

Young Singaporeans abroad and their misguided sense of superiority towards S-E Asia

It can blind them to their neighbours' hidden strengths

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As an undergraduate taking a course on South-east Asia nearly four decades ago, I was assigned a map exercise. Handed a blank map of South-east Asia, the class was asked to mark a list of cities in the region that the professor had put together. I realised how little I knew about South-east Asia. And I was not alone. The entire class was not able to get more than 10 per cent of the cities marked roughly in the vicinity of where they exist.

I am quite certain that if I repeated that exercise today with our students, the results would be the same. Despite young Singaporeans having had greater opportunity to travel, it is not clear to me that South-east Asia has drawn their attention in a way the region deserves.

Travelling overseas can indeed help Singaporeans have a better grasp of the world and our role in it. But I hasten to add that travelling with the right mindset is vital. This is where schools and universities have a critical role to play in imbuing our students with a sense of perspective when we send them off on their overseas stints, be these week-long camps or months-long internships.

Living on a small island whose very existence is a constant source of wonderment, it is no exaggeration to say that Singaporeans can least afford to be insular. Given our paucity of natural resources, our economic policies are designed to plug us into the global marketplace to cement our position as a trade and financial hub. We actively woo international talent to complement our local workforce and attract investments from across the world.

Singaporeans are well acquainted with why our country holds such appeal for international prospectors – our peaceful multicultural environment, well-planned economy, transparent and robust legal system and world-class education system are renowned assets. But it is these very



strengths that can give young Singaporeans a misplaced sense of superiority when they venture overseas, and cloud their ability to see the virtues of their host countries. This is not helped by the fact that many overseas school trips have a charitable dimension, enlisting our students to build sanitary facilities for underprivileged households, improve ageing infrastructure in orphanages or teach English to local children.

These are laudable efforts, but they have the unfortunate side effect of stereotyping these countries, especially those within our region, as being in dire need of our help and support. Our young Singaporeans then return home feeling grateful for what they have here, while seeing our regional neighbours through a distorted deficit lens.

Consequently, the Global North continues to be deemed worthy of emulation, with the Global South in need of salvation. Our

university students often manifest such biases when they select exchange programmes and internship opportunities, or eschew particular overseas employment options.

This biased view of the world is regrettable when Asia, and South-east Asia in particular, is ripe with promise. South-east Asia's avid digital and mobile adoption has paved the way for explosive growth in e-commerce, fintech and gaming services. The region is home to at least 40 unicorns and boasts of a bustling start-up ecosystem complete with accelerators, incubators, start-up founders, angel investors, venture capitalists and private equity firms. By some estimates, South-east Asia's technology start-ups had a combined valuation of US\$340 billion (S\$470 billion) in 2020, with this figure projected to treble by 2025.

This digitally savvy and tech-hungry side of South-east Asia is one that young

Singaporeans will fail to see unless we make the right educational interventions. At Singapore Management University, for example, we have sought to actively vest in our students a sound appreciation of growth in Asia. To support this endeavour, we are therefore launching a series of overseas centres in selected South-east Asian cities, with our first centre opening in Jakarta in December.

One of the crucial roles for these infrastructure-light centres will be to play the mediating role of enhancing overseas internship and research exposure for our students that embed them within companies in the region. Be these large family-owned corporations or micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, our students will get to understand first-hand local industry trends, business practices, cultural norms and how these are influenced by the broader geopolitical climate. They will not only sharpen their

business acumen, but also hone their cross-cultural literacy.

Such immersion opportunities are therefore critical for opening young Singaporeans' eyes to the potential of the region rather than to just dwell on its pitfalls. They will enable our students to recognise our regional neighbours as trailblazers in their own right, and not as laggards to be helped. Above all, they will instil in them a spirit of openness as they appreciate the unique traits of different countries and their people.

As overseas travel picks up during the year-end school holidays, let us celebrate its return and set forth to explore the world with curiosity, humility and a sense of possibility.

• Lily Kong is president of Singapore Management University and Lee Kong Chian Chair Professor, whose research has focused over the decades on social and cultural change in Asian cities.

Tourists releasing lanterns into the sky during the Loy Krathong Festival in Thailand. Travelling can enable Singaporeans to get a better grasp of the world, but doing so with the right mindset is vital, says the writer. Schools and universities can play a critical role in imbuing students with a sense of perspective when they go on overseas stints. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG