

Exactly Foundation – Residency #25 – *A Way of Becoming*

by Kenneth Wong. September 2025, Singapore

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Word from the ‘Wart’¹

By Li Li Chung

There is so much out there on the woes of being female as well as being male. But in different and unequal measure. My take is that there is much on the “mistreatment” of females and the need to make right. While the discussions on males are on tempering toxic masculinity and reinforcing positive behaviour such as fatherhood, husbandhood, brotherhood. It’s as if men/boys need to get control of some innate bestial force. Is that what is happening in Singapore, like “just get a grip, guys”?

What’s special about masculinity in the Singapore context, given that we have this additional rite of passage for young men, National Service (NS)? ChatGPT helpfully describes NS as “... a mandatory two-year program for all male citizens and second-generation permanent residents, starting at age 18, to serve in the Singapore Armed Forces, Singapore Police Force, or Singapore Civil Defence Force. After completing full-time service, they enter a reserve phase with annual training until they reach a certain age, and failure to comply can result in penalties like fines or imprisonment. NS is considered a rite of passage that builds national identity and ensures Singapore's defence and security”. What this really means is that in Singaporeans’ early 20s, women are ahead of the mean by two years in post-secondary school education, employment and career; what does this do to perception of eligibility (of what?) and all manners of compare?

I looked for a long time and am grateful that photographer and gerontologist Kenneth Wong is willing to take on this discussion, in his Exactly project *A Way of Becoming* to visualize masculinity in Singapore. No doubt, the discussion is one of inter-generational differences amidst vast social and environmental changes over time. But yet, are there principles and modes of behaviour that can stand this test of time and also get re-visited as Kenneth and other men transition into being fathers themselves? For example, one can look at sports and physical exercises; are these tenets of strength, team play, fairness, competitiveness the same over time? “Looking good”: we always want to look good, regardless of age or gender. I am particularly intrigued by Kenneth’s career development into gerontology and the possibility of his taking on a professional and personal, and a longer-term view of men’s aging.

Then there is the thorny issue of vocabulary and language. Are we moving forward or are we regressing or stagnating? Are we just aping what we pick up from Western/English-language media or have we developed our own in Singapore? Is NS helping or hindering? I have heard that schools and NS introduce to our children new vocabulary and attitudes that we as parents have to be aware and sometimes have to untangle at home. And hope that the undesirable aspects do not last or stick in our children’s psyche as they move to adulthood.

Then there are also the visuals: what it is to look manly, masculine? When I finally got to retirement and graduate school in London, I was intrigued and pleased that some of my much younger, male classmates wore makeup, nail polish and skirts. Let’s not even get started on K-Drama/K-pop stars and their flawless, chiselled faces. It has taken me years to mouth/spell “androgynous” and be mindful that being metasexual/metrosexual is okay and not necessarily about sexual orientation.

So much to navigate. Is it confusing or just swirling of the same old juice?

¹ *Wart* is short for Stalwart, which Exactly Foundation’s first resident Kevin Lee suggested that for future residences, I should pen a statement as “Exactly Foundation Stalwart” – a label that sounds like too much adult responsibility.