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Headline: Is this home truly? Reflections on Singapore as it turns 59

Is this home truly? Reflections on Singapore as it turns 59

Singaporeans living abroad are not drawn home by smart technology. What they cherish is the intangible essence of our city.

Lily Kong

Spectators at the National Day Parade preview show at the Padang on Aug 3. A city is home when the ensemble of sites, buildings and infrastructure are understood as not just brick and mortar, nor merely functional places responding to utilitarian needs. They hold meaning when they are recognised as "a record of our ancestors' aspirations and achievements", as Mr S. Rajaratnam, one of our founding leaders, once put it. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

What is "home"?

Born in 1965, I have long held a sense of common destiny with Singapore – my country, my home. Thanks to the Majulah Package, announced by former prime minister Lee Hsien Loong at his last National Day Rally in 2023, I am a "young senior", a group born between 1960 and 1973. I feel neither young nor senior, but young enough to lament the loss of Borders and HMV with the millennials, and senior enough to recall with fondness Yaohan and Fitzpatrick's with the baby boomers.

I grew up in the early years of Singapore's independence, when HDB was still striving to break the backbone of housing shortages, when going to school on the public bus meant passing by Ellenborough Market, to be assaulted by the briny tang of fishermen's produce hauled in well before dawn. It was a time when our city was still in the making, where public hygiene and urban infrastructure were works-in-progress.

It was a time of many strategic changes, in our early efforts to leapfrog more advanced economies. My sister, two years ahead of me at school, had to learn Malay as a third language, given the recency of Singapore's merger with Malaysia. I escaped the requirement, which I now see as a missed opportunity. When I started Primary 1, schools had pivoted to teaching the simplified Chinese script that China uses rather than the traditional one prevalent in Hong Kong and Taiwan. To a seven-year-old, fewer strokes to learn was definitely a good thing! Unbeknownst to innocent school-going children, it was a time when larger geopolitical and economic considerations bore on educational policy decisions that would shape today's "young seniors".

These ruminations are only partially self-indulgent. As our 59th National Day approaches, it is the season to reflect on this place that we call our country, and the journey we have undertaken collectively and individually. Are we citizens because we have a passport status, or a people with shared experiences and collective memories, forged through years of myriad transformations, for whom this is home?

DISTILLING THE PAST

There is a danger of recalling the past through rose-tinted glasses, remembering the "halcyon" days with nostalgia and praising kampung living as a time of community and camaraderie, downtown as vibrant yet uncongested, the air less noxious and perhaps even sweeter. There is an equal danger of condemning the loss of heritages, the influx of new migrants, and the shifting priorities of each succeeding generation. "Home" was not idyllic, then broken. The formation of nationhood, of imagined community and Singaporean identity is not simply a unilinear trajectory.

Conventional wisdom has it that post-independence Singapore forged a harmonious society out of diversity – multicultural, multilingual, multiracial and multireligious (4M), built on meritocracy. This vision caused separation from Malaysia in the first place.

In the nation-building project, Singaporeans were exhorted to see ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language or religion, and to serve the greater good above communal interests. Efforts were made to build inter-communal bridges. The Speak Mandarin campaign sought to diminish differences across Chinese dialect groups through Mandarin. The Ethnic Integration Policy sought to ensure that different ethnicities would live side by side, forging greater understanding, acceptance, even integration.

It was perhaps the consistent propagation of these ideas that caused me to respond with "no", at 16, to a survey question about whether I had friends of another ethnicity. Hours later, it dawned on me that one of my best friends was Indian. I simply did not think of her in racial terms.

Yet, it would be naive to believe that, as a society, we can be blind to difference. The late founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew believed that these were ineradicable primaeval forces and deep-seated instincts.

When my late mother was in a geriatric ward at the hospital, the group of six elderly men and women, all manifesting dementia at various stages, spent time together in a communal room for social interaction and activities. To the extent that they engaged in conversation, they had one recurring question for one another: What is your dialect group? When all else was forgotten, that – fundamentally – was their sense of identity. It struck me so viscerally what I had only rehearsed intellectually till then. Theirs was the generation that grew up with differences in their lived experiences.

The Hokkiens occupied Telok Ayer and Hokkien streets; the Teochews, South Canal Road; the Cantonese, Temple Street, each group with specific trades, with periodic gang fights erupting across groups. It is unsurprising that their sense of identity differentiated along dialect lines was so deeply rooted.

As I accompanied my mother in the ward, it became forcefully clear how crucial it is for Singapore to keep the balance between recognising the deep-rootedness of difference while persevering with creating opportunities for integration. As a society, we have to wind our way through these positions. Government policies from the group representation constituencies to ethnic-based self-help groups reflect this navigated pathway. To believe that we can get to a point where difference does not exist, or at least, does not matter, is folly, to my mind. But to give up on trying to bridge the differences is a still greater folly.

HYPERDIVERSITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Even while the earlier narrative of unity in diversity has stirred supporters and cynics alike, Singapore society has evolved into one where the established 4M society anchored in a CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others) frame, has become disrupted by a more complex hyperdiversity. Critics have argued that reliance on CMIO as the dominant categorisation of Singapore society is outdated and oversimplified.

Indeed, the new "superdiversity" of the Singapore population today defies easy categorisation. Local-born Singaporeans, naturalised Singaporeans, new citizens, hybrid and hyphenated identities, Chindians, Zoomers (Gen Zs), Generation Alphas, young seniors, Pioneer and Merdeka generations, third-culture kids, digital tribes, virtual communities, humanists, new religionists, singles, Dinks, LGBTQs and many more categories have come to make up Singapore society, reflecting different experiences, preferences and values, sometimes manifesting conflicting needs and wants.

This presents a renewed challenge: How do we forge strong communal bonds going forward, as we confront an era of increasing global uncertainty and technological revolution?

STRENGTHENING SOCIAL COMPACT

Recently, I had the privilege of moderating Prime Minister Lawrence Wong's first dialogue with youth after assuming office. He urged Singaporeans to refresh our social compact, and to strengthen our sense of solidarity as a country. He exhorted the audience to recognise our roles in society, uphold responsibility to one another, strengthen social capital, foster trust and play our parts to enable progress. How might this be done?

First, to develop a tight social compact requires a deep sense of shared responsibility for our destiny. Government, businesses, professionals, community groups, families, and individuals together form the basis of a strong model of collaboration. Can we own our challenges and develop a collective path ahead? Is the refrain that Singaporeans tend to look to the Government for solutions still valid?

On the one hand, there is cause for optimism. The 2020 Emerging Stronger Survey showed an encouraging communal spirit among Singaporeans and permanent residents. Four in five respondents felt a responsibility to help others. Seven in 10 believed that working together could make Singapore a better place. Yet, volunteerism and

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New opportunities to build a more inclusive society

FROM B1

giving rates have been on a decline, as a National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre survey showed. In 2021, 60 per cent of respondents donated, down from 79 per cent in 2018; 22 per cent volunteered, a decline of 7 percentage points. Covid-19 probably impacted the ability to volunteer and give, but was that the only reason? Forward SG's focus on shared responsibility is right, but are we ready for the strong model of collaboration it calls for?

Second, to move ahead as a society knitted by common meaning, it is imperative to deepen the trust quotient: trust between the Government and people, as well as people to people. In the Emerging Stronger survey, while four in five respondents were open to partnering with the Government to create a better future, only two in five were confident that the Government would consider public views seriously.

Addressing this trust gap is crucial for effective engagement. The Government must develop more inclusive practices that engage the community in upstream ways as opposed to communicating plans after decisions have been made. Citizens must realise that, with the invariable multiplicity of views, no solution can please everyone. Only if the trust quotient is high will the model of collaborative approach stand a chance of success.

There is no shortcut to trust building, and discursive engagement alone will not suffice. When the rubber hits the road, and each individual, each group, stands up to be counted, trust is built. In times of crisis, like the Covid-19 pandemic, Singaporeans demonstrated that they could indeed stand up and be counted. Whether it was distributing masks, supporting local businesses, or volunteering for community initiatives, the country's collective response was one of mutual support and unity that transcended differences. There was much solidarity, trust in Government, and mutual trust. Will these be maintained now that the crisis has passed?

OUR ISLAND, OUR HOME

Strong communal relations and resilient Government-people ties are crucial to a robust compact, but in the making of our Singapore home, they are insufficient. Much like an alumnus visiting the school of his or her youth, meeting well-loved teachers and cherished friends is a big part of reliving memories, but quite as valuable is the sentiment tied to familiar places and spaces. They mark our individual and collective memories, and offer a sense of anchoring in a rapidly changing world. So too our relationships with our island, our home.

In recent times, planners, policymakers and academics have been seized by the "science of cities" (the use of science and technologies to improve cities). But we ignore the art of city-making at our own peril. Singaporeans overseas are not drawn home by smart traffic lights or science-based decarbonisation strategies, nor do these necessarily distinguish us from other smart cities. While they contribute importantly to our city's efficiency and resilience, what people appreciate, remember and cherish is the intangible essence of our city, our unique spirit and soul – the genius loci of our place. This comes from a combination of history, culture, and lived experience.

A case in point is our much-loved hawker centres with their mix of multicultural hawkers, hosts to patrons from all walks of life, revelling in the cacophony of sounds, sights and smells, united in their quest for a plate of fried Hokkien mee or Indian rojak on the Bib Gourmand list.

Maintaining communal bonds across an increasingly diverse population is a significant challenge but not an insurmountable one. Singapore has consistently demonstrated resilience and adaptability, from its tumultuous beginnings in the 1960s. At 59, we have the advantage of shared experiences, past and present, to draw on and learn from.

That hawker culture that is recognised on Unesco's Representative List of The Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity adds to the sense of pride when tucking in to one's favourite nasi lemak, roti prata or chicken rice. For sure, there are criticisms about the loss of traditional tastes, the industrialisation of hawker foods or the inauthenticity of new recipes, and anxieties about the diminishing of next-generation hawkers. But this is precisely the ferment that is part of a living heritage, reflecting the zeitgeist of our times, and this is what Singaporeans cherish as distinctly home.

More broadly, a city is home when the ensemble of sites, buildings and infrastructure are understood as not just brick and mortar, nor merely functional places responding to utilitarian needs. They hold meaning when they are recognised as "a record of our ancestors' aspirations and achievements", as Mr S. Rajaratnam, one of our founding leaders, once put it. They "enhance the sense of time and place unique to our city" in ways that history books, photographs and words cannot substitute. In walking into or around these buildings and places, we connect to a past that is intimate. Our forebears have their hopes and dreams, blood, sweat and tears, written into our city. This is what "home" means.

As places get remade and stories morph, we will inevitably run into divergent interpretations: Should a building have been demolished? Should we have allowed a modern structure to be integrated with the historical style? Should a mural be allowed to re-present history? Should the naming of a road or an MRT station valorise a certain past?

As we mature as a society, we must value differences and welcome debates, learn to appreciate perspectives other than our own, agree to disagree, and then to still cherish our identity as Singaporeans, and hold fast to this island city-state as home. We must ensure that it is because we care that we debate.

Maintaining communal bonds across an increasingly diverse population is a significant challenge but not an insurmountable one. Singapore has consistently demonstrated resilience and adaptability, from its tumultuous beginnings in the 1960s. At 59, we have the advantage of shared experiences, past and present, to draw on and learn from. Our social fabric is more heterogeneous and complex compared with the past, but this also means there are new opportunities to build a more inclusive society.

Many young(er) Singaporeans would not have shopped at Yaohan or Fitzpatrick's, nor bought books from Borders and music CDs from HMV. But when we hear the familiar Singaporean accent while enjoying a snack on the streets of Bangkok or shopping in Seoul, we are reminded that we all hail from our little red dot and share much in common.

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