

THE SUPPER CLUB | DAVID CHAN

'If we have no differences, we would be in trouble'

Whether it's ironing out LGBT issues or those of race and religion, it's all part of being an inclusive society, behavioural scientist David Chan, 49, tells **Charissa Yong**. The Singapore Management University psychologist ought to know – he is the editor of a new book, *50 Years Of Social Issues In Singapore*, containing essays on population issues, social divisions and the changing social landscape.



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■ *How far has Singapore come since 1965 in terms of inclusivity? If you look at the Government's narrative, the phrase that really comes into the discourse at first is "inclusive growth", not "inclusive society".*

We are doing quite well on inclusive growth. All along, we have been trying to ensure there is social mobility. Compared to many societies, people have opportunities because meritocracy is real.

But as for inclusive society, there are two different notions.

First, there's inclusivity in the sense of including a group that is disadvantaged.

Typically, they are disadvantaged economically or financially, but they could also be disadvantaged in terms of opportunities, like the elderly, or structurally because of their status, such as foreign domestic workers. Most people will agree that, either out of compassion or social values, these are the people who deserve to be helped and there's very little societal disagreement on that.

But there's another inclusivity that is harder. One could argue that people with different values are not in your mainstream values and are therefore not included when policy or public actions are based on mainstream values. Such as on LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) issues.

To be an inclusive society, we must accept there are differences, and approach disagreements constructively.

■ *Which is the social issue we have done the best in? Why?*

We do well on race and religion, in terms of social harmony. On social media, if someone makes an outrageous, unfair comment about a racial group, let's say a minority, many people immediately speak up against the individual. One good example is Amy Cheong (the former NTUC staff member who was sacked in 2012 for her on-line diatribe against Malay weddings in void decks).

This happens even on websites that are considered "anti-establishment". And these people who speak up are anonymous, so there is no need for them to pretend to be socially acceptable and give politically correct responses. The way we have been brought up in Singapore to respect, tolerate and accept other races and religions, it's one of the social issues that we have done well in.

It's because the Government did not just say, "Social harmony is good". The emphasis has been, "Can you imagine what would happen if we don't have social harmony?" Most people did not live through the race riots (in the 1960s) but would have heard enough about it through history books or from older generations.

The adverse consequences are clear. At the same time, there was concerted effort to involve the various racial and religious groups to interact in common spaces and build mutual understanding. We need to maintain this harmony, but the ways to do that have to evolve and continually improve to be effective.

■ *In contrast, which area did Singapore do the poorest in and why?*

Local-foreigner relations. When there is a flare-up between locals and foreigners, why shouldn't we treat it as seriously as a flare-up between different races? We have forgotten that nationality could be as important as race and religion.

It doesn't help when there are

What's for supper

Rakuichi Japanese Restaurant at Oasia Hotel

8 Sinaran Drive #01-05
Singapore 307470

- Agedashi tofu: \$7
- Aburi sushi: \$32
- Kobachi tuna: \$7.20
- Total (including GST and service charge): \$54.35

cases where the quality of foreign talent is lower than it should be. And negative cases loom large. They get remembered and highlighted.

■ *How can we bridge these gaps?*

We should avoid categorising people into groups. In reality, all of us have multiple social identities. I'm male, I'm Chinese, I'm Singaporean, I'm a professor, I'm currently from a particular socioeconomic status, I live in a particular place. So if you look at David

Chan you should not just say he's Chinese, full stop. He's also Singaporean and male, and a member of many groups. Depending on the issue and context, his different social identities may be activated and influence his thoughts and actions in different ways.

Now, consider someone who is gay. He's not just gay, he's also a Singaporean, he could be a civil servant and so on. And when you look at a foreigner, he's also many other things. When there's a disagreement that cannot be resolved, perhaps we can focus on common social identities?

So if you and I disagree strongly on LGBT issues that we cannot resolve, surely you and I are more than just our sexual orientations? We are also Singaporeans. And as Singaporeans we share some commonalities and core values or principles and we can use those to address our differences.

■ *What shared values or core principles do you have in mind?*

For example, we should be able to share the values of integrity, fairness and social harmony. On core principles, I believe there are at

least three that we should and can agree on.

First, we need to agree that rule of law must prevail. There is a forum to change the laws if you don't like (them) – Parliament – but the prevailing law sets the parameters for dissent and creativity and individual freedom of expression.

Second, we must be accountable for what we say. This means being responsible for what we say, but also speaking up in a responsible manner. We don't lie, we don't defame people.

And perhaps the most difficult principle is the idea that you treat people with dignity and respect, in the same way that you want to be treated. Once you recognise this principle, then you may not unfairly criticise someone on social media and say nasty things because you wouldn't want that done to you either.

■ *What is your advice for dealing with disagreements?*

Speed is not always a good thing. So when somebody posts something and you want to react, there is no need to make sure you react

in a split second. It's good to pause and think. You may then give a much better response, one that you are less likely to regret later but also makes yourself happier, because you wrote something that is more substantive and people then agree with you.

The second way is to have a sense of humour, especially on social media. I'm not talking about cartoons offending races and religions, I'm talking about treating comments with a sense of humour, and it includes understanding sarcasm. That's the nature of the social media space.

Finally, be more self-confident. If somebody criticises you for being stupid and if you know that you are not stupid, you can be less offended than to be so offended, why do you call me stupid? If you know you are not stupid and somebody calls you stupid, it could be a wrong choice of words or it could be that he couldn't see your point.

■ *You noted in your introduction to the 50 Years Of Social Issues book that foreign domestic workers are a group Singapore*

has not talked about enough. What do you think of the debate to give them a day off each week?

I would argue that families need to learn to be more resilient, and if your life is structured such that you cannot function at all even one day without a maid, you're in trouble. Giving one day off to the maid is very good for the whole family because you're no longer so dependent on her.

But, more fundamentally, it's just wrong to expect anyone to work 24 hours a day. None of us will want to work 24 hours a day and not be entitled to a day off. The problem is that some employers treat maids not as people, but in a very transactional way – I pay you, therefore you do what I tell you to. If you go back to the core principle of treating others the way you want to be treated, then you should do whatever you can to try and give them a day off.

■ *How do you see social divisions playing out in Singapore over the next 50 years?*

In civil society, increasingly, there will be more cases of groups that fight for human rights, such as the rights of foreign workers. To be fair, many of these issues are really quite legitimate, because they're just asking for respect, to be treated fairly. The problem is when you try to impose how things should be, how people should live their lives.

When this assertion is done aggressively and in absolute terms, it is perceived as one group imposing its values on the other. If we think of these differences as something to be eliminated rather than worked out, it can threaten social harmony when, in fact, the societal diversity can be a strength instead of a liability.

■ *You turn 50 this year and so does Singapore. What is your greatest hope for the country in the next 50 years?*

That we can approach differences in a much more enlightened manner.

I hope the day will come when we can look at a disagreement as not inherently a bad thing, and be able to say: Now we have a disagreement, how are we going to deal with it? And in the course of it, we may realise that disagreement is a wonderful experience because things became better as a result of trying to address it.

Society is inclusive and society progresses when differences come together and are resolved constructively. The moment there are no differences we are in trouble because we could all be happily wrong. When you want diversity of ideas, it comes with differences. Dealing with differences is not only part and parcel of living together, it is also necessary for both social harmony and societal progress.

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50 Years Of Social Issues In Singapore consists of 16 essays by 23 writers. Published by World Scientific, it costs \$35 and is sold at major bookstores.

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DAVID CHAN on his hopes for Singapore in the next 50 years



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