



Season 4, Episode 1 – Working Abroad in Southeast Asia

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[Music]

Stacie Berdan:

Welcome to the global careers podcast sponsored by GW-CIBER – THE source for inspiring stories from seasoned professionals who have embraced a global role and reaped the benefits. We offer practical advice and insider tips across a broad swath of industries and fields around the world. Whether or not you've considered moving abroad or taking on an international role, globalization will impact your career. So join us for a lively discussion as we explore what an international career really means. My name is Stacie Nevadomski Berdan and I'll be your host!

In season four we travel around the world exploring what it's like working abroad in some of the hottest industries and best countries for advancing your career. Come with us as we journey through rich and diverse cultures and deepen our understanding of the expat experience.

Today, I have the pleasure of interviewing former US ambassador Curtis S. Chin, a business leader, board member, strategist and public affairs and policy specialist, having served in leadership and operational positions working with the private not-for-profit and public sectors in Asia and the US. He served as the 15th US Ambassador to the Asian Development Bank, becoming only the fourth US ambassador of Chinese heritage. And he's now a senior fellow with the Milken Institute. He also serves as a board member for several companies and institutions focused on Asia. And Curtis is one of my dearest friends for several decades now, and I'm super excited to have him here with us today to talk about living and working in Southeast Asia. Welcome, Curtis.

Curtis Chin:

Ooh, Stacy, great to be with you. Absolutely! I've known you for so long, it seems, but if people will see us, they know how young we really are. But yeah, it's been amazing last 15 years working in Southeast Asia, you know, from the Philippines, to now where I am mainly in Thailand, Singapore, and Indonesia. But what an amazing experience, which I hope some of our listeners will be able to take advantage of too.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah, absolutely, absolutely great part of the world. And one of the objectives of this podcast is to provide a sense of the careers that are out there, you have done so much, you've got lots of really big, impressive titles. But can you give us a sense, just kind of quickly a summary of what you do?

Curtis Chin:

Yeah, you know, it's funny, as I think about, you know, how we first met in the world of public relations, where we often got that question, what do you do, what is PR, and I get it today. And partly, it's because what I live now, you know, I'm calling it a portfolio life, you know, I've been blessed, as you know, to have many experiences across different sectors – government, not for profit, and, of course, the corporate world. And so what I'm doing now is a mix of different kinds of jobs, all based around this nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank called the Milken Institute, in Asia, based out of Singapore, you know, back in the US out of Los Angeles, New York, and now South Florida. But their work, and so that's my work is... we focus on trying, hopefully to have an impact bringing people together – whether it's institutions, or philanthropists, you know, people with access to capital with money – and trying to link them to prospects for a new company, new philanthropy, and a lot of what we do is focused on the notion of,



you know, you might have a great idea for a business or, or you know, even a charity. But sometimes if you don't have access to capital to money, sometimes it just remains an idea. So my focus, bringing people together, convening people with the end goal of impacting policy, and hopefully making people's lives day to day at least a little bit better.

Stacie Berdan:

That's wonderful. And you've been able to do that, of course, because of everything that you've done beforehand, kind of... kind of leading to this point. And as you look back on your career, and everything you've accomplished, you know, what do you see, what are you most proud of?

Curtis Chin:

Well, one, I have to say, you know, how cool it is to serve your own country, you know, to be a US ambassador. You know, that job I had came up under the US Department of Treasury, not the US Department of State. And basically, I sat in Manila, in the Philippines, and the Asian World Bank is kind of like an Asian version of the World Bank. So really trying to help Asian countries, you know, move out of poverty, and develop their economies. And so to be able to sit on the board of directors of that bank, and say, yeah, we're gonna lift people out of where they are right now to a better life. And the US is going to be, you know, part of the solution. And there is exactly kind of what I'm proud of, too, is in a way, you know, being Asian American. Hopefully, I was also able to address the stereotypes that people might have in Asia, of what is a US ambassador, what is an American? And so for students coming to the diversity that is Southeast Asia, I will say to them too – part of the great opportunity they will have and the challenge is that people have stereotypes of what is this young American person, what is he or she all about? And so I was able to change that, and hopefully in a positive way, and also have an impact on people's lives. You know, they're looking for a better way to power their home... So the whole clean energy space... They're looking for ways to improve the yields on, you know, agricultural crops. So when people eat...so, how amazing that I could do that. So, proud of that, but still honored to be able to do that too.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah, that's wonderful. That is wonderful. And loved, loved visiting you when you were in Manila. And you were based there in Manila and worked across the Philippines, Japan, China, Beijing, Hong Kong, also New York, DC. So you've worked in a lot of different places, you're now in Bangkok, working across Southeast Asia. What's it like?

Curtis Chin:

What I have to say it's so cool. My world, though, has changed somewhat because of the pandemic, where it's less easy to go between countries. But as of, you know, I'd say, mid of this year 2022, Southeast Asia, for the most part is open to business or open for business. So what's the like, I might be on a plane flying to another country... And again, this region of ten nations that make up what is called the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ranges from a diversity of countries – from giant Indonesia (you know, the largest country in Southeast Asia, by population and by geography, a secular nation, but the largest nation in terms of having Muslims in Southeast Asia) to tiny little places like Brunei, oil, rich Sultanate of Brunei. So it's amazing to be able to travel between places to see both the differences, but also the similarities in trying to get things done. And also recognizing in some ways, you know, people still are just focused on trying to have a better life for them and their kids. You know, they don't want to be involved in all the geopolitics of the region of US and China, Korea and Japan. But I'd say it's just a marvelous experience seeing based and working in Southeast Asia.



Stacie Berdan:

Well, you mentioned some differences and similarities. What are some of those? And you know, I don't really want you to necessarily compare just talk about what's it like in Thailand? What's it like in Singapore – business, etiquette, culture, even food, even some of the fun stuff?

Curtis Chin:

Yeah, well, I have to say... Well, one, I think across the region, but food is amazing. It's funny, if you look at the flag of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, you'll see that in the middle of it are stocks of rice. And some people don't even know how rice is grown... so I'd say the wheat, or the kernel, where the grains are at the top... When you look at these ten Southeast Asian Nations, how they even eat rice is so different... You know, from here in Thailand, where I'm at the moment, like if I think just about breakfast, you know – it's kind of like a rice soup, where the grains are distinct, almost like a porridge where you might kind of put all kinds of interesting things in it. Where when I'm having a traditional Chinese, Singaporean – like a straight Chinese breakfast in Singapore – it might be some toast with two poached eggs. And on that coast is something called Tiger, which is kind of like a sweet spread. And so you know, the diversity of food in this region is also amazing. So when I say that I see, you know, my fellow Americans out there, the reason that people come out, I say to them, you know, explore the food, food is a great connector to people. So even in a place that I would say is much more casual, like the Philippines, (you know, Philippines was a US, in essence, a colony in a way, though technically not a colony), but the Philippines is so American, from the casualness to the friendliness of the people. Where Thailand, remember Thailand, yeah, people do speak English for some part, but people really speak Thai. It's much more hierarchical, much more formal. And so I think when people begin to think about where they might want to be in the region, they really want to try and get an understanding of why do people behave a certain way? What is their history, and hopefully have a little bit of empathy, and understand why they might have a stereotype good or bad of a young American who's come out to study English or to work or just to enjoy these amazing destinations that are Southeast Asia.

Stacie Berdan:

That's great. That's wonderful. Especially of course, food, have dived into your breakfast this morning already. So tell me a little bit more about business etiquette for some of our.... So tell me a little bit about what it's like in various places?

Curtis Chin:

Yeah. So I mean, just again, think about the diversity of this region. So let's, let's say Singapore... Singapore – I don't know, 5 million people or so – their, like, GDP (so if you averaged out how much money people make) was something like \$57,000, right, the average right, which is kind of similar to the US, and that also reflects the state of development of Singapore. So think a first-world, world-class, you know, a little bit of stereotypes, but a lot of truth too, like in that film "Crazy Rich Asians", about how developed this city-state is. So in many ways, business etiquette here is a little bit like almost, I'd say in New York, or London – world-class business cities where there are kind of used to an American trying to shake someone's hand, you know, whether or not you would normally do that if you were an American, they're used to it. In Singapore the business etiquette is also one where a lot of business is conducted in English. So all of the formalities of how you do business in English the pleasantries – people will see here. But then underneath that top layer of international business, Singapore, this amazing city-state is a city predominantly of Chinese ethnicity, of course, but also Malay and Indian. So their own traditions and cultures in terms of how they deal with people.. I'd say across the region, though, there is an emphasis on relationship building, right? There's a hunger to learn, and a hunger again, really to make people's lives better, and hopefully make some money along the way. So again, world class international city, Singapore. But you know, when I go back to Philippines, I remember very American but also very different too, in the sense that, you know, they were a real colony of Spain for hundreds of years. And if one travels in the Philippines, sometimes maybe even in the South, you'll see that a Filipino town can feel a little bit like Mexico, not Spain, because Spain ruled the Philippines from



Mexico. So the town square, the church, the importance of faith and religion in the Philippines, and the names of Filipinos they sound like Spanish. So again, it's so different than other parts of the region... But again, relationships are so important. And where Singapore and the Philippines as an example, are so different... Some would joke to me and say, you know, the, the Philippines and maybe they belong in the Inter-American Development Bank versus the Asian Development Bank, because there's a lot that seeped in from being part of the Spanish Empire for so long. So again, for people who want to come and work in the region, I'd say, before you come, study the history of this region. And to add, you know, that's why America of course, is so amazing, because you think about Asian Americans in the US, so many have come from this region. And people don't even realize, when you look at the ethnic Asian groups in the US, you know, number one are ethnic Chinese and number two are ethnic Indians, but the third largest Asian-American ethnic group, are actually Filipinos. And so I'd say, you know, how often have all of us in the US gone out, not just for Chinese or Indian food, but if there's a big Filipino-American community, explore the culture and the history back in the US before coming over here to Asia.

Stacie Berdan:

That's wonderful advice. Great. So lots there to unpack for listeners – depth, but definitely doing your research and diving in. And really appreciating and understanding what culture is. That's great. I want to turn back to something you said about ASEAN. I know it's one of the largest economic blocs, if you kind of pull all of the countries together. I think you said ten plus or so. Within those, what are some of the hottest industries or types of jobs that a graduate from, say from a B school might be interested in pursuing or might be able to pursue? What's going on?

Curtis Chin:

Yeah, absolutely. So these ten nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations may one day actually be eleven, with the island nation of Timor-Leste they trying to get in. If you add up all these economies, I think the last ranking I saw, this is the third largest economy in the Asia Pacific region. So you know, because China, India, way up there, Japan way up there, too. And this is the fifth largest group of nations in the world in terms of the economy. I think the GDP is something like \$2.8 trillion, and something like 680 million people, so twice the size of the US, plus. And so when you think about the businesses and trends and the opportunities, again, that's where people really need to dive deeper into the specific country. So if I look at Singapore, you know, where I'm based with the Milken Institute, world-class financial hub. So you know, there's opportunities for those in the banking industry, not necessarily just traditional mainstream banking, but Singapore is also trying to be a hub for fintech. So this intersection of finance and technology, the Singapore government has what it's called, like a sandbox, meaning it's a place to try out new policies and beings in this evolving world of finance. So very world class, think, you know, city. So think of New York, what are the opportunities in New York and bring them here and think about that in Singapore. But then you move to a larger country like Indonesia, more than half or so of the people, economy I should say, associated with Southeast Nations... And there and in the other large economies of the regions, which would be Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, and I'd say Malaysia. So these are the bigger nations. There the opportunities are driven in a way because people are moving up. And so think of it as an upgrade. And what does that mean? It's so that I might be trying to get a better car. I might be trying to get a better television, you know, do people watch television, a better phone, or I might be trying to have new and different experiences. So you think about how the US economy grew, and as people upgraded to bigger homes, better food and more opportunities in terms of schools and education for the families, that also is happening throughout this region. You know, I had an interesting lunch today with a Fellow at Yale School of Management, a Thai person, who's done a startup focused on the education space, you know, working through technology and online trying to get people also to improve their English. So there's some very real examples of, you know, what's hot. People are trying to move ahead, they need to also speak English, in addition to their own native language, the actual language of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations officially is English. But of course, in every country, you need to speak the local language really to move ahead, particularly if you're dealing with, say, consumer marketing. But this new graduate and his partner, we're, again, trying to address the reality that there's a whole bunch of young people in this region too, that want to move up and move ahead. So they want more skills, then they want to spend on



different things. So I always tell people to think about the pace of change. And as you yourself got richer, what would you want to do? And what would you want to buy in many ways that's being replicated across much of the... I would say, almost like more middle class or, or the countries of a bigger middle class in Southeast Asia. Remember, at the bottom end of Southeast Asia, is, you know, Myanmar – beautiful nation, also known as Burma. But really being torn apart by the military junta there, a return to violence, how sad for this beautiful, big nation. And so I would say, you know, you should not be going to Myanmar. But clearly, that's also an example of the diversity of Southeast Asia, we see what is happening in Myanmar, so terrible with the military junta there. But then we also see poor countries like Laos, I've just come back from Cambodia, where there was a big event focused on the issue of the looting that has taken place of cultural heritage there. And so even poor Cambodia is trying to think through how to do the build more sustainable tourism, how they bring back some of these Khmer statues and sculptures that have been sadly torn out of that country. But there we can think about issues related to sustainable tourism, to issues related to the impact, to community development. So a lot of opportunities there for young people from the US who want to come out and bring a skill set that goes above and beyond the world of finance. So look at a nation's development, and then try and think through what is the value that you bring? You know, it's much more than I'd say, the old days, I want to be an English teacher. It's much more than being an English teacher. There's so much opportunity out here.

Stacie Berdan:

Excellent, Curtis, thank you so much, really challenging our listeners to think much more deeply, broadly, creatively about the opportunities out there. That's terrific. That's terrific. There are going to be challenges though, I'm sure. What are some of the ones that you have faced working internationally?

Curtis Chin:

Well, I see it even because I live you know, what I call my portfolio life of flying from one country to the next. I'd say to people, you know, I'm okay. Because, you know, I work with a Thai company, I'm with an international think tank, it's easy for me to move around. But throughout, you know, my time in Asia, one of the challenges has been visas. You know, I always say to people, you know, you can't just show up anywhere and start working, you have to have the right visa. And so think through how do you do that? How do you handle the bureaucracy? And I remember, you know, shows you how old I am, I don't know, maybe it was like 35 years ago, when I first came to Asia, I looked at programs in the United States that would bring me to Asia for a summer. And I found one through a group called YMCA International. And they worked out everything. And then they brought me, sent me to Nepal, which is one of the reasons I have fondness for Nepal, one of the first times I worked overseas, as probably a 22-year-old was a summer spent in Nepal. But that whole issue, how do you do it? I searched and this is pre internet in a way, through reference books and calling friends. Is there a way that I can get to Asia for a summer? And so I looked at the United States where there are groups... And people now have so many more resources, as you know. GW was amazing for the resources they had, you know, what are the alumni connections? What are the groups there that will help you think through how do I get overseas, versus I'm just going to show up overseas and look for someone to sponsor me. Right? I think that's less realistic today than the old days, particularly in this still pandemic period, where countries still continue to struggle to get their own citizens, jobs and things as countries and economies begin to open up. Visas for me is one of the big challenges.

Stacie Berdan:

That's a great piece of advice. Visas... always do it legally. That's one thing that I know that I always say when I talk as well as GW makes certain that the students actually follow the law, that's super important. And you cannot get around doing your homework, figuring it out yourself. It doesn't matter what, what type of resources, whether they were years ago and on internet or not, it doesn't matter. It takes a lot of hard work, I think, to find that. So thanks for that. What else do you see on the horizon? Kind of stepping back a little bit from working specifically in Asia? What do you see on the horizon for students, young people, young workers, even alums, what do they need to be aware of?



Curtis Chin:

Why I always say to people, as you think about you yourself as an individual, and you know, as a real person, not just this, you know, scared to go, X-years-old, just graduated. But think about your individual differences and strengths. And what do I mean, is that like, for me, you know, Asian-American and Chinese-American, there's not just one way to do things. And I remember your specific example. And I remember when I sat on the board of directors of the Asian Development Bank, or my role, in a way, was just supporting specific projects throughout this Asia Pacific region that helped a country develop. And I want to get, you know, 50% of the votes of that board to support the US position. And I remember the Korean representative to the Asian Development Bank, a terrific guy who sadly passed away a couple years ago, but he once said to me, you know, when you talk, you kind of deliver the same things that your predecessor said, which I'm sure you know, US Treasury wants you to say – you know, fight corruption, you know, focus on the poorest people. But how you say it is a little bit different. I don't know if it's because you're Asian, you said to me, but I kind of want to listen to you more. And so I say, I don't know about being Asian... but is about a different kind of style, but don't run away from if you're a woman in Asia, or Asia Pacific, you hear about all these specific challenges that women might have in Asia, don't run away from being a woman, but be aware of the stereotypes people might have – how to use that to your advantage. And so even for me, being an Asian-American, or Chinese-American, don't run away from that, I said to myself as advice to me, that's part of your strength, right? And there'll be good things and bad things that come out of it, but leverage it to help get things done. And so people will know you as an individual. And hopefully, they'll say, wow, you're so much better than these other people applying for that same job, because you bring something added. So whatever it is, think about what makes you so unique from all your fellow classmates or recent alum, and use it to your advantage if you can.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah, I love it. That is great. Because so many times people follow the same course. And yeah, embrace yourself, who you are, and work it. I like that piece of advice. Thank you. Okay, so this is a tricky question. I know. And you could answer it... will probably take a long time. But pretty quick about all of the places you've been in the world and you've lived and worked - do you have a favorite and why?

Curtis Chin:

You know, my non-diplomat answer would be, I love Tokyo. I love the people, I love the food. And because it's like the same state of development as the US, I never felt, oh, people want something from me, right, or maybe...or we want something from each other. So I love Japan. And I would go back... and you know, Japan is one of many countries that actually welcome Americans and welcome US investments. So many times people are surprised when I tell them there's more US investment in these 10 nations of Southeast Asia than there is in Brazil, Russia, India, and China combined, those famous BRIC nations. But my diplomatic answer to your question would be my favorite place to work all around the world would be right where I am. I happen to be in Singapore, or in Thailand right now. But if I were in another country working there, I'd say right where I am. Because then you know, you make the effort to learn what is going on. You're exploring new things. And how cool is that? So whatever country you find yourself in, I hope you look at it as this is the best place to work. And now let's help. Let's figure out how we make that come true.

Stacie Berdan:

Wow. I wish all of our listeners to have as much optimism and excitement and energy as you do throughout their career, Curtis, and everybody will do a great job. Thanks. Well, so before, before we wrap up. Is there anything else you'd like to add? Because this has been a great conversation?



Curtis Chin:

No, thank you. Oh, well, first, I always want to give a shout out to you Stacie. In a way we learned so much from each other and our own experiences and commiserating. I say to people, how great it is to also have a friend who's going through some of the same things, so you can help and learn from each other. So thank you, Stacies. Of course, a shout out to GW. You know, I particularly like GW because George Washington University is also the home of the Milken Institute School of Public Health, you know the main School of Public Health... maybe the only one, I don't know, in Washington. So what a great university. But I'd say as a closing comment, I just want to share a quote for you (one of the things I've done at the Milken Institute, is I speak regularly about, you know, the Asian creative economy), that when you're in Asia, you'll find it's not just an Asian version of the West, but Asia is creating content of its own. Your most famous right now is probably like, Korean dramas like Sweet Game, or K-pop. So I'm going to close, yes, with a simple quote. Some people might know of this person named Kim Tae-Hyung, maybe better known as "V", from the group BTS, but he has a quote that he often says, which is, "don't be trapped in someone else's dream". And I'd say the same for everyone listening. That, you know, others, like me will describe their path and their careers in Southeast Asia and what their hopes are. And you might think, oh, I want to do that too. And you may want to, but don't feel trapped in how someone else did it. Don't feel trapped in terms of this is what success is. Because at the end of the day, you know, I hope that you get your own dream to come true, whether or not it includes studying and working in Southeast Asia. It could well be a dream back home in the US that just involves Southeast Asia. That's terrific too, there's no one path to go forward.

Stacie Berdan:

Great, wonderful advice. Thank you so much, Curtis. Great advice. The whole conversation has been fantastic. An absolute pleasure talking with you today. I really, really appreciate you taking the time, because I know, still you are a very busy man. So thank you for that. And just great catching up.

Curtis Chin:

Thank you.

[Music]

Stacie Berdan:

You have been listening to the GW-CIBER Global Careers podcast. Join us again next time, and in the meantime – go global!