

IPS-Nathan Lectures  
Lecture IV — The Idea of Singapore: City, Country and Nation  
Professor Tan Tai Yong  
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# **IPS-Nathan Lecture Series**

## **Lecture IV — The Idea of Singapore: City, Country and Nation**

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## Introduction

In my last lecture, I referred to Singapore as a port city, both in terms of functions and instincts. At various times in history, Singapore has been described as emporium, trading hub and cosmopolis. How would I describe Singapore today? Most obviously, it is a country. More accurately, it is a sovereign nation state. Invariably, Singapore has often been called a city-state, or increasingly, a global city-state.

All this is to suggest that Singapore has, over time, morphed from one form to another, largely determined by historical circumstances. Singaporean author and poet, Alvin Pang puts it most eloquently when he says:

“... our story was not inscribed whole upon some tabula rasa: no nation’s is. Building upon countless elements old and new, from near and far — whether imposed, inherited, invented or fashioned anew to suit — the Singapore we have today is the outcome of a long continuum of accommodation, adaptation, reimagining and risk. More to the point: we are not done with our changes. We continue to become.”<sup>1</sup>

Throughout its long history, Singapore has continuously evolved, taking on different forms. At this point, its existence as city and country is most salient. It is a

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<sup>1</sup> Alvin Pang, “City of a Thousand Histories; Island of a Thousand Cities”, in Sheila Pakir and Malminderjit Singh (eds), *The Birthday Book. What Should We Never Forget* (Singapore, 2017), p.9

nation state that grew out of a city. Major cities in the past have become part of larger nation states: Venice in Italy, Hamburg in Germany, Penang and Melaka in Malaysia. But, Singapore's experience is unique in that the city became the country.

In this lecture, I shall try to narrate how this came to be and examine how this history might show that Singapore's evolution was not a straightforward and predictable trajectory. Singapore's history took unexpected turns and its current incarnation as a country and city carries tensions and paradoxes that continue to animate its development and growth.

### **Post-War Political Developments**

The official narrative has it that the seeds of Singaporean nationalism were sown in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, an outcome of the British surrender to the Japanese, and the ensuing Occupation. The shock and trauma that followed the calamitous defeat of an imperial power at the hands of an Asian country triggered major political repercussions throughout the European empires in Asia. There was indeed political awakening in Singapore in the aftermath of the Pacific War. But, it was not the sort of nascent nationalism that grew into mass-based movements or revolutionary wars of the type seen in India, Indonesia, Burma and Indo-China.

The disruptions caused by the War and its aftermath created the conditions for widespread anti-colonial feelings. The old colonial order was no longer viable and had

to be replaced. The main political force that challenged the legitimacy of continued colonialism was the communists. Galvanised by their successes as freedom fighters during the Japanese Occupation, the Malayan Communist Party was the first organised political force to mobilise locals into action against the unjust colonial system. By the late 1940s the communists were a force to be reckoned with; they took to subverting the colonial state by infiltrating trade unions and student organisations, and launching highly disruptive strikes and direct political action against the authorities. This was an anti-colonial insurrection, and an attempt at sparking a popular revolution to bring an end to British rule. The communist party and their sympathisers not only wanted to end colonialism, but desired to replace the old, traditional political and social order with a new, independent, socialist system.

The British responded with a slew of regulations, the most severe of which were the Emergency Regulations (applied to Malaya and Singapore) when a communist-led insurgency erupted in Malaya in 1948. The Communist Party of Malaya was outlawed and its networks curtailed. This drove the movement underground, but the communists and left-wing movement did not totally dissipate.

While the left-wing movement had local political objectives — the end of colonial rule — its political language was international. The left-wing activists drew inspiration from liberation movements elsewhere in the Afro-Asian world. Their horizons and expectations were broadened by the end of empire in South Asia, Indonesia and Indo-China, together with Pan-Africanism, Pan-Arabism and the Afro-Asian Conference in

Bandung.<sup>2</sup> Much of left-wing politics was shaped by the rise of Chinese communism as an anti-imperialist and nationalistic ideology. The idea of a socialist future that promised a just and equal society, especially for the working classes, appealed to Chinese-educated youths in Singapore and Malaya, who saw the colonial state as exploitative and unjust. This was not solely a local contest for political power, determining who would take over from the departing imperialists. It was a fight to determine what type of state and society would replace the colonial state.

But the British were not about to make it easy for these revolutionaries. Decolonisation had to be managed such that British interests could be maintained in post-colonial Asia. In Malaya and Singapore, the British showed that they were prepared to devolve political power to moderate groups, while taking draconian measures to beat down the left-wing radicals. It was a well-worn tactic used by the British in their Asian and African colonies — the search for political successors, nationalists though they may be, who would be prepared to continue doing business with the British after the end of Empire. The French and Dutch took a different approach, and the outcomes in their colonies were significantly different from those in the British colonies of Southeast Asia.

When the British instituted political reforms to take the sting out of anti-colonial attacks, political parties surfaced in Singapore to contest elections. By the mid-1950s,

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<sup>2</sup> T.N. Harper, 'Lim Chin Siong and the 'Singapore Story'', in Tan Jing Quee and Jomo K.S. (eds), *Comet in Our Sky. Lim Chin Siong in History* (Kuala Lumpur, 2001), pp.16-17.

the political climate had changed. The introduction of mass-based electoral politics would set the stage for a political contest to decide who would eventually bring an end to colonial rule and determine the future of Singapore. With tough security instruments and legislation to curtail left-wing activism, the way was paved for a peaceful transfer of power to a popularly elected government that took over a self-governing Singapore in 1959. While initially distrustful of the People's Action Party, the British eventually came around to see them as the most viable party to which political power could be transferred. The British were keen to preserve Singapore as a port city and naval base and planned to re-integrate with Malaya in due course. By the mid-1950s, London had concocted a plan known as the "Grand Design" which ultimately aimed at bringing together all its Southeast Asian colonies into a super-federation anchored on peninsular Malaya. Singapore, which had already been given city status in 1951, elevating it from a town to a city,<sup>3</sup> would be a key piece in the "Grand Design". The next step was self-government and integration with Malaya.

The gradual devolution of power from the British to local politicians was, therefore, not predicated on the expression of some form of Singaporean nationalism. While anti-colonial politics did become a potent force, the British were able to dictate the pace and form of decolonisation in Singapore. As Singapore prepared for self-government in the late 1950s, the expectation was that the next step in the political

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<sup>3</sup> Singapore is Conferred City Status (<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/7333873b-d517-4a75-b828-331a30673b30#1>)

evolution would be independence from colonial rule by joining Malaya as part of a larger Federation.

### **Malayan Nationalism**

The desire to end colonial rule in Singapore did not necessarily translate into the political ambition to achieve independence for Singapore as an independent sovereign state. While Singapore had to be politically separated from the Malayan peninsula in 1946 as an expedient to “retain a base for British activity in Southeast Asia”,<sup>4</sup> no one in Singapore believed that the island state would eventually strike out on its own. The separation of Singapore from Malaya under the Malayan Union scheme, and subsequently the Federation, was seen as temporary; the British as well as local politicians of all stripes believed that Singapore had to eventually return to Malaya.

The PAP’s ultimate objective was to achieve independence for Singapore through merger. As I had explained in my previous lecture, this was borne out of a conviction that Singapore had no economic future if it were not re-integrated with the Malayan hinterland. From a political and security standpoint, Singapore would be too vulnerable on its own, and would succumb to radical left-wing takeover unless it was fortified by the bulwark of the right-wing Malayan state.

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<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Tarling, *Nations and States in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge, 1998), p.77.

So, Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP campaigned not for an independent nation state of Singapore in the late 1950s and early 1960s, but for merger with Malaya. Lee had argued that “merger was inevitable” and prepared the city-state to join the Malayan state. From 1959, Lee took steps to encourage a pan-Malayan outlook in Singapore with the hope of creating, in his own words, a “Malayanised Singapore man who could talk, think and act like the exemplary Malaysians of the Federation”. To facilitate the social integration of Singapore’s predominantly Chinese population into the Malayan hinterland, Malay was made Singapore’s national language and a Malay Head of State (Yang di-Pertuan Negara) was installed. A Malay Education Advisory Committee was set up in 1959, and a Malayan school syllabus introduced.

Singapore became a state in Malaysia in September 1963. It did so on special terms. As a state of the Federation, Singapore would enjoy a much higher level of autonomy than all the other states in Malaysia, but the trade-off was that Singapore would also have lower representation in the Federal parliament, and was not expected to partake in the politics of the peninsula. The Tunku had envisioned that Singapore could continue to prosper economically as a port city, with Malaya as its hinterland. But, political control of the Federation would have to remain in Kuala Lumpur. In the Tunku’s mind, Singapore could be the New York of the Federation, while Kuala Lumpur would be the Washington DC.



## **Building the State and Nation**

In August 1965, very unexpectedly, Singapore became an independent sovereign state. The merger project had failed and Singapore was excised, once again, from its Malayan hinterland. This time, with independence already obtained, there could be no return to the British Empire as a Crown Colony. Nor was there another Federation to which Singapore could append itself. An exit from the state of Malaysia meant that Singapore had to be standing on its own, as a sovereign state in its own right, occupying its place in a post-war world order that was organised as a collection of nation states.

Singapore did not plan to be a sovereign state, but it had sovereignty thrust upon it. What were the chances of small, sovereign states surviving? The historian Arnold Toynbee, writing in 1966, had opined that as a sovereign independent city-state, “Singapore [was] too small a political unit to be practicable...”<sup>5</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, too, once said, “In the context of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century South-East Asia, island nations are political jokes.”<sup>6</sup>

## **Nation and State**

While the nation state might appear to be a very natural political organisation today, it is, unlike the city, a relatively new phenomenon in history. The nation states

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in John Curtis Perry, *Singapore. Unlikely Power* (Oxford, 2017), p.177

<sup>6</sup> Singapore Legislative Assembly Debates, Second Session of the First Legislative Assembly, Part II of Session 1956-7. On the Constitutional Talks in London (March 1957)

in Europe mainly emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the wake of the French Revolution. They proliferated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, following the First World War. In 1920, the League of Nations had about 50 members. The 1815 Treaty of Vienna, which represented the international community then, had only eight signatories, of which three were empires (Austria Hungary, Russia and Turkey). After the Second World War, as empires broke up and erstwhile colonies, large and small, had to be re-constituted as nation states, their numbers grew. The United Nations now has nearly 200 members. As the new nation states emerged, many continued to struggle with the tasks of delineating boundaries and uniting disparate and diverse communities and geographical entities. Benedict Anderson calls the nation state an “imagined community”, and even today nation states are seen as younger enterprises (in the long history of political organisations) that have yet to prove their viability.<sup>7</sup> Cities have been around for over 5000 years, while most nation states are barely a century old.

In all its earlier incarnations, Singapore had functioned as a city of sorts. It was an emporium, a cosmopolis, a colonial port city, a crown colony and then a city within a larger Malaysian Federation. But it was a most unnatural nation. It did not have any of the ingredients needed to build national identity — indigenous rootedness, civilisational lineage, cultural commonness, religious, ethnic and linguistic homogeneity; all it had was probably common political cause.

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<sup>7</sup> Simon Curtis, *Cities and States in History*

The politics in the island up to 1965 had reflected its historical experience as an open port city and the international make-up of the cosmopolis. Internationalism and populism, more than the indigenous nationalism of the sort one saw emerging in India, for example, was the natural experience in Singapore from the 1920s to the 1950s. The idea of Singapore as a nation state thus sat uncomfortably with its instincts as an open commercial cosmopolis that depended on international trade for its survival. Yet, in 1965 Singapore had become a nation state, very much against its own expectations. It now had to get on with the business of quickly reconstituting and re-imagining itself. It knew how to be a city, but becoming a nation state, with hardly any time to prepare, was a different proposition altogether.

So two processes had to happen simultaneously, each reinforcing the other. The first was state-building, and alongside it, nation-building. The process of state-building after 1965 was driven by a single-minded devotion to the goal of survival. Building on the structural foundations of the colonial state, Singapore focused on getting its economy right, establishing functioning governing institutions, educating and housing its people and creating an efficient bureaucracy to develop and implement policies. Singapore became a viable state with a thriving economy, and efficient system of governance with the wherewithal to feed, house and educate its citizens. To defend its national territory and sovereignty, Singapore had to build its defence capabilities and the Singapore Armed Forces came into being. As a state that had to conduct relations with other states, foreign policy became necessary.

This fed into the process of nation-building, which needed a much longer time. It has been argued that “nationalism [or national identity] ... is not a phenomenon that appears suddenly. It is a result of a process by which a people become conscious of themselves as a separate national entity in the modern world, a process by which they become willing to transfer their primary loyalty from the village, or the region, or the monarch, to the nation state.”<sup>8</sup>

As a new nation state, Singapore had to build in its people a sense of community, and emphasise its viability, no matter how small, in a world of nation states. But, in the case of Singapore, this consciousness could not be built on the foundations of a common culture. Singapore was simply too diverse and complex to find common ground in terms of identity. Neither did the country have a long, shared history, or common struggle, on which to meld common purpose. As former minister George Yeo said, “Singapore nationalism had to be cooked in a hurry without the fire of war or revolution.”<sup>9</sup>

Nation-building — the building of an intrinsic national identity — was therefore a much more complicated enterprise than state-building. How do you generate a lasting sense of identity, bonding and loyalty among a diverse and largely migrant population, whose identification with the state dated back only a few years before 1965, when citizenship was introduced in 1957? The population that, until August 1965, had been

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<sup>8</sup> W. J. Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam, 1900-1941* (Ithaca, 1976), p. 15

<sup>9</sup> George Yeo, *The Bonsai, Banyan and the Tao* (Singapore, 2016), p.49

told that they were Malaysian citizens, now had to embrace a new identity as citizens of a new country. This was a wholly new experience for the people of Singapore, most of whom had never thought that Singapore could be independent, let alone national.

Lee Kuan Yew made this very clear when he said:

“We ask ourselves, what is a Singaporean? In the first place we did not want to be Singaporeans. We wanted to be Malaysians. Then the idea was extended and we decided to be Malaysians. But, twenty-three months of Malaysia — a traumatic experience for all parties in Malaysia — ended rather abruptly with our being Singaporeans.”<sup>10</sup>

From 1965, political leaders urged the people of Singapore to think of themselves as Singaporeans, not as Chinese, Malays, Indians and Sri Lankans, least of all Malaysians. But up to this point, Singapore had no experience of being a nation and people were not accustomed to being Singaporean.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, nation-building was a critical part of making Singapore viable as a nation state, if only to ensure that Singapore could maintain its independent, sovereign

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<sup>10</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, cited in Michael Hill and Lian Kwen Fee, *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore* (London, 1995), p.12; Lee Kuan Yew, ‘Transcript of Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, at the Reunion Dinner of St. Andrew’s Old Boys’ Association on 7th September, 1968’, 7 September 1968, <http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/lky19680907.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Rajaratnam, as quoted in John Curtis Perry, *Singapore. Unlikely Power* (Oxford, 2017), p. 117

status. Lee Kuan Yew declared in December 1965 that “independence ... created the conditions for the eventual success of what we want: survival in Southeast Asia ... as a separate and distinct people.”<sup>12</sup> He described Southeast Asia as “a very turbulent part of the world” and Singapore had to be careful not to be “absorbed or swallowed up by ... bigger hordes”.<sup>13</sup>

So, the narrative of survivalism became a creed that was used to bind people together. But it was not just the fear of perishing that was used to build common purpose. As I described earlier, referring to the pillars of nation-building, the state would use a combination of economic and social development, in the context of political stability, to build belief in the new nation state. Development and growth would be undergirded by shared values and beliefs that promised every citizen a chance to progress and prosper in a country of their own, regardless of race, religion and socioeconomic status. Thus, the centrality of the principles of meritocracy and multiculturalism.

Diversity had to be managed in the name of nationalism. Emphasising Singapore’s multiculturalism was important as the 1964 race riots were still fresh in the memories of the government and its people. In many ways, the conception of the Singaporean nation grew out of its bitter experiences in Malaysia. As David Chang

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<sup>12</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, Speech given at a luncheon by the Pasir Panjang Residents at Perak House, 5 December, 1965. <http://nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/lky19651205b.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

writes, after Singapore's separation from Malaysia, "'Malaysian Malaysia' ... found its experimentation in [Lee Kuan Yew's] own multiracial, multi-lingual and multi-religious nation."<sup>14</sup> The PAP government adopted policies that actively managed Singapore's ethnic diversity. For instance, in the early post-independence years, PAP leaders tried to downplay the "Chineseness" of Singapore to avoid being perceived as a "Third China" by its neighbours.

The special position of the Malays was also recognised in Singapore's Constitution, with the designation of Malay as the national language, and the provision of free education for Malays up to university level. At the same time, four official languages were selected – English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil, to be used in official documents, parliament, and schools.<sup>15</sup> In the early years of independence, projecting the image of Singapore as both a harmonious patchwork of cultures and an English-speaking nation took precedence over highlighting cultural distinctions and heritage.

The flag, national anthem and pledge were important symbols of ideals and aspirations that would bind Singaporeans as a people, building the nation as a "community of destiny". But, loyalty and identity had to be nurtured and anchored on concrete experiences. National service and the educational system became key

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<sup>14</sup> David W. Chang, 'Nation-Building in Singapore', *Asian Survey* 8, no. 9 (1968): 766, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2642643>.

<sup>15</sup> Jon S.T. Quah, 'Globalization and Singapore's Search for Nationhood', 81-2.

vehicles for creating and sustaining national identity, and a successful public housing scheme, as well as a growing economy, provided stability and belief in the nation.

This is not to say that all nation-building efforts have been unambiguously positive. Some scholars view Singapore's policy of multiculturalism as "an instrument of social control and policing of boundaries in the name of the larger public good and harmony".<sup>16</sup>

Another critique of the policy is that it functions as tool for disempowerment. By encouraging strong racial group identification, state multiracialism theoretically prevents claims of cultural otherness or cultural discrimination.<sup>17</sup> It has been argued that multiculturalism pushes race out of the front line of politics, while still according it high visibility in the cultural sphere.<sup>18</sup> As such, this ideology that served Singapore well in its search for national identity early on, may have to be tweaked moving forward.

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<sup>16</sup> Raka Shome, 'Mapping the Limits of Multiculturalism in the Context of Globalization', *International Journal of Communication* 6 (2012), 144-165

<sup>17</sup> Raka Shome, 'Mapping the Limits of Multiculturalism in the Context of Globalization', *International Journal of Communication* 6 (2012), 160

<sup>18</sup> Chua Beng Huat. (1998). *Racial Singaporeans: Absence after the hyphen*. In J. Kahn (Ed.), *Southeast Asian identities: Culture and the politics of representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand* (pp. 28–50). London: I. B. Tauris.



## **Nation state and Global City: A return to the cosmopolis**

After decades of state- and nation-building, Singapore has established itself as a viable nation state. It now has all the characteristics of a nation state — territory, sovereignty, citizens, and a legitimate government. But, the inherent dilemmas of a new nation state that grew out of an old commercial city that had always privileged openness, mobility and connectivity have not gone away. Global competition has given rise to the need to revive the instincts of the cosmopolis, notwithstanding the demands of nurturing a local base of citizens.

Historian Anthony Reid points out that “[by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century] ... as increasing global competition created an international context where [the cosmopolis] was more necessary than ever ... the public rhetoric of nation appeared both less necessary in itself and less opposed to cosmopolis. Public leaders appealed to make Singapore ... “a cosmopolitan centre, able to attract, retain and absorb talent from all over the world”,<sup>19</sup> or “a global hub where people, ideas and capital come together”.<sup>20</sup>

This has generated the tensions that are innate in a country that is a city. As a consequence of this dual personality, Singapore has had to actively and continuously connect with the wider world, while taking care of a local citizenry and building national identity within its shores at the same time.

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<sup>19</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, 2000, cited by Yeoh and Huang, 2004:31.

<sup>20</sup> Goh Chok Tong, 1999, speech at opening of parliament; Anthony Reid, “Cosmopolis and Nation in Central Southeast Asia” in *Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series*, No. 22, (2004), p.11

IPS Director Janadas Devan has argued, “the fact that this city is all the country that we will have informs every facet of our existence”. As such, Singapore the city and country needs to be an “exceptionally and intricately well-organised organism”, or risk not existing at all.<sup>21</sup> He referred to Singapore’s key infrastructure to illustrate how Singapore being a country means it has to, among other things, house its gateways (port and airport), manufacturing and military facilities within its geographical limits. Given that public infrastructure and housing occupy well over half of Singapore’s land area, it is inevitable that decisions that give importance to some goals while sacrificing others will have to be made. For the PAP authorities, managing Singapore as a city and country with small land area, amidst other challenges, has translated to intense, long-term planning, and prominent government presence.

Let me cite two examples where the Singapore government has had to mediate the contradictory pulls of “internationalisation/regionalisation vs Singapore as home” and that of “attracting foreign talent vs looking after Singaporeans”.<sup>22</sup>

## **Immigration**

Decisions arguably made in the interest of pragmatism and expedience have not necessarily remained policies that continue to produce positive results. One example is Singapore’s liberal immigration policies, which at its peak, ran the risk of

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<sup>21</sup> Janadas Devan, Opening Remarks delivered at Singapore Perspectives 2017 Conference <https://www.ipsccommons.sg/exceptional-government-to-sustain-a-nation-once-thought-improbable/>

<sup>22</sup> Brenda S.A. Yeoh and T.C. Chang, ‘Globalising Singapore: Debating Transnational Flows in the City’ in *Urban Studies*, Vol. 38. No.7, (2001), p. 1028.

alienating the local population and contributed to xenophobic sentiments. Liberal immigration policies were and are part of the government's plan to develop Singapore into a "talent capital", attract migrants to fill the gap in manpower needs given Singapore's greying population, and ultimately sustain its economic growth.

However, the non-resident population increased at an unprecedented pace in the first decade of the 21st century, resulting in widespread public disapproval of the government's liberal immigration policies for highly skilled labour around the 2011 general elections.<sup>23</sup> Another wave of anti-immigrant sentiment, which arose when the Population White Paper was released in 2013, illustrated the continued tensions between the needs of the city-state and the sentiments of the nation state.

Since then, the government has continued to reassure Singaporeans that the workforce is not disproportionately dependent on foreign labour. Its stance is that foreign talent complements rather than competes with the local workforce, even as it plans to reduce the number of employment passes it grants to qualified foreigners.<sup>24</sup>

In hindsight, some would argue that too quick an inflow of foreign workers depressed wages among low-wage workers and brought about avoidable social

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/rapid-growth-singapores-immigrant-population-brings-policy-challenges>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.gov.sg/factually/content/do-you-know-how-many-types-of-foreign-workers-we-have-in-singapore>; <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/big-read-foreigner-issue-are-we-ready-rethink>

costs.<sup>25</sup> While workers from abroad filled gaps in roles in the sectors such as construction, health and social services, some locals have perceived foreigners to be taking from Singapore's economic pie rather than growing it. For instance, there continues to be resentment towards skilled workers turned Permanent Residents who are viewed as enjoying the benefits of citizenship without having to take on the attendant obligations.<sup>26</sup> As for "low-skilled" workers, they are "forgotten" even as they have grown increasingly visible as part of Singapore's social landscape and public spaces. Singapore aspires to be a cosmopolis, but the cosmopolitanism in Singapore also has its clear limits. It has little room for "migrant others", which include "low-skilled" domestic, construction and manual workers.<sup>27</sup>

### **Developing the Arts**

Another example demonstrates how there was pushback on the ground in response to state efforts to develop Singapore as a prominent arts destination and hub. Government efforts to quickly and visibly shape Singapore into a global city for the arts were not received with enthusiasm by local arts practitioners. A former Artistic Director of The Substation argued that the hub model would "retard the growth of our indigenous arts development", because it prioritised massive infrastructural development, import of foreign specialists, and tourism, over benefits to local

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<sup>25</sup> Manu Bhaskaran, 'An Architect of the Singapore Miracle', The Business Times, 25 March 2015, <https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/government-economy/lee-kuan-yew-dies/an-architect-of-the-singapore-miracle>.

<sup>26</sup> Brenda S.A. Yeoh and T.C. Chang, 'Globalising Singapore: Debating Transnational Flows in the City'

<sup>27</sup> Brenda Yeoh, 'Globalisation & the Politics of Forgetting', 146-9.

practitioners and smaller-scale development projects. Some criticised the government's motives — nurturing arts and culture as a vehicle for economic growth, rather than for their own intrinsic value. Cynics have also questioned if “a vibrant arts scene could ever be the result of government blue-prints” and whether an artistic society could be fostered through an economics-driven programme of change.<sup>28</sup>

At the same time, from the government's point of view, attracting international players and supporting local players may be complementary rather than contradictory goals. However, government action has an outsized footprint and influence in Singapore, compared to other cities, because of our relative smallness and one-city proposition. As such, the tensions between different players that are sometimes natural for cities play out on a national level and become magnified in Singapore's context.

### **The strengths of a city**

But, this duality does have its upsides. Although there are stresses that come with balancing the needs of city and country, Singapore has also played to its strengths as a city state, without compromising national identity. As Minister for Finance Heng Swee Keat said in his 2019 Budget speech, “As a city-state, we are nimbler and can

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<sup>28</sup> Brenda S.A. Yeoh and T.C. Chang, 'Globalising Singapore: Debating Transnational Flows in the City', 1037-8

adapt to changes faster.” Singapore can also take advantage of its strategic location and “serve as a neutral, trusted node in key spheres of global activities”.<sup>29</sup>

Former minister George Yeo also expounded on the advantages a city-state possesses in regulating its population and resolving urban issues in 1996:

Because we are a city-state and not one city in a large nation state, we are able to solve urban problems which many cities in the world are not able to. A city-state has its own borders. This is its great advantage. It is able to control and regulate the inflow of people. Because of this, Singapore has been able to clear its old slums and prevent new slums from forming. We have better control over our own environment. This is the key reason why we have been able to overcome problems of traffic, pollution, prostitution, drugs, crime, education, housing, health care and so on.... This is one major advantage we have as a city-state.<sup>30</sup>

Positioning itself as a global city offers other advantages. As large nation states turn inwards and intense nationalism generates insularity and protectionism, globally-oriented cities could become important international actors in place of traditional nation states. Observers have suggested that “this may create new patterns of competition

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<sup>29</sup> Heng Swee Keat, 2019 Budget Speech.

<sup>30</sup> George Yeo, ‘Speech by George Yeo, Minister for Information & the Arts and Minister for Health, at the Temasek Seminar on 7 November ’96 at 11.30 Am at OCS Main Auditorium, SAFTI Military Institute, Upper Jurong Road’, 1996, <http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/view-html?filename=1996110607.htm>.

and cooperation in the world, resembling western Europe when the maritime city-state notably flourished.”<sup>31</sup>

Diversity, once regarded as an obstacle to common identity and which had to be managed, is now seen as a key characteristic and strength. As contemporary Singapore continues to search for new ways to remain relevant in the global marketplace, it has to welcome people from all around the world in search of investment, work and a better life. This means welcoming new immigrants, and seeking ways to integrate these newcomers.

However, as seen from the example of backlash in response to liberal immigration policies, managing diversity has proven to be a complex task. It is not merely about locals who feel pitted against foreigners, but also about how the state manages different segments as groups within the country that include on the one end the “high-waged, highly skilled professional, managerial and entrepreneurial elites”, and at the other “the low-waged immigrants who occupy insecure niches in the unskilled or semi-skilled sectors of the urban service economy”.<sup>32</sup> Caught in between the two groups are middle-class Singaporeans.

These groups are affected by globalisation unevenly. Singaporeans generally accept that globalisation has brought economic success to Singapore, but

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<sup>31</sup> Perry, *Unlikely Power*, p. 262.

<sup>32</sup> Yeoh and Chang, ‘Globalising Singapore’, p.1026.

globalisation processes have also brought about change and disruption, such as rising inequality and for some, a sense of precariousness towards their livelihoods.<sup>33</sup>

As the city's population continues to grow more diverse, its identity also becomes more fluid. One thing is certain: as the canvas grows more colourful, the difficulty lies in blending the colours seamlessly, while ultimately creating a harmonious whole.

### **Local identity and Global City: Different sides of the same coin?**

The examples of immigration and arts and culture policies show how there are competing needs and wants, which require thoughtful responses and subsequent fine-tuning to ensure Singapore's continued flourishing. Another way of examining these competing goals is to look at them as two differing orientations. There is a part of Singapore that is more oriented towards itself, more inward focused, perhaps closed, even as Singapore also regards and markets itself as outward looking, cosmopolitan, open. As Janadas Devan puts it,

I can describe the political, economic and social contradiction between these two Singapores briefly thus: If this island-nation does not remain one of the world's leading global cities, it cannot survive as an economy; we might as well

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<sup>33</sup> Anju Mary Paul (ed.), *Local Encounters in a Global City*, p. 16-18



not have left Malaysia. To sustain itself as a leading global city, Singapore must remain open to the world, welcome all varieties of talents, become and remain a cosmopolitan society and culture.

To remain a nation, however, Singapore cannot be forever turned determinedly outwards. It cannot be so porous to the outside as to allow itself to be overwhelmed by the foreign. And it cannot resign itself to a diffuse and rootless cosmopolitanism. Life exists here and now, in a particular place and time, or it cannot exist at all.<sup>34</sup>

Can the division be such a neat one, and is it correct also to see Singapore as being bifurcated into two groups of population, one internally oriented and the other always looking outwards? Perhaps it is not quite accurate to characterise Singapore as comprising of ‘cosmopolitans’ and ‘heartlanders’ that then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong referred to in his 1999 National Day Rally speech, even if this set of terms provides a starting point for us to think about the internal and external pulls that Singapore negotiates.

For then Prime Minister Goh, ‘cosmopolitans’ were defined as English-speaking, international in outlook, and skilled in fields like banking, IT, engineering, science and technology, while ‘heartlanders’ were defined as speaking ‘Singlish’,

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<sup>34</sup> Janadas Devan, Opening Remarks at Singapore Perspectives 2018, [https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/singapore-perspectives-2018\\_opening-remarks\\_final799d057b46bc6210a3aaff0100138661.pdf](https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/singapore-perspectives-2018_opening-remarks_final799d057b46bc6210a3aaff0100138661.pdf)

being local in interest and orientation, making their living within the country, and playing a major role in maintaining core values and social stability. However, some feared that the terms reflected a growing divide between Singaporeans on the basis of economic status, values and outlook, while others feared that these terms would create more of a barrier between Singaporeans, even if the barrier between the two groups started off as imagined.<sup>35</sup>

Another suggestion is that rather than having these dualistic categories, perhaps there is a blending, and Singaporeans are more likely “cosmolanders” who “could lead, or could afford to lead, global lifestyles, but prefer the values of the heartlands”.<sup>36</sup> This is a form of “rooted cosmopolitanism” that prominent ethicist Kwame Anthony Appiah argues for. The term “rooted cosmopolitanism” seems oxymoronic, for to have roots suggests the need to be embedded in a specific history, nation or people, while to be a cosmopolitan is to declare oneself a citizen of the world. For Appiah, however, these two are inseparable. Local histories, he reminds us, have themselves been shaped by the movements of peoples and their communal practices as old as human history itself. He argues for multiple affiliations, and the idea that one can pledge allegiance to one's country and still conceive of oneself in terms of global identities or universal values.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Brenda Yeoh, ‘Globalisation & the Politics of Forgetting’, 140-1.

<sup>36</sup> Yeoh, ‘Globalisation & the Politics of Forgetting’, 140-1.

<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Freedman, “The Ethics of Identity”: A Rooted Cosmopolitan’, *The New York Times*, 12 June 2005, sec. Books, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/12/books/review/the-ethics-of-identity-a-rooted-cosmopolitan.html>.

But, whatever it is, Singapore the nation state cannot close itself off from global capital or labour flows. Its continued desire to be on the winning side of globalisation while maintaining its viability as a nation state means that the government will have to constantly tread a fine line between protectionism and openness.

And even as globalisation continues to have a major effect on the culture and cityscape of Singapore, there is the need to navigate it without alienating and leaving behind different groups of people. These could be locals and foreigners who call Singapore home, or Singaporeans who have heeded the call to seek opportunities beyond its shores, but find it difficult to maintain ties and relationships with Singapore, this cosmopolis and nation that finds itself continually changing to suit global and regional trends. Singapore's government has, with time, come to recognise that to attract international companies and human capital, Singapore has to emphasise both our cosmopolitanism and Singapore's "localness". As Mr. George Yeo writes, "The tension between being nationalistic and being cosmopolitan cannot be wished away. It has to be gingerly managed".<sup>38</sup> Dogmatic and xenophobic nationalism will "stifle initiative, inhibit trade, and drive [talents] away. It has to be broad minded, practical, idealistic ... but also distinctively Singaporean".<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> George Yeo, p. 50.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

On the day-to-day basis, and the local level, there will be the constant need for accommodation, acceptance and adaptation as the global and local both negotiate for space in Singapore.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

In this lecture, I have shown how Singapore has evolved from city to country. For the better part of its existence, it has functioned as an open city, sustained by fluidity, mobility and openness. Its culture was essentially hybrid and cosmopolitan. I argued that unlike many former Asian colonies, Singapore did not set out to be a nation state once it was freed from colonial rule. Instead, it aspired to be part of something larger, as part of the international socialist system, and subsequently the Malaysian Federation. When the Malayan dream died with Separation, Singapore became an independent nation state and had to strike out on its own. The new state had to work hard to ensure its viability as a new sovereign entity, its size and diversity notwithstanding. In the last half century, it has established itself as a young nation state, but continues to grapple with the fact that it is a city and country in one. These dilemmas will persist as long as there is the desire to “ride the crest of globalisation... while continuing to shape the local arena”.<sup>41</sup>

In the title of my talk, I used the phrase – the “Idea of Singapore”. I wanted to capture the essence of Singapore, an underlying spirit that had stayed consistent

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<sup>40</sup> See essays in Anju Paul (ed), *Local Encounters in a Global City* (Singapore, 2017).

<sup>41</sup> Yeoh and Chang, “Globalising Singapore”, p.1028.

despite the many changes to its form. For me, the idea of Singapore must refer to the meaning and significance of Singapore; it must be larger than the island itself and must extend beyond its relatively brief existence as a nation state.

So, in my mind, the idea of Singapore can best be encapsulated in the concept of “smallness unconstrained”. Smallness is a constant and reality in Singapore’s history, but that smallness has never constrained the evolution of Singapore as a city, country and nation state.