

**Kurt W. Kuehne**

Mellon Foundation Area and International Studies Fellowships for Incoming Graduate Students

Submitted: September 21, 2015

I would like to express my deep gratitude for the generosity and support of the Mellon Foundation, which enabled two productive months of research in Singapore. I study the social and institutional mechanisms behind Singapore's complicated development trajectory, focusing on the national education system, identity-making, and social stratification.

The Mellon Fellowship opened many doors for my work. Over the summer, I formally interviewed local teachers about their understanding and practice of climate change education. The qualitative data collection will not only support my Master's thesis, but also advances a long-term research project managed by one of my UW-Madison professors. The Mellon award allowed me to participate in the early stages of this work and to develop personal relationships with the project's Singapore-based research collaborators. As a direct result, I gained an extraordinary opportunity to apprentice, write, and publish alongside these scholars. I will be their project assistant for the next academic year, and perhaps beyond.

The summer also benefitted my personal research agenda in both formal and informal ways. The National Institute of Education welcomed me as a "Visiting Graduate Scholar" and provided me with generous hospitality and a personal office. I hope to maintain this relationship in the future. I also re-connected with scores of friends, ex-colleagues, former students, and other networks. Over the eight weeks, some of these individuals introduced me to influential new contacts. Thus, my physical presence in Singapore allowed me to lay important groundwork for future research.

This was a particularly important time to be in Singapore, a politically significant period between the death of Lee Kuan Yew in March and the SG50 celebration (the country's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence) in August. Both inspired a wide range of special events that I otherwise would have missed. I attended dozens of one-time theatrical productions, film screenings, retrospective exhibitions, installations, photo galleries, parades, and the like. Along the way, I collected hundreds of salient photographs and printed artifacts, and had the chance to discuss ongoing events with everyday Singaporeans.

Above all, I'm grateful for the opportunity to simply *be* in Singapore for the summer. The value of informal in-country time cannot be underestimated. Though I have years of experience living in Singapore, each day provided fresh opportunities to deepen ties and to develop my academic familiarity with a dynamic and rapidly changing society. While many of my day-to-day conversations were strictly informal, they make a difference to my work on identity and social dynamics. I can cite many examples, among them a memorable evening tending to rabbits with a witty 90-year-old Singaporean woman—the grandmother of a friend of a friend. She is illiterate and speaks only Malay, but through her daughter's translations, we talked about decades of life and social change. Obviously, I can't have those conversations in Madison, Wisconsin, but they add important richness to my academic understanding. Thank you for making these connections possible.

Finally, I would like to note that the enthusiasm for my research—including the Mellon Foundation's recruitment award—was an important factor in my decision, two years ago, to pursue an area studies M.A. degree at UW-Madison. I've been very happy here, and I recently chose UW-Madison again: this time for a Ph.D. in Sociology. I'm grateful for the early fellowship support. It became the start of a long relationship with this wonderful university.