



IPS-OnePeople.sg Forum on Ethnic Identity and Culture

By Shanthini Selvarajan

“We are going to have a multi-racial nation in Singapore. This is not a Malay nation, not a Chinese nation, not an Indian nation. Everybody will have a place in Singapore.”

— Minister S. Iswaran, referring to Singapore’s first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s statement on Singapore’s Separation from Malaysia in 1965

On 19 July 2018, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and OnePeople.sg jointly organised a [forum on ethnic identity in Singapore](#), to examine key elements of the Singapore national and ethnic identities, the new pressures being brought to bear on them, and the appropriate responses necessary to maintain national unity and harmony.

In his opening remarks, Minister for Communications and Information and Minister-in-charge of Trade Relations at the Ministry of Trade and Industry S. Iswaran described three ways to strengthen multiculturalism—from cultivating a sense of belonging and national identity that transcends ethnic identity on an individual level; fostering greater social interaction between different ethnic groups on a societal level; to signalling our commitment to denounce discrimination and promote diversity as a country on a global level.

Strengthening multiculturalism is vital, but this cannot be fully accomplished via multicultural policies alone. A cluster analysis conducted by IPS Senior Research Fellow Dr Mathews Mathew and researchers classified Singaporeans into four distinct categories based on cultural identity and cross-cultural relationships: Cosmopolitan chameleons, ethnic insulars, platonic multiculturalists and the culturally closed-off. Of these categories, the culturally closed-off pose the greatest threat to multiculturalism given their lack of interest in culture as well as interracial understanding and interaction.

Four panels comprising scholars, policy makers, and grassroots and cultural organisations’ representatives were convened to discuss specific topics of interest.



Minister S. Iswaran speaking at the forum.

Ethnic and National Identities—Complementary or Mutually Exclusive?

The first panel tackled the relationship between ethnic and national identities. The discussion was moderated by Member of Parliament and Management Committee Member of OnePeople.sg Mdm Rahayu Mahzam, and comprised the following panellists: Singapore Management University (SMU) Associate Professor Eugene Tan, President of The Eurasian Association Dr Alexius Pereira, and Ambassador to Kuwait Mr Zainul Abidin Rasheed.

Assoc. Prof. Tan contextualised ethnic identity in Singapore. Most Singaporeans simultaneously possessed an ethnic identity and a national identity. However, there is increasing ethnic consciousness, given the rise of global identity politics, xenophobic attitudes towards immigration, heavy mother tongue usage and insularity among some racial groups. While current policies (linked to the CMIO model) have nurtured multiculturalism well, this increasing ethnic consciousness could stifle nation-building. Hence, a civic identity based on citizenship has to be developed to counter this potentially dangerous growth.

While both Assoc. Prof. Tan and Dr Pereira acknowledged the role of the CMIO model in ensuring the representation of ethnic minorities, Dr Pereira pointed out that some racial groups still lack representation and programmatic representation might lead to tokenism. Tokenism may then undermine meritocracy, said Assoc. Prof. Tan. Ambassador Zainul stressed the importance of building a Singaporean identity independent of disparate ethnic identities.

Defining Tradition and its Place in Shaping Identity

The second panel discussed definitions of ethnic tradition and its relevance to ethnic identity. The session was moderated by Management Committee Member of OnePeople.sg Ms Susanna Kulatissa, and comprised the following panellists: Chairman of the Singapore International Translation Symposium Mr Tan Dan Feng, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute Fellow Dr Norshahril Saat, and Co-Founder and Director of Intercultural Theatre Institute Mr Thirunalan Sasitharan.

One of the bigger themes of this forum revolved around ethnic tradition and its relevance to ethnic identity. Some panellists argued that preserving certain ethnic traditions in Singapore, such as ethnic art or music, is not always relevant because (i) how they are practised in Singapore varies significantly from how they are practised in their countries of origin; (ii) change and evolution of ethnic traditions are inevitable; and that (iii) ethnic traditions should not be tied to ethnic identity given its fluid nature.

Mr Tan acknowledged the existence of a “cultural ballast” in Singapore that clings on to ancient traditions, some of which may be irrelevant today, in response to the threat of “Western liberalism”. He elaborated on why change is not negative; traditions often thrive through constant innovation, as seen in examples of Singaporean lion dance and Bharatanatyam performances. Dr Norshahril reinforced this point, stating that tradition is not lost as long as the core values and principles behind the ever-changing practices are sustained. Furthermore, an increasingly globalised and interconnected world blurs the boundaries of tradition, a sentiment echoed by all three panellists.



Chairman of the Singapore International Translation Symposium Mr Tan Dan Feng, responding to a query.

Mr Sasitharan argued that pinning ethnic traditions to ethnic identity has a stereotyping effect, and stressed the need for individuals to reclaim authorship of their identity, regardless of the associations that communities draw between ethnic traditions and identity. Dr Norshahril provided the example of the Arabisation of Malay culture in Singapore: While ancient Malay culture (influenced by factors other than Islam) is kept alive through hybridisations of art, music and language, certain purists believe these hybrids to be “impure”, wishing instead to implement Arabic ways of practising traditions. That said, while there should be no top-down, mandatory gatekeeping of traditions, space should still be provided if communities or individuals wish to practice certain traditions.

Building Social Cohesion

The third panel discussed building cohesion in a multi-ethnic environment. It was moderated by IPS Research Associate Mr Leonard Lim, and comprised the following panellists: Former principal of Hwa Chong Institution Dr Hon Chiew Weng, Founder and President of Roses of Peace Mr Mohamed Irshad Abbas, and Lead Facilitator of OnePeople.sg and Chartered Psychologist Dr Sharifah Mariam Aljunied.

While different communities and individuals express varying levels of affinity with ethnic traditions, ethnic identities are still strong and building interracial cohesion remains vital.

To counter the potential effects of Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools on interracial mingling, Dr Hon elaborated on Hwa Chong Institution’s programmes for students to interact with people of diverse backgrounds, such as observing fast-breaking in mosques and helping migrant workers integrate into mainstream society.

Youth-led initiatives can help strengthen social cohesion as well. [Roses of Peace](#) emerged in the aftermath of the infamous Charlie Hebdo attack, and its signature event involves distributing roses across Singapore as a gesture of interfaith peace and harmony, and to celebrate religious diversity in a world of religious polarisation.

A micro-level solution to cohesion-building involves having experiential conversations to tackle more sensitive topics such as race and religion. Dr Sharifah Mariam discussed how such conversations impressed upon her the need to surpass a mere tolerance of other races, and to develop genuine empathy for them. Racial harmony is more than just cultural literacy, and constitutes emotions and feelings invoked around people of different races. Empathy can be nurtured in schools through teaching kids to recognise commonalities and manage differences.

Rising Chinese Multiculturalism as a Threat

The final session involved a dialogue with Chairman of the Middle East Institute and former Ambassador-at-Large Mr Bilahari Kausikan, who spoke of increasing attempts to assert the Chinese identity on multicultural Singapore, as seen in China’s repeated references to Singapore as a “Chinese country”. China’s notion of multiculturalism differs vastly from Singapore’s understanding of the concept, and any attempt to assert their definition of multiculturalism on Singapore could be dangerous. Thus, the dangers of potential foreign influence over domestic affairs should be taken into account.



According to Mr Kausikan (left), a potential threat to Singapore's multiculturalism in a context of rapidly intensifying identity politics is the rise of Chinese nationalism, vis-à-vis China.

Mr Kausikan elaborated on the possible effects of China's influence on the Chinese in Singapore, which could threaten social cohesion given the malleable nature of the Singaporean identity. The impact of global identity politics has also been amplified through social media, which facilitates connections to "ancestral homeland". Thus, there is a need to ferociously defend multiculturalism as well as establish a strong Singaporean identity, to reduce multiculturalism's vulnerability to external forces.

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