

Inclusive growth's good, inclusive identity even better

Leong Chan-Hoong
Today, 15 March 2012

When Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam delivered his Budget speech last month, many political commentators hailed it as a bold and audacious plan that bridges the widening socio-economic divide.

An enhanced social safety net, a cali-brated foreign-labour policy, and a fine-tuned Workfare Income Supplement (WIS) scheme are snippets of this ambitious blueprint. While there is no question in the political resolve to promote inclusive growth, much less has been said about nurturing an inclusive identity.

In essence, what can we do to foster a collective identity that all, if not most, Singaporeans can affectionately relate to?

What are the social institutions, shared memories and cultural resource that underscore this ubiquitous feature? Why is inclusive identity better than inclusive growth?

Three policy initiatives could engender an inclusive identity - bringing national service (NS) engagement to the heartlands, awarding long-service medals for dedicated hawkers and loosening the use of dialect in the media.

GOING INTO THE HEARTLANDS

Until the early 1980s, the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) Open House events were held in resident-friendly public areas like the West Coast Park.

Since then, all the fairs are conducted within military compounds, except for Marina South in 2000 and, this year, at the F1 Pit Building in Marina Bay.

As a young boy in the 1980s, I vividly remember the excitement of sitting in the AMX-tank, fiddling with the gun trigger and throttle. It was also a family affair with my cousin pointing to me the different toys on display.

The SAF is synonymous to NS and the latter is an integral component of becoming Singaporean; there is no differentiation in race, language, religion and income status within this institution. It is a hallmark of an inclusive identity.

The Ministry of Defence should consider rotating the fair in various parts of the heartlands instead of holding it at the Pit Building. The latter location is more likely to attract curious tourists than the citizenry. Young children and senior citizens may also find it challenging in navigating around the notorious traffic in Marina Bay.

VIRTUES OF GOOD FOOD

Food culture is omnipresent. It is quintessentially Singaporean as we all share the same gastronomic genes. The announcement to build new hawker centres in Singapore is a step in the right direction as they are the places that promote communal experiences. These are the locations where people religiously congregate

for lunch or dinner and are patronised by both the well-to-do elites and the working class so long as the food is good.

Food hunting is a manifestation of our inclusive identity. As such, all hawker tenants who personally manned their stalls could be recognised with long-service awards similar to those offered in organisations.

This is crucial because the stalls that serve non-differentiated products, like coffee and soft drinks, will never win in any contest relating to culinary skills in hawker fare, although they are an integral element in the hawker eco-system.

LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE

Finally, the Government should consider relaxing the regulations governing the use of dialect in the media. Many Singaporeans who are in their 40s or older would fondly recall the times when Cantonese dramas were shown on television before they were prohibited.

Despite this restriction, many Singaporeans, both young and old, are known to indulge in dialect TV series as a pastime.

Liberalising the linguistic landscape in the public would broaden the space for both young and old Singaporeans to engage in a common activity. More critically, this aspect of our collective identity is worth preserving because it offers a historical lens on the arduous journey that Singapore had taken in building a multi-cultural society.

From clan associations to Hokkien-Canto popular music played along Boat Quay, the dialect linguistic landscape is an imprint of our developmental history. We should cherish these interwoven threads of identity. Wouldn't the use of dialect marginalise minority races? Not at all. Because Malay and Indian Singaporeans use similar amount of dialect colloquialism like *jialat* (painful), and *haolian* (show off) just as Chinese Singaporeans utter Malay words like *makan* (eat) and *balik kampong* (go home).

The above suggestions are alternative ideas to complement the concurrent effort of this year's inclusive Budget in building an inclusive society.

In our pursuit of equality and justice, we have extensively relied on a deficit model to guide our strategies. The emphasis has been on narrowing the differences that divide as opposed to augmenting the ties that bind.

The political language used in the two elections last year had inadvertently created the impression that closing the economic rift is a panacea to all misery.

But the hard truth is that inequality is here to stay; the divides can be shrunk but never healed. The right fiscal policies can do much to promote inclusive growth. An inclusive identity will go hand-in-hand with this visionary Budget to fostering unity in the midst of disparity.

Dr Leong Chan-Hoong is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies. He leads the work in the area of society and identity at the institute.