



Reinventing Destiny: A Conference on the Occasion of Mr Lee Kuan Yew's 100th Birth Anniversary

Panel 3: Governance of a City-State

By Phan Hoang Long and Felicity Hwee-Hwa Chan

The Reinventing Destiny conference held on 14 August 2023 marked the centenary of the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew's birth. Jointly hosted by the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities at the Singapore University of Technology and Design, as well as the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and Institute of Policy Studies at the National University of Singapore, the event featured forward-looking discussions on geopolitics, governance and economic strategies relevant to Singapore and other small states.

The third panel of the conference focused on the governance of Singapore as a city-state, identifying important challenges ahead and outlining possible steps the city can take to be resilient in a world plagued with disruptions, as well as measures to fortify Singapore's role as a regional and global hub. The discussion tackled the issues largely from the perspectives of urban planning and environmental policy-making academia.

The session, comprising individual presentations from each of the three speakers followed by a question-and-answer segment, was moderated by Professor Tan Tai Yong, President of the Singapore University of Social Sciences. Speakers from the panel (in order of appearance) were:

- Mr Peter Ho, Chairman of the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA)
- Professor Cheong Koon Hean, Chair of the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities
- Professor Wu Weiping, Professor of Urban Planning, and Director of the M.S. in Urban Planning programme at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation



Professor Cheong Koon Hean making her presentation during the panel. Other panellists pictured (left to right): Mr Peter Ho, Professor Wu Weiping and Professor Tan Tai Yong.

The Anomaly of a Sovereign City-State

Mr Peter Ho, Chairman of the URA, began the session by speaking about the historical circumstances that have led to Singapore's unique position as a city-state, the challenges that it will face in the coming years, and the necessary strategies and mindset it must adopt to ensure its continued survival.

Mr Ho noted that although city-states have existed since antiquity, with the rise of the Westphalian system, only three remain today: Singapore, Monaco, and Vatican City. Of the trio, only Singapore is a truly independent, sovereign city-state. These city-states are invariably small, with no hinterland and no natural resources. He asserted that a sovereign city-state is an anomaly and its existence a constant struggle.

The challenges faced by city-states are especially severe for Singapore, which is the 20th smallest country in the world by land area and lacks direct access to the high seas. Mr Ho cited Mr Lee Kuan Yew's observation in 1957 that "island nations are a political joke". This highlighted the uncertain circumstances Singapore was in when it was thrust into independence in 1965. Nevertheless, through perseverance and determination, Singapore overcame the odds and became a modern metropolis. In noting this, Mr Ho quoted Mr Lee Kuan Yew: "[o]ver 100 years ago, this was a mud-flat, swamp. Today, this is a modern city. Ten years from now, this will be a metropolis. Never fear." However, he noted that Singapore's success has masked deep challenges that remain.

Survival in a Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) World

Mr Ho highlighted critical issues confronting Singapore, particularly the city-state's extreme vulnerability to climate change and the unfolding geopolitical tension that threatens the free, open and fair trading environment on which Singapore's economy relies. These developments are exacerbated by the emergence of the Anthropocene and the phenomenon known as the Great Acceleration.

The Anthropocene is defined as a period in which human activities increasingly have a decisive impact on the planet's eco-system. It entails the quickening pace of urbanisation, globalisation and industrialisation. These phenomena will fuel an increase in consumer demand for products and services and their desire for more and better infrastructure, which in turn will further increase the demand for resources and their extraction, accelerating the pace of climate change.

Simultaneously, technological change is propelling the Great Acceleration — the profound and wide-ranging upswing in human activities with immense implications for the planet's eco-system. Mr Ho asserted that this can be seen through the exponential pace of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, which affects every industry. Additionally, the technologies developed during this time will usher in an era in which connectivity is enhanced as advanced analytics and AI become intertwined.

Mr Ho asserted that these developments have pushed Singapore — and the rest of the world — into what former Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam has described as “a perfect long storm”, a confluence of lasting structural, geopolitical, economic and existential insecurities. This spawns an environment in which humanity has less time to adapt within ever-shrinking decision-making windows. Outcomes of actions become unpredictable as each shock to the system interact with each other and create new combinations that could eventually overwhelm the system. This world is described as VUCA.

In such an environment where major unpredictable, catastrophic events — or “black swans” — become more common, new circumstances cannot be dealt with by individual ministries alone. Instead, Mr Ho proposed that building resilience and being open to making fundamental changes were essential to tackling complex and wicked problems.

Resilient Government and Being Willing to Safe-Fail

Mr Ho cited Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's idea that resilience must underpin planning and policymaking for all of government. As “known known” and “known unknown” events become more common, the question for government is not if they would happen, but rather when and how severe would they be.

The government should not aim for perfect answers but be willing to experiment and recognise that failures will occur. Instead of a culture of blame, the appropriate philosophy should be to contain the fallout of failure and to resolve the problem as efficiently as possible. Mr Ho termed this approach as “safe-fail”, which would promote experimentation and reduce the stigma surrounding failure in government.

Embracing safe-fail would mean being willing to make fundamental changes, setting aside tried and tested approaches and accepting the risk of trying something that has no precedence

or shows little immediate evidence of success. Such a mindset requires the government to acknowledge that what has worked well in the past may become ineffective or even counter-productive in the future.

Building on this, Mr Ho asserted that the ability to change with confidence, even when lacking information and facing uncertainty of outcome, is an ability of the highest order within the government. It is an iterative approach with a virtuous cycle of probing, sensing and responding.

Additionally, for complex situations with no clear correct answer, a resilient organisation and government must create breathing room and scope for diversity in both thought and action. Willingness and space to discover and experiment with new solutions must be inculcated and fostered within the organisation to build flexibility and adaptability. An over-emphasis on structure and processes might focus the organisation on activities that become unimportant when disruptions occur, creating rigidity where flexibility is required.

Mr Ho stated that the litmus test for government in this new era is not efficiency, but whether problems can be resolved as they arise.

Four Trends Changing Singapore

The second speaker, Professor Cheong Koon Hean began by noting that Singapore used to be a nation of slums and squatters but has now transformed into a modern metropolis. Yet many of the challenges it faced historically still remain, notably the constraints of land and resources. She proceeded to highlight the four critical drivers of change which Singapore must acknowledge and address.

First, Singapore is facing a major “resource shift and cliff”, threatening its ability to provide for its population in the future. Since 1965, the population of Singapore has grown by 3.3 times. This begs the question of whether it has created a virtuous cycle of land stock to prepare for the future. Additionally, a myriad of disruptions from climate change to geopolitical developments can contribute to the uncertainties surrounding the supply of food, energy, water and other resources.

Second, we are entering a carbon-constrained world, as dictated by exacerbating climate change and the commitments countries have made to reduce their carbon footprint. Singapore, in particular, has pledged to become net zero by 2050. This means achieving a balance between the amount of greenhouse gas Singapore produces and the amount it removes from the atmosphere through different means. Professor Cheong stated that in order to achieve this, the city-state will need highly integrated strategies and innovative technological solutions to drive a reduction in carbon footprint. Additionally, businesses and the community must be adequately prepared to survive and thrive through this transition.

Professor Cheong then brought up the topic of population and infrastructural changes, or what she described as “people in the fourth age and city in the third age”. She cited statistics predicting that one in four Singaporeans will be 65 and above in 2030 and this proportion would grow to one in three by 2050. Additionally, in one to two decades, many Singaporeans will turn 80. This implies that healthcare demands will rise even as the country begins to focus on prolonging health-span and not just lifespan. Moving on, Professor Cheong described the

maturing of the city into its third age with 50 to 60 per cent of existing infrastructure passed their 50th year by 2040. Additionally, by 2050, around 33 per cent of HDB buildings will be 70 years old. It is imperative that Singapore prepare and muster massive fiscal, physical, environmental and human resources to rejuvenate the city.

Finally, she outlined some of the societal changes relevant to Singapore's future and development.

One of the drivers of these societal changes will be the new aspirations and lifestyle needs of a population comprising many new citizens and transnational marriages. There will likely be new contestations for space and resources, as well as perceived citizenship rights.

People would also become increasingly bolder in advocating for causes in which they believe. She noted that these changes and lifestyle trends would only be accelerated by the rapid advancement in technology.

Professor Cheong asserted that such challenges cannot be simplistically tackled. The city-state needs to reimagine, reinvent, and regenerate to provide ecosystems for people to thrive in this new world. There is an emergence of superstar cities around the world with important characteristics — such as talent clustering, productivity from proximity, availability of institutes of higher learning and high-quality living, and rising global superstar firms are drawn to these cities, said Professor Cheong, citing the observations from a book by Oxford University's Professor Ian Goldin, who had spoken earlier in Panel 1. She called on Singapore to strive to be one of these superstar cities.

With this in mind, Professor Cheong outlined six shifts necessary for Singapore to address its challenges and ensure its place among superstar cities.

Six Shifts for the Future

Professor Cheong began by discussing the urban planning process in Singapore. She stated that government agencies now actively deploy foresight and scenario planning to account for multiple possible futures, given the uncertain of the future ahead. With uncertainties and constraints in mind, Singapore must prepare new framework and methodologies for a future where brownfield sites are more numerous than greenfield sites. Thus, she advocates a life cycle approach to planning by looking forward 100 years as this will better enable the nation to capture opportunities for potential redevelopment beyond the existing economic and useful lifespan of current buildings.

Subsequently, she discussed how urban governance will be enhanced in the future with the advent of digital innovation, especially in the realm of Artificial Intelligence (AI). However, Professor Cheong cautioned that these technologies also harboured high risks of entrenching existing biases in planning and governance. Thus, there is a need for clear digital and AI governance. An adequate form of digital governance which encompasses ethics, norms, and social practices must be developed in parallel with the adoption of digital technology.

Third, she said resource innovation must be bolstered in Singapore to address its land and energy constraints. It is imperative to work towards a new pipeline of land by recycling brownfield sites to serve future generations while maintaining lease-hold, a critical system to recover and redevelop land for Singapore's future. In terms of energy, regional collaboration

will become an essential strategy to broaden the space and grow the capacity available for the future.

Building on the topic of energy, Professor Cheong proposed a reimagination of power by bringing up the fact that the government is pushing for four switches to power the future of Singapore. Alternative and sustainable forms of energies and energy distribution and management must be considered and adopted to varying extents to ensure a consistent supply of energy for the nation. These include diversifying gas sources such as liquefied natural gas, capturing more solar power, establishing regional power grids in collaboration with neighbouring countries, and introducing other emerging low carbon alternatives such as carbon capture, nuclear energy, tidal energy or geothermal energy.

It is necessary for the government to play an active role in transitioning the country to net zero and potentially net positive one day. This can be done through facilitating the development of ecological technologies and promoting them from niche fields to mainstream sectors. Furthermore, many sustainability initiatives require difficult decisions and trade-offs. There will be many conflicting interests, diverging needs and wants, and complex choices with regard to intergenerational allocation of resources. Professor Cheong stated that Singapore should move from stemming ecological losses to restoring resources and achieving ecological gain.

Finally, she asserted that the people-private-institutional-public partnership in Singapore must be strengthened to ensure all sectors are prepared for future uncertainties and changes. To achieve this, there must be a transition from consultative engagements to transformative partnerships between the government and these sectors. Additionally, as digital and data democracy will increase participation, new models of community communication are needed for issues of the day to be discussed rationally and constructively.

Despite the many challenges that Singapore faces, there are still numerous opportunities for the city-state to be innovative, and to reimagine, reinvent and rejuvenate itself, Professor Cheong concluded.

Three Questions for Singapore

Closing the presentation segment was Professor Wu Weiping, who provided an international perspective. She structured her presentation by posing three questions important for Singapore's position in the future.

First, how can Singapore remain the nexus of the East and West and perhaps also the Global North and Global South?

Professor Wu noted that Singapore had a unique advantage in its location, geographically and epistemologically. Geographically, Singapore has been a melting pot and nexus of trade, migration, and investment. Epistemologically, Singapore successfully made the transition from a developing to a developed country, giving the nation state a great position to be the nexus between the Global North and the Global South.

Building on Singapore's epistemological position, Professor Wu argued that the provincialisation of urban and governance thinking can be accomplished through Singapore. A large proportion of governance thinking and theories about urban areas are centred on particular world regions at certain points in history with a specific cultural tradition, but they

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must be considered as universal. This is particularly relevant with regard to the prominence of Western tradition of urban planning. What Singapore has experienced, has the power to provincialise said theories and chart a competitive pathway for other developing countries. Additionally, Singapore should capitalise on its exceptional story of development and transform itself into a learning lab to, ironically, demystify its exceptionalism. This soft power of Singapore can be viewed as the future of its geographical and geopolitical role, she said, adding that this would be an impetus for Singapore to expand its educational influence and become one of the centres for training and lifelong learning in the world of built environments.

Second, how can Singapore coexist with, not confront, climate change?

Noting that Singapore has been fortunate so far relative to Hawaii and other American cities, Professor Wu warned, however, that worsening climate change would lead to more severe consequences for Singapore, such as rising sea levels. To address this, there must be a recognition that retreat and adaptation to climate change might trump the demand for growth. This would entail behavioural change to reduce consumption. The reduction of consumption is also important in other ways for Singapore, such as addressing the growing lack of landfill in the constraint city-state. Incentivising changes in consumption and encouraging other forms of environmental stewardship would pave the way for sustainability in Singapore.

Third, how can Singapore exemplify the role of “a city as a refuge” in the age of mobility or forced mobility?

Throughout its history and in the present, Singapore has had a very diverse population due to its position as the nexus of East and West. Contestations over citizenship rights would naturally arise when the population becomes even more comprised of people originating from all parts of the world.

Professor Wu then cited Mr Lee Kuan Yew’s statement that Singapore may live or die by migration. Such a policy approach has led to a more tolerant and humanistic form of politics being practiced in Singapore, distinguishing it from the more apathetic political climate globally and giving the city-state a comparative advantage in attracting and sustaining a multicultural workforce. Vitality and prosperity could thus be achieved by continuing to embrace Singapore’s history as a melting pot of diversity, providing vibrancy to itself.

Professor Wu concluded by summarising that humility, a collaborative can-do spirit and superior work ethics play critical roles in Singapore’s position as a true nexus of the East and West, and the Global North and Global South.

Question-and-Answer

Q: Singapore is a city-state and a country; are there inherent tensions between a city-state and a nation state? Can these two become one? A city-state has to be open, attract all sorts of talents, be open to trade and connectivity, but there is a subtle citizenry that has expectations as citizens of a country. Here we constantly see tensions between parochialism and the need to remain open. What are the panellists’ opinions on this?

A: Mr Ho asserted that this is a red herring discussion. If the proposition that Singapore is forever constrained within the confines of 720 sq km of land is accepted, then the lack of a hinterland and natural resources must be accepted as well. By taking the cue from historical

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cities such as Venice, an open approach to “foreign talent” can be identified. Tensions between newcomers and established citizens will arise and it must be addressed by the political leadership.

Professor Cheong stated that the fact that Singapore is both a city and a nation state must be accepted, rendering its comparison to other global cities, such as New York City, less relevant. Water, military protection, and ports are matters of importance which must be self-sourced in Singapore, which is not the case for other cities. Therefore, long-term thinking in all categories is not a luxury, but a necessity for Singapore. Balance must also be struck between all the tensions in Singapore, such as issues of foreign talent and the competition for jobs. She mentioned that most Singaporeans would accept that the city needs to import workers to do the jobs for which the population might not possess the needed skillset, or which are less desirable to native citizens.

Professor Wu mentioned that Singapore is “at the front of the pack” and there will be pressures which come with this position. She cautioned about the dangers of Singapore becoming a legacy city in 100 to 150 years, citing the example of the Rust Belt of the United States. She stated that the dynamism of cities, such as New York and London, comes from the diversity of their population and their variety of economic activities.

Q: Beyond working towards net zero, and potentially providing capacity-building for the region, what other roles do the panellists see for Singapore in facilitating meaningful change and driving actions towards addressing the climate crisis, especially given its unique geopolitical position and capacity to leverage climate adaptation technology?

A: Professor Wu stated that Singapore has made strides in showcasing alternative pathways for development that can be very illustrative for other countries with limited resources, land, and population. What Singapore has innovated in terms of various mechanisms and systems can be of tremendous educational value for the Global South.

Subsequently, Professor Cheong elaborated that Singapore’s story is more aligned with the part of the world to which it belongs. Singapore shared issues and sentiments common to many other Asian countries in the 1960s, and the city-state’s development was built on its own experience rather than purely borrowing from Western theories. Singapore can also play the role of a centre for bringing together different parties for discussion, exchange, and conflict resolution. Singapore also has an ecosystem which can promote solutions for climate change, such as the development of a Carbon Exchange Centre or the financing of green infrastructure. These, and Singapore’s ability to invest in research & development and innovation, are measures and strategies it can adopt beyond capacity-building.

Mr Ho urged that there should be humility in considering what Singapore can practically affect with regard to climate change. There are serious problems that all cities around the world, including Singapore, experience as the result of climate change. One area where Singapore could practically make an impact could be the urban heat island effect. If an applicable solution can be found in Singapore, it is possible to replicate it in other cities facing the same problem. Nonetheless, Mr Ho emphasised that Singapore was only a “small player” in the grand scheme of the global struggle with climate change, unlike the “big players” who would make a material difference in the long run. Mr Ho questioned whether the global leadership needed to combat climate change on a worldwide scale exists today.

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