

SOUL SEARCHING TIMES

# TAKING RISKS

The conflict between pragmatism and passion was best exemplified in the divergent career paths taken by young Singaporeans.

In a 1994 address to National University of Singapore graduates, businessman Ho Kwon Ping observed that while “the best social engineers will be our technocratic high-fliers, the soul of Singapore will be shaped by... those who are willing to take artistic risks, career risks, intellectual risks”.

The ruling ethos of pragmatism was also seen as inhibiting romance and courtship in a society with falling birth rates.

A 2006 report on Valentine’s Day memorably described romance in Singapore as “seasonal, consumerist, functional and in denial”. The report described, somewhat unkindly, the local variant of the conventional marriage proposal, “Shall we get married?” as “Shall we get an HDB flat?”

While an academic warned that “pragmatism can easily degenerate into an unthinking mindset”, a columnist attributed the lack of “great” individuals in Singapore to a “no-nonsense approach to life”.

An elevated form of pragmatism also seemed to be at play for young men serving national service (NS), as indicated in a 1982 Defence Ministry survey.

Most said self-interest was the strongest motivating factor for serving NS because they were committed to defending “the Singaporean way of life”, which included “the food, the shopping centres, East Coast

Parkway and Orchard Road”.

In the new millennium, the debate assumed more nuance. In 2002, a Straits Times commentary argued that there was a need to separate politics from country when it came to defining patriotism and duty.

The commentator observed a tendency to equate patriotism with loyalty to the People’s Action Party (PAP): “Singapore is a young nation that has had one strong governing voice – that of PAP, which has made a modern miracle out of an insignificant dot on the map. So for many, patriotism to Singapore equals patriotism to PAP.”

As an idea, meritocracy is perhaps the component most baked into national identity. It has been emphasised as a key tenet of policy since independence as the lack of natural resources makes the development of human resources paramount.

In 1981, Trade and Industry Minister Goh Chok Tong expanded the meaning of the term. He noted that meritocracy had been misunderstood by being equated with individual ability, regardless of the ability to work in a team.

“In our definition of meritocracy, we must give double weightage to a person’s ability to mobilise all concerned behind a common goal.”

Singlish, Singapore’s edition of English, is another facet in the Singapore identity. Its usefulness, however, is limited for pragmatic reasons.

A 1985 column noted that Singlish was tied to the national identity “like the smell of durian – a true child of Singapore would recognise it anywhere”.

In 1992, The Straits Times examined both sides of the debate. Though it concluded that Singlish was not “bad English”, the newspaper still pointed out that its widespread use on mainstream broadcast channels would make things difficult – and confuse those who could not speak proper English.

“Do we really want to promote a sub-language that may be culturally unique but is, in fact, a handicap to people who cannot switch naturally to standard English when engaged in conversation with those who do not speak the Singapore patois?” the writer asked.

In 1999, an Education Ministry report warned against its use, saying Singlish could erode students’ competence in English.

A well known academic has posited that resilient ethnic cultures were helping to shape the national identity in unique ways.

In a commentary last year in The Straits Times, Professor Wang Gungwu, chairman of the National University of Singapore’s East Asia Institute, drew an intriguing line between identity and “cultural resilience” of ethnic groups.

He contended that a recent surge in interest in heritage issues was a sign of local cultures responding to national and global forces. In a migrant community like Singapore, local cultures that draw on ancestry do not merely survive, but are “badges of pride”, an embodiment of “cultural resilience” in a bewildering, fast-changing environment.

Accomplished and confident, Singapore’s young women are shaping the Singaporean identity while being shaped by it.

In 2002, a columnist defended the perception of Singaporean women as being “fierce” and made no apologies for the lack of submissive, feminine behaviour. She contended that the Singaporean woman was shaped by her society, its competitive nature, emphasis on education and merit.

She was “pragmatic and hence, materialistic”; she “goes out to work and tries to excel in her career, and is “frank and has no time for mind games”.

With the large number of foreign residents becoming an issue, a Straits Times reader gave an interesting take on citizenship in 2012.

The reader’s letter in the Forum page decried reducing citizenship to its perks. “The insistence on citizens’ privileges is not patriotism, and reduces citizenship and national identity to the value of its perks, somewhat like a club membership”.

Sociologist Tan Ern Ser noted in a comprehensive 2012 report that the 2011 watershed general election gave netizens an opportunity to air views on Singapore that drew a distinction between love for the country and support for the government in power.

The findings showed Singaporeans’ strength of emotional attachment to Singapore had been remarkably stable and healthy in the past two decades.

“Singapore is at the threshold of a defining moment in its history when the people are rising to take ownership of its destiny, while state paternalism makes way for state-people partnership, armed with a strong sense of national purpose.

“This will produce a patriotism which is more than just about love of food, place, family and friends, but extending into the realm of a national community where the people can be counted upon to stick with it through thick and thin”.

Perhaps one of the most insightful observations on national identity was made more than 40 years ago by one of Singapore’s founding fathers Goh Keng Swee. In 1973, he suggested that “the true Singaporean” would emerge from generations of Singaporeans sharing the common experience of national service.

Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts Lee Boon Yang struck a similar note in 2006. There was no need for Singaporeans to be anxious about creating a national identity quickly, he said. It would evolve naturally over time.

What does it mean to be Singaporean today, as National Day 2015 nears?

Is there a way to measure passion? Pragmatically? And so the quest continues. • ST

Minister for Information,  
Communications and the Arts Lee Boon  
Yang struck a similar note in 2006.  
There was no need for Singaporeans to  
be anxious about creating a national  
identity quickly, he said. It would  
evolve naturally over time.

