

## LETTERS HOME

## Dotting the i for Singapore

■ BY OW YEONG WAI KIT

RECENTLY in Dublin, I represented Singapore at an international student exchange fair to advertise global study opportunities.

Each country had a booth, with about 20 nations represented, including a handful of Asian ones like Japan and South Korea.

But when I arrived at the hall ready to perform my duty, I couldn't find my country's booth: The sign for "Singapore" simply hadn't been printed.

An Irish friend quipped: "It's because Singapore's too small. They probably just forgot about it." When I did find the booth, it was in a quiet corner of the hall.

The fair organisers, who were staff of University College Dublin, apologised and explained that there had been a miscommunication. They promised to print a sign for next year's fair.

I didn't blame them: They were working within a limited budget to pull off the whole event. But the incident led me to reflect upon perceptions of Singapore.

In the few months I've been in Europe, I've been asked twice whether Singapore is in China.

Occasionally, however, people tell me that they've heard many things about Singapore – that it is clean, safe, and that chewing gum is banned.

Seasoned travellers will add that Singapore is tough on drug traffickers and litterbugs. The Formula One night races also tend to get a mention, and judging by the

reviews, Singapore is thought to be either an Orwellian police state or an ultra-modern metropolis dazzling in its splendour.

Yet there's a crucial difference between people knowing about your country, and having any emotional investment in it.

If you happen to come from one of the major nations of the world, others pay more attention

**At the international student exchange fair, I drew my own sign for Singapore. It was a small gesture, but I wasn't just inscribing a word: I was asserting the right of my country to be counted on equal terms among other nations.**

to you. They accept your currency at money changers, they understand your accent, they tell you how much they want to visit your country... the list goes on.

An American friend here once remarked to me that he just enjoys the comfort of the knowledge that he is a citizen of the world's dominant superpower.

But if you come from Singa-

pore – geographically smaller than the Isle of Wight – the bare fact is that not many people give two hoots about your country. There's something profoundly unsettling in knowing that you belong to a dot on the map that is barely visible when you try to point it out to others.

Is Singapore then condemned to be inconsequential on a global scale? I think not.

Like Switzerland, we have the necessary clout to punch above our weight, and I'm not just referring to politics, in terms of Singapore's influence in international entities like Asean or the United Nations.

It's also that, as one of the few places in which races and faiths exist in harmony, Singapore can draw cultural strength from the whole of Asia and beyond to command the attention of observers worldwide. Our youth, in particular, have the potential to fulfil this purpose by acting as ambassadors on their country's behalf.

At the international student exchange fair, I drew my own sign for Singapore. It was a small gesture, but I wasn't just inscribing a word: I was asserting the right of my country to be counted on equal terms among other nations.

It was also a little reminder to the fair's organisers: Please remember to print the sign for Singapore next year.

**The writer, 23, a third-year English literature major at the National University of Singapore, is on an exchange programme at University College Dublin.**