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Photo: ST
Businessman Ho Kwon Ping.

Businessman Ho Kwon Ping's initial reaction when he was named the first S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore was: I'm not a "logical" choice. The 61-year-old is executive chairman of luxury hospitality group Banyan Tree and chairman of the board of trustees of Singapore Management University (SMU), and he felt that neither role qualified him for the one-year fellowship announced last week by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS). But ideas are beginning to take shape in his mind. The lecture series, he tells Maryam Mokhtar, will seek to get people thinking about key issues facing Singapore in the next 50 years, such as politics and governance, civil society and identity. He also has a message for young Singaporeans: The world is yours to change.

How did you feel when you heard you were the first S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore?

Very surprised. The only other time I'd been equally surprised was when I was asked in 1996 by then Deputy Prime Minister Tony Tan Keng Yam (now Singapore's President) to head SMU. I'm not the logical person to head a university, nor am I the logical person to be the first S R Nathan Fellow.

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Why?

The fellowship is for "the Study of Singapore", which is very broad and is supposed to cover public policy and governance.

To me, a logical person would have been perhaps a retired minister, retired civil servant or a mid-career person taking a sabbatical.

But it was explained to me that, as it is the first and because next year is Singapore's 50th anniversary, they wanted someone who was generally a little bit more outspoken and would be more willing to set the tone of what they hope the fellowship would be: of interest to the public, relevant and thought-provoking but not necessarily super academic.

This is not professor Ho Kwon Ping. It's just me, a public citizen, giving a series of six lectures which should be coherent and linked together.

Why does IPS feel your lectures will be interesting, relevant and thought-provoking?

When people ask me what is the essence of leadership and where it originates from, I've always said the key attribute is contained in a three-letter word: "Why" - the ability to ask questions and not accept the status quo.

I suppose they think I do ask a lot of 'whys' and so it'd be good to ask it in public over the next year. I'm not asking people to be simply rebellious by asking why. I'm just saying you need to think through all the questions - be it religion, politics, society, and so on - and make your own conclusions.

Next year is a seminal point for Singapore - we turn 50 as a nation. In your view, how should we measure how far we've come as a nation?

My broad view is Singapore is an improbable nation. Despite the improbability, Singapore's success story is huge. Even so, the success has been overwhelmingly in the economic domain.

The challenge in the next 50 years will be in other spheres of life: the creation of civil society, and creating a sustainable participatory democracy which does not rely on the vision of some exceptional individuals, pioneers like former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, who are not likely to ever walk in Singapore again.

Given those circumstances, would Singapore be able to take the necessary steps to become a truly sustainable society and nation state?

How do you plan to structure the six-part series?

I'm thinking of several broad areas - politics and governance, economics and business, demography and family, civil society and identity, and sustainability.

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Another big issue will be to rethink the fundamental institutions and pillars of Singapore and ask whether some need to be changed to be relevant for the next 50 years.

What are some of these institutions?

Take CPF (the Central Provident Fund). It represents our whole philosophy towards social security and pensions. If I were to say GIC, it represents our whole attitude towards our management of reserves.

Another is SAF (the Singapore Armed Forces), which represents our entire policy on deterrence; HDB, the whole policy of public housing. And the final one would be EDB (the Economic Development Board), which represents the whole process of industrialisation and economic direction.

These are probably the five pillars of Singapore's strategy for the next 50 years. The questions we need to ask would be, how would these pillars continue if unchanged, or where should they be tweaked over the next 50 years.

As you can see, I'm really in a complete mess in deciding what to do (laughs).

The changing political landscape will be a defining point for Singapore. Are you keen to explore it?

What I'd be interested in looking at as a purely quasi-academic observer is, what are the possible directions Singapore politics could evolve towards, with no clear road map and some indications perhaps from past examples.

There are not too many countries with democratic systems where a founding political party is able to stay on for 60, 70 or 80 years.

The pattern seems to be that after a period of time, the ruling party degenerates. It's not ascribing fault, just historically, maybe the electorate changes in its expectations.

If that is the historical trend, regardless of how well the party serves its people, then what does that augur for Singapore?

One could look at Taiwan and say the (ruling) Kuomintang has to lose an election and come back again.

On the other hand, you could say Taiwan's case doesn't really match Singapore's because Taiwan had a clear cleavage between the island-born people and the so-called Chinese from China.

Our leadership is also very concerned when they talk about constructive politics.

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What they're saying - being leaders they cannot name it - but obviously what they're saying is: Do we want to go the way of Hong Kong? Where you can throw things at the Chief Executive, where you can have brawls in public - is that constructive politics?

What's to prevent us from going that way and what must we do to not go that way?

What are some possible political routes Singapore may take in future?

Others have said that perhaps Singapore would evolve towards, given our unique circumstances, a dynamic equilibrium with an opposition that has a sizeable minority and it would stabilise at that level.

Another scenario is the PAP (the ruling People's Action Party) would split into two.

It's interesting in a public lecture to say, with some research, that this is what has happened to other countries; how is it relevant or not relevant to Singapore and what are the signposts as to what may happen here?

Is it good to have a ruling party split into two, or is it not so positive?

What are key issues in civil society that need to be discussed as we move forward?

One thing that concerns me is Singapore's identity, whether it is shaped more by a shared sense of who we are not, as opposed to who we are. I'm not quite sure of the answer.

You see it expressed when Singaporeans go overseas. When you are in Paris and you see another Singaporean, you identify with the Singaporean because you are not French. To what extent is there a really very positive identity and what is that identity? One has to question, and this is where I want to throw up issues rather than say it's a policy procedure.

You grew up, worked and lived in several countries. Have you also defined yourself as Singaporean by what you are not?

It's quite precisely that. Although I was born in Hong Kong, I never really lived there except for a while when I was married.

I spent the bulk of my childhood in Thailand and I feel emotionally close to the country but I'm a total alien there. I've realised that to some extent you have to create your own identity, and I found it comfortable that in Singapore I could create my identity.

I cannot say who I am but I can say who I'm not. I've lived and thrived in the US and I understand American culture quite well but I'm not American. I spend a lot of time in China and I empathise a lot with the Chinese side of me, but I'm not Chinese.

So if you're not any of these things, then you're Singaporean (laughs).

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How different would be the challenges facing young Singaporeans in the next 50 years compared with those faced by you and your peers?

Mr Lee Kuan Yew and his generation were the ones left with the problems of nation building. They were the founders and my generation were the nation builders.

The issues then were pretty clear - ending poverty, the creation of a new, just society not based on colonialism. These were easy markers for success.

What are the markers for success when the direction is not going to be so easily marked?

One cannot minimise Mr Lee's role in making Singapore what it is. But his dominant presence and absence create problems, too. We now deal with a post-LKY era and a post (Prime Minister) Lee Hsien Loong era. Once that is gone, you have a big vacuum.

Your generation will have to deal with leadership selection.

If you look back at your 25-year-old self, what advice would you give him?

I don't think I would want for one day to ever change the things that I wanted to do, or did. But I could have been - in many of the things I have done, whether it was brash business decisions which lost a lot of money, or brash decisions which cost me my freedom - more thoughtful and less headstrong.

But when I said that to some older people, their rejoinder was: If you had been less headstrong, you may not even be doing what you're doing today.

(Mr Ho was arrested and jailed for two months under the Internal Security Act in 1977 for his articles in the now-defunct Far Eastern Economic Review that were critical of the Government.)