

Singapore at 60: Home truly is an idea that never stands still

There are many new stories to embrace but also quiet distances between us that we must bridge.



Lily Kong

On one of my evening walks last week, I took a different path to the one I usually do. I spotted a playground I hadn't visited in years. The sand pit is now rubber flooring, the wooden see-saws replaced with sleek, safe climbing nets. The children were different too – more diverse in accent and, in the light of dusk, there appeared to be more varieties in skin tone too. Still laughing, still tumbling. That was nice, given how so many children today seem more familiar with their electronic devices than with playground equipment.

Something about the moment made me pause. Perhaps I had been reflecting on what it means personally and nationally to turn 60, pondering over both individual and collective pasts and futures as I clocked my steps. Looking at the changed playground and the children of 2025, I wondered how much they would grow up appreciating where Singapore had come from. Will they, more than Lady Gaga, say: “You, Singapore, are so special to me”? Will they bring out the Singapore flag with pride? Will they appreciate what has been built; what has been kept; value what has been lost, and acknowledge what we have outgrown?

This time last year, I wondered in these pages: “Is this home, truly?” This year, I wonder how these young children will respond to the same question in time to come. The question feels even more pressing now, for, in the space of a single year, our country has shifted in quiet but significant ways, in the midst of significant global turmoil.

A NEW LEADERSHIP, A DIFFERENT TIMBRE

We welcomed a new Prime Minister in May 2024 – the first leadership handover in 20 years. It was peaceful, measured, even unremarkable in its smoothness, which is perhaps the most remarkable quality. With it has



The writer hopes that as Singapore turns 60, it continues to invest not just in our infrastructure, but also in our imagination – of what a more generous, more inclusive Singapore could look like – as well as in our children in the playground, so they never stop asking the questions and doing the things that matter. ST PHOTO: SHINTARO TAY

nevertheless come a discernible shift.

Prime Minister Lawrence Wong and his team have introduced policies, some previously unimaginable, even radical: financial support for the unemployed, even if limited and constrained by caveats; greater housing access for singles; extended parental leave for fathers, going further than previously established.

Together, these shifts signal something deeper – a clear-eyed recognition that our society is evolving, and our policies need to evolve alongside. Some of those young children in the playground will grow up to remain unmarried, perhaps more of them than in their parents' generation. For those who do get married and become parents, there may well be greater expectations of fathers playing enlarged care roles. Perhaps indeed, leadership, society and policies are evolving in tandem.

Still, I find myself wondering: are we, as a nation, evolving together?

THE QUIET DISTANCE BETWEEN US

Whichever way one calls it,

Singapore does not face the destabilising divisions and dysfunctions that many other societies face. But this does not mean that there is no quiet distance within society. Disquiet is in the shadows.

In a 2023 survey by Access Singapore (a non-profit organisation that seeks to support disadvantaged students in accessing career opportunities), one in two believed that inequality has grown in a decade. In a 2024 survey by the Institute of Policy Studies, two-thirds of respondents rated Singapore's racial and religious harmony as high or very high. But racial minorities were more likely to indicate that racial and religious harmony was at moderate levels. These are just two examples of the quiet distance that exists.

In everyday life, perhaps we also observe a slight narrowing of empathy, a firmer conviction about one's point of view, a lesser willingness to laugh some things off, a tendency to assume, to categorise and hence divide. Local versus foreign. Deserving versus entitled. Us versus them.

Sixty years in, we are more prosperous, more connected and more technologically advanced

“Home”, for me, is not primarily about ownership or citizenship. It is the web of emotional ties among family and friends... It is the shared memories of people and places... It is hearing the National Day songs from my younger days – such as Home, Count On Me Singapore, and Stand Up For Singapore – and realising that they still catch in my throat.

than ever before. Are we kinder? Are we more curious and interested in others? Are we more inclined to see difference and diversity as strength?

THE SHAPE OF HOME

For those children in the playground, what would “home” mean as they grow up in Singapore? Will citizenship be about having the best passport in the world, or would they develop an “emotional citizenship” that is rooted, as one scholar put it, in the “everyday geographies of befriending, belonging and intercultural encounter”?

“Home”, for me, is not primarily about ownership or citizenship. It is the web of emotional ties

among family and friends, cultivated through years, not of constant togetherness, but invariably of ready support. It is the shared memories of people and places – teachers of yore who threatened to throw our incomplete homework into the canal; the neighbour's children who, after school, picked up baskets full of home-made *epok epok* and *goreng pisang* to ply along HDB corridors; the neighbourhood field that seemed so large when we were so little; the annual treat of going to have a special sundae at Polar Cafe in High Street; the school stage on which we played Macbeth's witches; the corner of the university canteen that we – an eclectic, colourful group of

undergraduates – “colonised”, skipping lectures while robustly debating identity, philosophy and ethics outside class. It is hearing the National Day songs from my younger days – such as Home, Count On Me Singapore, and Stand Up For Singapore – and realising that they still catch in my throat.

Yet the idea of home cannot stand still; It has to grow with us. And that means letting new stories in. School plays not based on William Shakespeare, but on Desmond Sim. Hawker food, cooked not only by Singaporean-born uncles and aunties but also by those of Myanmar, Vietnamese or Thai origin, whether they're naturalised Singaporeans or not. Accomplished professionals born and bred in Singapore, married to Britons or Swiss or South Korean, still holding the red passport, but also legitimately citizens of elsewhere, straddling two homes. And the next National Day song? Its lyrics penned by a Singapore permanent resident born in India, the music by a local-born Chindian Singaporean, and the performer, an accomplished Filipina who studied music at Julliard in New York and chose to make Singapore her home.

Will these be embraced as part of our new stories?

LOOKING AHEAD WITH TENDERNESS

At 60, most people are thinking about legacy. I hope Singapore is too – but not in a grand, self-congratulatory way. I hope we are thinking about the quieter legacies: the neighbour who brings you *tau suan* when you are under the weather, the teacher who believes that the child has much more to offer and nurture than grades, the friend who reminds you that you matter.

I hope we continue to invest not just in our infrastructure, but also in our imagination – of what a more generous, more inclusive Singapore could look like. Investment in our children in the playground, so that they will call Singapore “home, truly”, appreciating the stories about Polar Cafe in Singapore's 1970s High Street, even while routinely familiar with 2020s Urban Hawker and Michelin-starred Le Bernardin in New York City, and their equivalents in 2040s Mumbai, Ho Chi Minh City and Bogota. Investment in our children in the playground, so that they never stop to ask the questions and do the things that matter in order that we evolve in tandem, addressing the quiet distance in the shadows.

Home is an unfolding reel, spooling through time, frame by frame, memory by memory. Sometimes, we rewind to recall with affection the sepia-toned days; sometimes we play forward with new stories and new frames. Whether faded, monochrome or technicolour, we know home when we see it.

Happy birthday, Singapore.

• Lily Kong is president of Singapore Management University and Lee Kong Chian chair professor.