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Giving Back Through Mentorship

"Surprisingly, I find that the longer I live away from Singapore, the more connected I feel to Singapore, and being Singaporean."

By OSU

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Rachel Leng recounts one of her most gratifying experiences in the earlier days of being a mentor. "This was when I first advised a student throughout her whole process of applying to universities. I was glad that she was successful in her applications – and more than she had thought herself possible,"

"It's very rewarding to see how people change their opinions of themselves [through the mentorship process]. They usually have the capability and potential to do great things on their own, but may need an extra push to have results on hand. This would dramatically change their self-confidence and perspective on what their own abilities are."

As an experienced and accomplished mentor, Rachel has mentored students and young professionals in China, Japan, South Korea and the United States (U.S.) in areas ranging from leadership to global careers. The organisations she presently works with include Three Guineas Academy in Beijing and Shanghai, China; K-Move in Seoul and Busan, South Korea, and The Duke Association for Business Oriented Women in the U.S.

In Japan, where she's currently working at an investment management company in Tokyo, she is also a mentor at Komatsu Summer School and HLAB, a summer school programme that promotes Liberal Arts to Japanese students – one of whom she had an eventual connection with. "When I first started working in Tokyo, one of my colleague's daughters recognized me from a summer school program I had taught at several years ago and reached out to me," she said. "It really can be a small world!"

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Rachel (second from left) with students from Komatsu Summer School, Japan

A Singaporean away from home

Rachel's global journey began at the age of six, when her family relocated to Shanghai on her father's work posting. Upon finishing high school, Rachel took a year off to determine what she wanted to pursue for her tertiary studies, eventually choosing liberal arts over law. She commenced her undergraduate studies in Public Policy, Asian Studies and Economics at Duke University in North Carolina, U.S. after her gap year, and subsequently pursued her Masters in Regional Studies (East Asia) at Harvard University. Following that, Rachel moved to Seoul, where she worked at the Asan Institute of Policy Studies as a Policy Analyst and Research Associate for just over a year, and then to Tokyo for her current role.

Relocating at various stages of her life came with its own challenges. "While I experienced cultural differences as an international student in the U.S., it was still easier to adjust, thanks to good support systems like the dedicated student administration office or fellow student communities. Moving to South Korea and Japan alone, however, was incredibly more difficult. I had to be aware of cultural and societal differences, become immensely more resourceful and adaptable in searching for new communities, learning how to get around, moving apartments, and making new friends," she said.

"People say that moving to a new city and starting a new job are two stressful life experiences; doing both at the same time is exponentially more stressful. However, once you have done it before, it becomes significantly easier each time."

Despite living away from Singapore for such a long period, Rachel says that one thing that has remained constant is her identity as a Singaporean. "I find myself representing Singapore to diverse groups of people who may have never had a chance to visit the country or meet other Singaporeans. Surprisingly, I find that the longer I live away from Singapore, the more connected I feel to Singapore, and being Singaporean."

Similarly, she continues to maintain a deep connection to her Singaporean roots, through the values and traits that have been ingrained within her – for instance, being determined, savvy and working efficiently in international environments. Another inherently Singaporean trait is having cultural flex and awareness through an exposure to diverse religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This comes through most in her linguistic abilities; Rachel is able to speak Japanese and some Korean, aside from English and Mandarin.

"This setting in Singapore has significantly influenced me, and these are some values and traits that stay with me as I shape my own life and career overseas, with the aim of contributing to various local communities that I get connected to."

Coming full circle as a mentor

For Rachel, becoming a mentor was her way of coming full circle, from starting out as a college student at Duke University, to her various appointments around the globe. Such experiences have given her a unique insight into how her life has been shaped by them.

"As I reflected on my own experiences, I became increasingly passionate about 'paying it forward' as a mentor. It can be difficult for anyone to build experience and enhance their potential without knowing about available opportunities or how to access them. Mentoring is therefore an effective way to offer opportunities, information, insight and resources to others who could benefit from them."

She added, "In every country I have lived in, I aim to get involved with the local community. I wish to share the lessons I have learned from studying and working abroad, encouraging youth to think 'outside the box' of their perceived social limitations, mentoring students and young professionals to successfully attain an overseas education or employment."

She also values how being Singaporean has helped make her a better mentor and support to her international mentees. "As a Singaporean, I consider the awareness attained by being from a 'global village' and the ability to empathise with diverse groups of people as a Singaporean trait," she said. "It is also helpful that I am not

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the same nationality as most of the youth that I mentor. This way, they are challenged to interact and think differently when encountering foreign perspectives, pushing both sides to be more empathetic and receptive to different viewpoints.”



Rachel speaking at an Ignite Academy event, as a panelist on 'The New Silk Road: Entrepreneurship and Innovation in China'. There, she talked about the role of Chinese women in leadership and as entrepreneurs.

Connecting and contributing

Rachel's desire to be involved in local communities led her to join DukeEngage while at Duke University – a programme that encourages students to pursue immersive service experiences within the US or overseas, to meet the needs of a community. In 2012, she was a teacher at Dandelion Middle School in Beijing, a non-profit school for migrant children. Aside from being an educator, Rachel also conducted interviews and field research to learn more about the children's challenges and social environment, to contribute to the school's operations and policies for student retention.



Rachel with her students at Dandelion Middle School in Beijing, as part of the DukeEngage programme

"I had first-hand experience of the reality these kids face everyday – there were factors like the pressure to stop studying and start working at a young age, uncertain legal residency and broken family backgrounds. I wanted to do everything I could to encourage and support them to stay in school, [and] show them that through education, they could have the opportunity to change their future," she said.

Rachel credits this immersive service trip as being an important, life-changing experience. "I witnessed first-hand the impact that a foreign perspective coupled with positive encouragement can have on someone's life – sometimes, people really just need the exposure to different opportunities and ways of thinking, along with some encouragement and support for them to achieve great things on their own."

This is something that she also sees in the mentorship that she continues to do today. "It is an amazing feeling to be able to make a positive difference in the lives of others, no matter how big or small. To have mentees and students share their experiences with me, developing a strong relationship with them, and seeing them happy – these are just some experiences I consider priceless," she said.

Connecting with home

Though Rachel has enjoyed many fruitful overseas experiences, being away from Singapore for an extended length of time also makes her miss aspects of home. "As with many Singaporeans abroad, I miss my friends and family, and also the comfort of a local Singaporean community when I am away. I also sorely miss some of my favorite Singapore food that's hard to find abroad, such as Hokkien mee, and Peranakan food like *buah keluak*."

Despite being far away, she makes it a point to reconnect with Singapore wherever she is. On doing so in Tokyo, where she now lives, she said, "[The Embassy of the Republic of Singapore in Tokyo](https://www.mfa.gov.sg/content/mfa/overseasmission/tokyo.html) (<https://www.mfa.gov.sg/content/mfa/overseasmission/tokyo.html>) is a great resource for Singaporeans in Japan to get together and meet each other. Local Singapore interest organisations in each country – such as the [Singapore Association in Japan](http://www.saij.jp/) (<http://www.saij.jp/>) – are also very welcoming and fun. It is nice to be able to gather with fellow Singaporeans over Singaporean food and share our experiences overseas with each other."

Rachel also wishes to connect more with home through contributing back to the Singaporean society – particularly to the youth. "To be honest, I wish to be able to get more involved with Singaporean organizations," she mused. "I hope that through sharing my story and my work, I can also reach out to people this way, perhaps even connecting with potential future collaboration opportunities. I will continue to look for opportunities to get involved in a more direct role."



Rachel catching up with two of her mentees over Korean food in Seoul, South Korea. She was awarded Excellent Mentor of the Year in 2017 by the South Korean government (Human Resources Development Service of Korea).

To her fellow Singaporeans friends living abroad, Rachel has these words of encouragement, "Do not be afraid to step out of your comfort zone and get involved in the local community. By interacting with locals to learn more about their world, you'd be surprised at how much you can discover, and also about how valuable cross-cultural exposure can be."

"Cross-cultural interactions can sow many seeds for ideas, and having a foreign background and perspective can be a great asset to contributing to something that is lacking in that society or community, potentially impacting many lives. Even something as simple as sharing about your experience as a Singaporean can represent a valuable encounter and insight to another."

About the Author



OSU

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