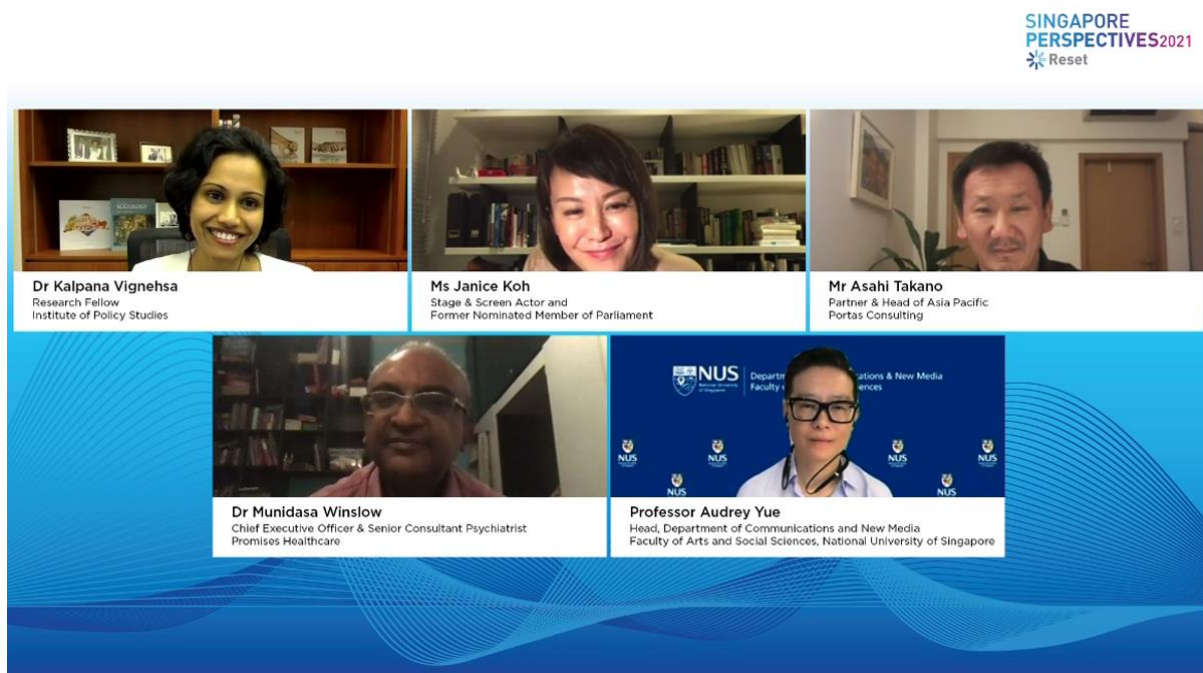


Singapore Perspectives Conference 2021: Reset Soul of the Nation

By Tasha TAN

The sixth forum of Singapore Perspectives 2021, titled [“Soul of the Nation”](#), was moderated by Dr Kalpana Vignehsa, Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies. It featured speakers Ms Janice Koh, Stage & Screen Actor and Former Nominated Member of Parliament; Mr Asahi Takano, Partner & Head of Asia Pacific Portas Consulting; Dr Munidasa Winslow, Chief Executive Officer & Senior Consultant Psychiatrist Promises Healthcare; and Professor Audrey Yue, Head at the Department of Communications and New Media at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore.



Caption for photo: The sixth forum of the Singapore Perspectives Conference focused on the “Soul of the Nation”, in which speakers discussed topics such as the arts, sports, communication and mental health.

Defining the “Soul of the Nation”

Dr Vignehsa asked the panellists what the soul of the nation meant to them. Each speaker shared their own views on the soul of the nation.

Professor Yue described the soul of the nation as the emotional and intellectual energy that binds people together as a community — in other words, culture. Culture includes both the traditional concept of culture such as customs and traditions, as well as new forms of culture like everyday culture, which includes all the ways people find common meaning in the way of life.

Mr Takano shared that the soul of the nation was something that people are reluctant to let go off under duress. He used the UK as an example, where in spite of the pandemic, professional football matches are still being held because football is such an important part of the people's lives and culture. Singapore has its own culture of solidarity and looking out for one another, which ties in with values of multiculturalism, equality, and well-being. For Singapore, sports might not be held on to as strongly during a crisis, but in future, it may change to become as important to the soul of the nation as the definition of sports and participation changes.

Dr Winslow described the soul as the spiritual, emotional, and intellectual capacity people have. The soul of the nation includes many things that cause people to want to come back to Singapore: food, material things, spiritual things, being part of a community with similar values, and individual resilience and community resilience. All these contribute to the *gotong royong* spirit as we get through crises together as a community.

Ms Koh saw the soul as the self, which includes the voices, desires, feelings, perceptions and memories. So the soul of a nation would be the commonality that underlies all the individual perceptions of the people; how the group of people make sense of the world. She agreed with the other speakers on their views on culture, food, sport and the arts as a way of bringing people together. Art is a way to bring to existence what currently exists as potential. Art is also a way to share perceptions and connect people.

Overall, there was no single thing that defined the soul of the nation. However, a common underlying theme was the idea of bringing people together, whether through culture, sport, shared experiences, values, or art.

Opening Remarks

Ms Koh highlighted a challenge brought by COVID-19 — the loss of community due to the restrictions on the number of people allowed in galleries and theatres, and restrictions on talking. Second, there is also a chance that we are losing artistic platforms that give comfort to people and promotes constructive criticism on tough topics. Third, there is a shrinking of the talent pool for the arts and it is not clear if people will come back to the arts scene post-pandemic. In terms of opportunities, she noted that performances could now be streamed online, allowing shows to reach a wider audience. Artists have also become more daring in breaking boundaries and are trying different media for their work. She also noted that the current season was a chance for Singapore to build new artistic narratives.

Professor Yue shared that the pandemic has accelerated the fourth industrial revolution. Opportunities include the high uptake of digital technology and boom in e-commerce. However, the pandemic has accentuated the digital divide, where seniors, those from a low social economic status, and persons with disabilities would find it harder to adopt digitalisation. Digital inclusion is important to help people remain connected as a society and is important to the soul of the nation. Professor Yue also noted the need to promote digital literacy and digital

well-being in the age of misinformation and infodemics. Large bouts of information and misinformation have resulted in echo chambers and polarisation which erode public trust in institutions.

Dr Winslow pointed out that the pandemic has brought a lot of stress as more people work and study from home, and as physical services go online. People have tried to cope using healthy ways like jogging, and unhealthy ways like consuming alcohol. However, the pandemic has also brought a shift in people's priorities where more have realised that mental health is as important as physical health, and that relationships with people are important. COVID-19 has given people the chance to say that they are not okay, which can allow for healing. He hopes that as Singapore progresses, mental health services can be considered as important as physical health.

Mr Takano said sports are an important part of society because it teaches skills to the young. There are many benefits to physical and mental health and social benefits if one is in a club or team. First, he argued that the pandemic has helped people personally recognise the value of physical activity. Second, with the rise of technology, there is a lower barrier of entry for sports participation. The change in mindset on the value of exercise and the lower barrier of entry has resulted in a shift from traditional team sports to individual activity, which has resulted in a loss in the sense of community that is vital for the soul of the nation.

Mr Takano said there is a need to find a way to bring people together, regardless of the new way of doing sports. For example, in the UK, people can turn up at their local park and run as a group activity. Another example he gave was e-sports, where a person is engaged in communities online through gaming; here, however, the individual loses out on the benefits of physical activity. Therefore, he said that it is important to manage the good while mitigating some of the downsides of the changing sports culture.

Discussion and Q&A

Participants asked if the soul of the nation was something that was crafted and managed by the government or something that was more organic and ground up in nature. The speakers believed that it is not a dichotomy where organic does not mean that everything is free while controlled does not mean that everything is micromanaged. Rather, it is about enabling people to do what they want to do. Examples include the provision of cycling lanes if a large enough population wants to cycle or providing people with access to online fitness instructors if they desire to exercise at home.

A participant asked to what extent does our surrounding environment serve as a carrier of memories for our collective identity, and what this means in the context of Singapore's constant transformation and perpetual redevelopment. The speakers agreed that Singapore's soul is constantly developing and changing. Reinvention is part of Singapore's nature and transformation often happens during adversity. It also leads to innovation and discovery of new things. However, the speakers also expressed the need for preservation of the old for future generations, and the need to find a balance this with redevelopment.

A participant asked how engagement with science could be a soulful experience. The speakers shared that the sciences can be soulful as scientists find joy in the work they do. The scientific method may not be as emotional as other activities, nor necessarily embraced

as warmly as the arts, but inventions and discoveries of science are part of the soul of the nation.

A participant noted that people are more open to seeking mental help, and asked how society and government could further encourage healthy mental health habits and decrease barriers to those seeking help. The speakers shared that people are generally hesitant to share about their issues as Singapore has a culture of “saving face”. Therefore, there is a need to teach resilience and soft skills in school, on top of the hard skills of math and science. It is also important to give people permission from an early age that it is okay to not be okay, that it is not okay to say that nothing is a problem.

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