for progress and the universality of 'market forces' to bridge and smooth out the uneven terrain of cultures, practices, languages, political frameworks, and similar frictions. Surely enough, in the talk, he reaffirmed that 'Southeast Asia, with its billion people coming online' and 'with half of that population being below 30', was a really

exciting place for entrepreneurs at the moment - "The sort of golden market everybody has been looking for" as he put it. So, while on the one hand, there was a clear problematisation of the region, there was also an imperative, fuelled by the desires of capital, to imagine and construct such a joined 'Southeast Asia market'.

The same position was expressed in an interesting discussion that unfolded across online blogs in 2013 and from which I adapted the title for this section. The stimuli for discussion started on July 1, 2013, when a Tech in Asia blogger, Anh-Minh Do, published a blog post titled "With Southeast Asian Web Entrepreneurs Eyeing The Region, You Better Learn This Stuff" (Do 2013). The author's point was that Southeast Asia as a region is starting to 'heat up' in an unprecedented start-up activity. He identified multiple reasons why he thought this situation had developed and why the "heated battle for the web in the Southeast Asian region" will continue in the coming years - political stability, ASEAN regulations that facilitated mobility across the borders, increasing pressure from rising China, Rocket Internet expanding across the region, little growth in the domestic markets separately, so businesses have to expand. His overall urgent tone that stressed the importance of thinking about the region was also focused on the idea of survival: "In order to survive, Southeast Asian tech start-ups have to think regionally first." (Do 2013)

Overall, it wasn't very different from other blog posts that had detailed similar sentiments, especially when discussing Singapore's position in Southeast Asia. Yet, this blog struck a cord and evoked a response on e27 by an entrepreneur from the Philippines. His blog was titled "Think before you drink the Southeast Asia start-up Kool-Aid", commenting that Southeast Asia is a fiction - a Cold War construct that puts all these very different markets in one bag. Arguing that the entrepreneurs and investors "tend to overestimate the market opportunity, and underestimate the fragmentation," (Segovia 2013) he resented the push from investors he had met towards start-ups needing to have a "Southeast Asia expansion strategy" in order to have chances of attracting venture capital. He identified legal, cultural, and economic (e.g. existing competition) differences between the countries, which, as he saw it, were so dramatic that it was impossible to talk about one regional strategy. Evoking his previous work experience at a large multinational company, he explained that even with the abundant resources the multinational had, it wasn't able to expand across the region as a blanket. Instead, successful products that sold very well in some countries would fail absolutely in others. Alluding to this widespread expectation to think about Southeast Asia as one market, he warned against it, saying that it's a delusion which many people are picking up just too easily.

This provoked a third blog post at Tech in Asia by a venture capitalist who immediately introduced himself and his firm as "big believers in a "regional strategy""

admitting that they also encourage and invest in the start-ups that want to ‘tackle *the region*’. Instead of trying to deny the fact that there is a significant difference between the countries in Southeast Asia, Matt fully embraced it, and similarly to Wei, he defined it as a ‘hard problem’ to be solved. For him, as an investor, it meant that a start-up company that has gone through ‘the hard work’ of building an international business would be rewarded for its efforts because it would be more appealing in the eyes of potential acquirers:

“When a startup handles the regional expansion, puts in the hard effort to build a regional company, the startup creates value for the acquirer and is paid back handsomely during acquisition, which is a win for both the VCs and the startup founders alike. As we like to say, hard work pays off.” (Walters 2013)

This perspective clearly reflected the investor’s bias that wants to imagine scale for continuous growth. In order to imagine the frontier - a space which needs to attract capital through its promise of huge potential, the imagination also needed to unimagine certain aspects of the terrain - in this case, everything that rendered countries and vast populations different and would create friction in streamlining and subjecting them to the ‘universal logic’ of market forces and capital. This imagination of future potential, expressed in geographical and political regionalisms such as Southeast Asia, was a necessary precondition for investment and Singapore’s centrality in this imaginary geography.

Visa runs and the boundaries

It was a lazy Sunday midday, and the area around Blk 71 was empty. As I approached the building, hoping to be able to catch up with some work, I noticed two Filipino entrepreneurs sitting by the edge of the building. One of them was John, who I introduced already in the Introduction. He was smoking. The other, Glenn, who was younger, in his very early 20s, was keeping him company. I was happy to see them because, on Friday, they had left Singapore on what was known as a ‘visa run’ - exiting Singapore briefly and returning in order to obtain a new tourist visa that would last another 30, 60 or 90 days, depending on from which country the person had arrived in Singapore. Visa runs were a precarious business, especially for founders from neighbouring countries such as the Philippines. It was very possible not to return to your working desk from such a ‘run’ if the immigration deemed your re-entry problematic. Even if it hadn’t happened

to anyone we knew directly, the stakes for both entrepreneurs were high since the possibility of not being allowed back into the country was terrifying. It would clearly put a big fat stop to their participation in The Accelerator program.

My eager greeting and questions about how the visa run went were met with shy smiles and embarrassed chuckles. John said that it went 'ok' and emphasised that the most important thing is that they are back here. The chuckles and the insistence to focus on the fact that they are back as the most important aspect of their trip made it rather clear that there was much more to it. Only after a while did they start sharing the still upsetting details of their experience over the past few days. They were from different start-up teams but had decided to go on the run together since both of their tourist visas were about to expire, and their teammates were entering and exiting Singapore at different moments. Their plan had been to exit Singapore to Malaysia and enter Johor Bahru, which is the most Southern city in Malaysia. It can be reached from Singapore by crossing the Johor-Singapore Causeway, which connects the two countries over the Straits of Johor. It is a busy crossing point with cars, busses, and motorbikes bringing tourists and locals, both Malaysian as well as Singaporeans. Especially on Fridays, at the end of the working week, it is a very busy place as many Malaysians working in Singapore return to Malaysia for the weekend.

To save money, they went to Johor Bahru by bus late on Friday night after the Friday pitching sessions and socialising with the investors had ended. Yet, arriving in Johor Bahru so late at night, they couldn't find a hotel. It was already late and pitch black, and they felt really lost. To find a solution, they decided to take a taxi from the bus station, asking it to bring them to a hotel. The taxi driver took them to a hotel but took advantage of their vulnerable situation by asking them a very high fee for its services. As John saw it - the taxi uncle ripped them off. Maybe the hotel didn't have a double room available, or it was too expensive for their tight budgets. Either way, both John and Glenn had to share the bed for the night. This was something they disclosed with an uncomfortable laugh, trying to ease their discomfort about the situation through humour. Luckily, the next morning, they found a bus back to Singapore, and after a few very stressful moments at the immigration point, when re-entering Singapore, they were back and could continue to work for another 30 days.

They had lost money from their already painfully tight budgets and had faced great uncertainty and embarrassment. For both of them, coming to Singapore was their first trip abroad. It is not hard to imagine how vulnerable such a 'visa run' made them feel - with a taxi uncle whom they expected to receive help from but were cheated, with a hotel room that cost them a fortune yet placed them in an awkward and what seemed to be somewhat humiliating situation. And above all, their precarious position was amplified by the threatening immigration checkpoints, where they faced a real possibility

of not being permitted back into Singapore and therefore put stop to their work at The Accelerator programme. It is quite understandable why they wanted to focus on the fact that they were back. That, indeed, was the most important.

Despite the fact that Singapore was attempting to position itself as a place for technology start-ups, the entry position for aspiring entrepreneurs was ambiguous since they rarely had a lot of capital to rely on, and their businesses were mere ideas rather than stable corporate entities that could provide the reasoning for their presence in Singapore. This made them precarious subjects in the face of Singapore's immigration policy, which was tailored to the specific needs of Singapore as a Global City. While the image of the world as its hinterland would imagine a free flow of capital, people, and ideas with no boundaries, Singapore was very specific about the sort of people and the terms on which it wanted to allow entry. Importantly, as scholars studying migration have pointed out (see, for example, Baas and Yeoh 2018), different migratory groups had different future horizons given in Singapore by the state, which sometimes aligned but very often clashed with people's own aspirations and visions of their life (Baas 2017).

Singapore's immigration policy was one of the actively used policy instruments Singapore exercised to regulate its labour market. Singapore, as a Global City, aimed to pick and choose and shift its hinterlands in relation to its manpower and migration policies. At the time of my research in 2013, Singapore's population was estimated to be 5.399 million inhabitants, out of which only 3.844 million were permanent residents (*Population Trends 2013*), which meant that nearly one-third of the population was transient and, to a large extent could be rather conveniently regulated through migration instruments such as visas and employment passes (see for example Abdul Rahman 2010). Singapore's development strategy over the years classified transnational labour into two major groups - 'foreign talent', which denoted the highly educated, mobile, well paid and welcomed group, and the 'foreign workers' - people allowed to enter Singapore for the purpose of semi or unskilled labour, usually in the construction, manufacturing and domestic help sectors. For the 'foreign workers', there were common 'source countries' such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Bangladesh, India, etc., whose nationals typically would face higher levels of discrimination, were low paid and were explicitly allowed to enter Singapore for a limited period of time with no access to permanent residency.

Differing levels of discrimination and favouritism were also embedded in the tourist visa system. Some country nationals could receive visas on arrival, while others had to apply for them beforehand. Those receiving the visa on arrival would receive visas with different durations depending on the country they belong to. For example, for EU citizens, the duration of a tourist visa was 90 days. For holders of the Philippines

passport, it was 30 days. People who had Indian or Burmese passports had to apply for visas beforehand.

Most aspiring entrepreneurs that entered Singapore from abroad, whom I knew, did so on a tourist visa basis, with a visa issued upon arrival. Once in Singapore, the entrepreneurs usually tried to extend the tourist visa. If the extension was rejected or expired, they went on visa runs, which they usually continued up until the moment they could qualify for one of the more permanent passes - either an Employment pass or an S Pass for highly skilled professionals and mid-level skilled professionals, respectively. One of my interlocutors told me he had exited and returned to Singapore so often over the course of a couple of years that he was forced to make a trip to his home country for a passport renewal because his old one had no more space for immigration stamps. I have a suspicion he had more reasons to go home, but this half-joke, half-true comment is an anecdotal example of the lived experience that forced people to access the future in Singapore only by regularly exiting it.

Both the Employment and S-passes become available options only after the business has been already incorporated in Singapore and preferably at least six months old. Thus, this path was not viable for the entrepreneurs wanting to start their business. Additionally, these passes could be realistically obtained (and not without additional difficulties) at the moment the employing business has received external funding or made enough revenue to cover the minimal salaries necessary to employ an employee - for Employment pass the minimal salary at the time of my research was \$3,300 and for S-Pass it was \$2,200, translating to roughly 2,200 and 1,500 Euros respectively. The actual costs for the company to pay for those passes were higher because, in addition to the salary, for the S-Pass holders, the company also had to cover medical insurance and a monthly foreign worker levy that could amount to up to 750 SGD or 500 Euros a month.

There was a special pass aimed at “foreign entrepreneurs wanting to start and operate a new business in Singapore” (“EntrePass,” n.d.). It was called Entrepass, and this was the only pass that one could apply for with the intention of establishing a business in Singapore. However, the Entrepass seemed to imagine a very different kind of entrepreneur - one that was far removed from people like John or Glenn. In order to qualify for this pass, the applicant needed to show proof of at minimum 50,000 SGD (roughly 32,500 Euros) of paid-up capital and either had to hold Intellectual property or had to be on contractual terms with a Singapore government-accredited venture capital or education institution. Theoretically, there was also an option for the Work Holiday Program, which allowed students from a university in Australia, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Japan, New Zealand, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, or the United States aged 17 to 30 to spend up to six months in Singapore for the purpose. Yet, very few of the entrepreneurs I knew could make use of it. All these passes had to be usually renewed on an

annual and biannual basis, and since there were nationwide quotas of how many pass holders could be at different categories, there could never be a certainty that one's pass would be extended. The issue of organising one's stay in Singapore has become especially problematic since the 2011 General Elections, especially since the so-called Population White Paper protests, which took place in 2013 and will be described in more detail in Chapter Two. During this time, growing anti-immigrant labour sentiment was articulated and voiced strongly.

The national boundaries exemplified by the need for visa runs were one such aspect that the imaginary geography of Singapore as the hub of the region wished to unimagine. However, these boundaries were very real and, for many of the entrepreneurs who came to Singapore, a constant worry. It was not always as upsetting as in the case of Glenn and John. Clearly, depending on one's wealth and country of origin, the levels of experienced precarity varied. Entrepreneurs from within the region often combine visa runs with their visits home for family and business reasons. Those who had relocated to Singapore from further away and had more wealth used these if not for business, then for vacations on the beaches of Phuket in Thailand or Bali, Indonesia, to name a few popular destinations. Yet, it was always a matter of time and money. Those who had neither resorted to the more risky but quicker and cheaper run to Johor Bahru in Malaysia. Especially the entrepreneurs from the Philippines, India, Thailand and Indonesia - countries on which Singapore relied for much of its immigrant workers who fulfilled lower-skilled jobs and thus were subjected to much stricter regulations and control from the government. They faced much more thorough questioning at the immigration checkpoints and, in private conversations, have remarked that exactly the visa runs with the uncertainty they carried with them were the hardest and the most unpleasant part of the experience of building a business in Singapore. National boundaries and migration regimes structurally made different types of futures in Singapore possible for different groups of people with different levels of ease. In this way, the lived experience of trying to locate a start-up in Singapore as the launchpad for the rest of the region reveals itself as more of an ideal rather than a straightforward practice. The future in Singapore turned out to be accessible only through temporarily exiting Singapore—both in terms of business and physically for the founders themselves.

6. Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I showed that geography and how it is imagined also matters in the new economies of technology entrepreneurship. Despite highly utopian

assertions in the early 1990s that digital technologies connect everyone everywhere, geography and places have never ceased to matter, nor are they overtaken by abstract cyberspaces. Even more so, not all places matter in the same way. Despite ideas about globalisation sweeping the globe as a wave, it connects places and disconnects others, often at the same time. In this chapter, I used the notion of 'imaginative geographies' (Said 1978) to explore what kind of image of the world and what kind of understanding of Singapore's position in the world vis-a-vis other spaces informed and structured the technology start-up culture in Singapore, and vice-versa, how through technology start-up related practices such as blogs and start-up conferences these discourses had material consequences. Therefore, in this chapter, I proposed that exploring the global power dynamics as captured in the practices of constructing imaginary geographies is a fruitful way to study futurities ethnographically.

I used the notions of 'scale-making' and 'conjuring' developed by anthropologist Anna Tsing to highlight how these processes of imagining specific scales such as 'national', 'regional' or 'global' informed the flows of capital, people and ideas. These concepts helped to show how these processes of imagination relied on generating difference and perpetuating inequality, based on unequal global power relations where Singapore was imagined to stand between the 'more in the future' Silicon Valley and 'hungry-for-development' 'Asia'. I examined what sort of temporal relationships and social and historical contexts generated and sustained the appeal of this geography and explored the limitations of this futurity ethnographically.

Laura Bear has argued that "racial, gendered, national and other imaginings of the social permeate acts of speculation." (Bear 2020, 1) and "speculation conjures social distinctions and capitalises on inequalities of race and nation" (Bear 2020, 9). My research started at a time when the 2008 financial crisis had scarred the Western economies, and surplus capital was searching for new, more opportune places for growth. In this larger global context, the techno-orientalist narratives about Asia being the location of the future resonated with a new-found force. An older narrative of 'Asia on the Rise' was re-casted as 'the Asia Opportunity' for the entrepreneurially minded and those with capital to spare. It imagined 'Asia' as in need of digital services that could be delivered by Singapore-based start-ups drawing on the knowledge of 'Asia' and the appropriation of practices of Silicon Valley. The identification of an "Asian opportunity" and how it connected to Singapore was a complex overlap between a particular understanding of economic progress, Singapore's government's endorsed narrative of Singapore's history, nation branding, and policies, and equally important, also a particular ethos associated with entrepreneurship that requires an imagination of a 'frontier zone'. The notion of 'scale' here featured as an emic, aspirational term crucial for directing capital, people and ideas. In the chapter, I argued that the imaginary geographies of technology

entrepreneurship relied on a linear temporal imagination, which organised spaces in hierarchical relationships. Silicon Valley was imagined to be in the future and set the standard for how the future would be; Singapore was trying to catch up with it by using its temporal advantage over the temporally distant Asia, which was seen more in the past (yet with a pre-determined future in the context of sinofuturism). The images of the future that animated and drove Singapore's appeal for international finance and entrepreneurship relied on an imaginary geography characterised by temporal incongruity and denial of coevalness. 'Asia' was implicitly construed as less developed, as the future of its development would provide spectacular growth opportunities.

The Asia opportunity narrative seemingly envisioned an alignment between the Singapore government's wish to see Singapore as a 'global' city, investors' aspirations for high returns on capital, and entrepreneurs' wish to build innovative businesses and change the world. The scale and growth opportunities had to be imagined in order for the scale-making projects to bring different players together. The blogs and conferences were working to benefit from and, at the same time, entrench this narrative, enacting a flexible regionality where Singapore stood central. Yet, they also provided opportunities to challenge it, and through the chapter, it became evident that the entrepreneur is positioned precariously in this imagination of start-up futurities.

While this imagination of Singapore as a global city positing the region as its hinterlands is one that entrepreneurs also embraced due to the aspirations of scale, in practice, this movement between 'the centre' and its 'hinterlands' was filled with frictions. Imagination and unimagination had to work hand in hand for successful scale-making and future conjuring processes. Discussions about the actual diversity within the region and the practice called 'visa runs,' illustrated how much struggle and work awaited those who wanted to pursue start-up futurities. This complicates the simplistic imagination of Asia on the rise and Singapore's imagination as a Global city as inevitable, natural futurities and highlights the work and the friction that was part of these futurities. By describing the 'Visa runs', I showed how old power hierarchies revealed themselves and structured the possible futures as well as the shame and vulnerability the interlocutors from around the region experienced to access their future in Singapore. Similarly, entrepreneurs drawing on their own experiences argued that the imagination of scalability at the regional level required them to unimagine the local diversity that they actually had to deal with when starting to build their businesses.

This leads me to conclude that the imaginary geography of start-up futurities was essentially a neo-colonial capitalist imagination of the future where development happens through inclusion in the market. It shows that old geographies of power have not necessarily disappeared but underlie and inform the new geographies of technopreneurship and innovation futures. While Silicon Valley has a well-established history

of claiming the technology innovation futurities globally, the same may be said of Singapore at the regional scale. Despite its humble origin story, it was a regional colonial centre, even as part of the British Empire (see, for example, Bunnell 2016). Similarly, the narrative about Asia on the rise gains its strength from decades of techno-orientalist imagination and fear of the West losing its economic and cultural dominance. Such teleological imaginations, which deny coevalness to countries, places and people coexisting simultaneously, is bound up with the imagination of a deeply hierarchical geography. In that regard, then, it does not matter whether the source of the future is set to be in Asian or Euro-American urban centres because both aim to deny the multiplicity of futures-in-the-making inherent to any particular context and locality, which is what I will explore in greater detail in the next chapter.

