

Foxes and Hedgehogs in Singapore History¹

by Chua Jun Yan

“A fox knows many things,” the Greek poet Archilochus famously wrote, “but the hedgehog knows one big thing.” German philosopher Isaiah Berlin later popularized the distinction in his 1953 essay, distinguishing between thinkers and leaders who viewed reality through a singular lens, and those who drew on a range of ideas and experiences to understand the world.² In this essay, I argue that the success of present-day Singapore has been shaped by the healthy tension between both styles of historical agency, enabling the country to benefit from hedgehog-like vision but foxlike methods.

From the outset, it bears mentioning that the fox/hedgehog distinction should not be confused with the generalist/specialist divide. Instead, it reflects different ways of engaging the world, rather than the range and depth of knowledge that one happens to possess. Nor is fox/hedgehog a stand-in for idealist/pragmatist. Hedgehogs may be highly pragmatic in pursuit of a single virtue; equally, foxes can be enamored with multiple ideals. Properly understood, the fox/hedgehog framework illuminates how Singapore’s past has shaped the cognitive styles of leaders in different fields, with far-reaching consequences for the nation’s trajectory.

The recent past offers cautionary examples of systems that falter when foxes or hedgehogs dominate to the exclusion of the other. In the Soviet Union, Michael Gorbachev’s hedgehog-like faith in glasnost and perestroika precipitated the collapse of the country he sought to reform. His successor, Boris Yeltsin, swung to the opposite extreme, governing post-Soviet Russia through foxlike improvisation which relied on personal patronage and ad hoc deal-making. The absence of a unifying national project enabled oligarchs to enrich themselves and hollow out the state, fostering a pervasive cynicism among ordinary Russians.

Singapore escaped such tail-end outcomes partly because its founding leaders comprised both hedgehogs and foxes. S. Rajaratnam was the consummate hedgehog, driven by the singular ideal of a multicultural Singapore through almost four decades of public life. As Minister for Culture, he sought to forge a Malayan civic nationalism that transcended race and language. On the eve of independence, he was one of the last signatories of the Separation agreement because it meant giving up on the dream of a non-communal Malaysian Malaysia. As author of the National Pledge, Rajartnam subsequently translated multiracialism into a shared credo and everyday ritual. Lee Kuan Yew later reflected that “only Raja had the conviction and optimism to express those long-term aspirations in that pledge.”³ Indeed, Rajaratnam’s belief in cosmopolitanism infused his strategic thinking as Foreign Minister. For him, non-alignment and support for multilateralism represented a natural extension of the country’s plural social fabric. In 1972, he articulated his vision for Singapore as a

¹ I use Generative AI as a tool for brainstorming and refining my ideas, but the words in this essay are my own.

² Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy’s View of History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1953), 1.

³ Irene Ng, “S. Rajaratnam: Keeper of the Multiracial Flame,” +65: *A Journal by the Founder’s Memorial on Singapore’s Post-Independence History and Society*, no. 4 (2025): 159.

“global city,” for whom the lack of a hinterland was no obstacle. Today, Rajaratnam’s ideas are so foundational to Singaporean consciousness that they are often taken as truisms.

By contrast, Rajaratnam’s Cabinet colleague, Goh Keng Swee, functioned as the classic fox. Intellectually promiscuous and problem-driven, he pursued multiple goals that stood in tension with one another, identifying solutions without presupposing the authority of any single analytical frame. He supported “independence through merger,” yet was the first to conclude that Singapore would ultimately fare better outside Malaysia. He championed fiscal prudence and market discipline, but also presided over extensive state intervention in the economy, as a key proponent of the Economic Development Board and later the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation. Goh’s policy imagination drew inspiration from eclectic, often idiosyncratic, sources. His experience with “Hokkien platoons” in the Ministry of Defense prompted him to introduce streaming in schools; the need for an early warning system for air quality in the Jurong Industrial Estate nudged him to set up the Jurong Bird Park. Unlike Rajaratnam, Goh was never wedded to a single vision: his fox-like sensibilities enabled him to hold competing logics, privileging empiricism over ideological purity.⁴ Whereas Rajaratnam was the intellectual architect of Singapore’s nationhood, Goh was its chief engineer, designing institutions which continue to structure Singaporean life.

Although the fox/hedgehog distinction is most clearly articulated in political thought, it extends well beyond the realm of high politics. Sim Wong Hoo, founder of Creative Technology, was an archetypal hedgehog. In his late twenties, Sim built what was billed as “Singapore’s first low-cost computer,” driven by the belief that superior engineering, coupled with cost discipline, could enable a scrappy Singaporean start-up to compete with the giants of Silicon Valley.⁵ By the early 1990s, Creative had become the leading producer of PC sound cards; its Sound Blaster line delivered near-professional audio quality at consumer prices through a single soundcard.

Even as audio capabilities increasingly became integrated with PC motherboards, Sim clung to his original thesis. Rather than rethinking Creative’s broader strategy, he fought a war of attrition by doubling down on premium hardware and a proprietary software layer.⁶ The MP3 player wars of the early 2000s revealed the same hedgehog instincts: as with Sound Blaster, he focused on creating technically superior products and selling them at lower prices. Consumers, however, ultimately sided with Apple, which played a different game altogether, winning on design and simplicity rather than features or cost. Sim’s hedgehog disposition did not allow Creative to last, but it ensured that the firm would be remembered. To date, Creative arguably remain the only Singaporean company which has come close to challenging the preeminence of American consumer technology.

⁴ Ooi Kee Beng, *In Lieu of Ideology: An Intellectual Biography of Goh Keng Swee* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010), xxii,

⁵ Fong Weng Fatt, “Creative four build Singapore’s first low-cost computer,” *Singapore Monitor*, October 14, 1984, 16.

⁶ Bradford Morgan White, “The Story of Creative Technology: The Sound Blaster,” *Abort Retry Fail*, August 10, 2025, accessed January 1, 2026, <https://www.abortretry.fail/p/the-story-of-creative-technology>

If Sim Wong Hoo's exemplified the power and peril of a hedgehog, his contemporary Ron Sim provides a foxlike counterpoint. Best known as the founder of the massage-chair empire OSIM, Sim's entrepreneurial journey started in 1979 with the R Sim Trading Company. An early product—advertised in the *New Nation*—was the “New Generation Garment Drying Rod,” adapted from a Japanese design and positioned as a modern alternative to the “primitive” practice of drying clothes by bamboo pole. The same advertisement noted that the company also “deals in the window washer from Korea, witch needle threader from Germany and Chemicon industrial chemicals.”⁷ From the start, Sim was less an evangelist for a single product than a bricoleur of an eclectic mix of imported consumer goods.

It was only in the 1990s that Sim found his breakout hit in the massage chair. Riding on the growing affluence of Asia's middle class, he rebranded his business as OSIM (a portmanteau of the letter O and his surname “Sim”) in 1993 and pitched the appliance as an aspirational symbol of domesticated luxury. By 2000, OSIM was listed on the Singapore Exchange with a valuation of \$120 million. Yet, even at the height of OSIM's success, the massage chair was not the telos of Sim's business vision, merely one winning bet in a long game. In 2003, Sim acquired a stake in the GNC supplement chain; seven years later, he purchased the struggling luxury tea brand, TWG Tea and turned it into a high-street staple across major Asian cities. Not content with conquering tea, Sim launched the Batcha Coffee line on the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even as the popularity of massage chairs declined through the 2010s, with the once-futuristic gadget fading into a down-market curiosity, Sim had already outgrown the product which both bore and had given him his name.⁸

Taken together, the Sims illuminate the explanatory power of the fox/hedgehog dichotomy in Singapore's business history. Whereas Sim Wong Hoo's single-minded vision represented Singapore's closest brush with building a global technology company, Ron Sim exemplified a more opportunistic path to regional dominance. “Singapore Inc” has been built on the backs of both hedgehogs who relentlessly perfected a single thesis, and foxes who could read the market and thrived on serial reinvention.

This same duality is evident in Singapore's art history, where hedgehogs circled around singular aesthetic visions, while foxes roamed across styles, genres, and themes. The social realist painter Chua Mia Tee was the quintessential hedgehog. From his time as a founding member of the leftwing Equator Art Society, Chua's work was animated by the enduring conviction the art could mobilize the masses to enact social change.⁹ His earlier paintings sought to evoke a Malayan consciousness in the throes of decolonization; his later works included both portraits of political leaders and scenes of everyday life, but invariably emphasized the heroic character of nation-building. When the National Gallery inaugurated its permanent exhibition of Singapore art, his painting, *National Language Class*, provided the inspiration for its title, *Siapa Nama Kamu*, cementing Chua's role as Singapore's de facto painter laureate.

⁷ “New drying rods for your clothes,” *New Nation*, October 20, 1981, 16.

⁸ Basia Chow, “From Wanton Mee to Massage Chairs: How OSIM Billionaire Founder Built a Net Worth of US\$1.3B,” *Vulcan Post*, October 2, 2020, accessed January 1, 2026, <https://vulcanpost.com/716125/osim-billionaire-founder-singapore/>

⁹ Low Sze Wee, “Enduring Values: Continuity and Change in the Art of Chua Mia Tee,” 2020, 4.

On the surface, Lim Tze Peng's career paralleled Chua's—both artists were Cultural Medallion winners, and their work came to define Singapore's national canon. Unlike Chua, however, Lim embodied the spirit of the fox. Across a long career, he restlessly experimented across styles and subjects. In the 1960s, Lim painted extensively in oil during his travels in Southeast Asia with the Ten Men Group, before turning to Chinese ink to depict idyllic local scenes in the 1970s. The hybridity of his work led a local selection committee to reject his submission for the Commonwealth Art Exhibition, on the grounds that it was “neither Western nor Chinese.”¹⁰ In his later years, Lim once again redefined his practice, drawing on his grounding in Chinese calligraphy to produce abstract paintings characterized by bold, expressive brushwork. By drawing inspiration from multiple traditions, moving fluidly between idioms, and challenging artistic convention, Lim created a distinctive visual language that defied easy categorization.

In a sense, the hedgehog- and fox-like tendencies in Chua and Lim's art reflect a more fundamental tension in the formation of Singapore's national culture—between the desire for a unifying, cohesive vision, and the untidy, at times contradictory, realities of pluralism. Across politics, business, and art, the duality of the fox and the hedgehog has shaped Singapore's national character, producing a society that is at once tightly ordered but ruthlessly adaptive, boldly imaginative but coldly practical, obsessed with the future but conservative in instinct.

As the world becomes increasingly unsettled, will Singapore need more foxes or hedgehogs? Hedgehogs would argue that this is precisely the moment for Singapore to double down on the first principles of small state survival: preserving social cohesion, defending a rules-based liberal international order, and remaining a credible partner to all major powers. The world may have changed, but these axioms were forged precisely for such moments—to provide a strategic core in the face of external flux. In contrast, foxes would argue that the old playbook is no longer fit-for-purpose. In a troubled world, we ought not to make a priori assumptions about what will and will not work. Instead, we must be prepared to hedge, experiment, and improvise, seeing the world as it is, not as we want it to be. To the fox, everything is conditional, nothing unimaginable.

If history is any guide, Singapore will continue to require both foxes and hedgehogs—though the balance is likely to shift towards the fox. Today, the explosion of information has outpaced human processing ability, both because the world itself has become more complex and volatile, and because data has become more readily accessible. Hedgehogs work through this overabundance of information by filtering reality through a single organizing idea, providing clarity but also creating blind spots as anomalies mount. Foxes, by contrast, are better adapted to such conditions, operating through continual course correction, and treating all hypotheses as partial and provisional. We will still need Rajaratnams and Sim Wong Hoos and Chua Mia Tees to provide a sense of internal narrative coherence. But we will increasingly rely on the Goh Keng Swees and Ron Sims and Lim Tze Pengs to make substantive

¹⁰ Low Sze Wee, “Pioneer Artist: Lim Tze Peng,” *Culturepaedia: One-Stop Repository on Singapore Chinese Culture*, December 18, 2025, accessed January 1, 2026, <https://culturepaedia.singaporeccc.org.sg/art/pioneer-artist-lim-tze-peng/>

choices. Whereas the hedgehog once defined the ends and the fox devised the means, the future is likely to require a role reversal.