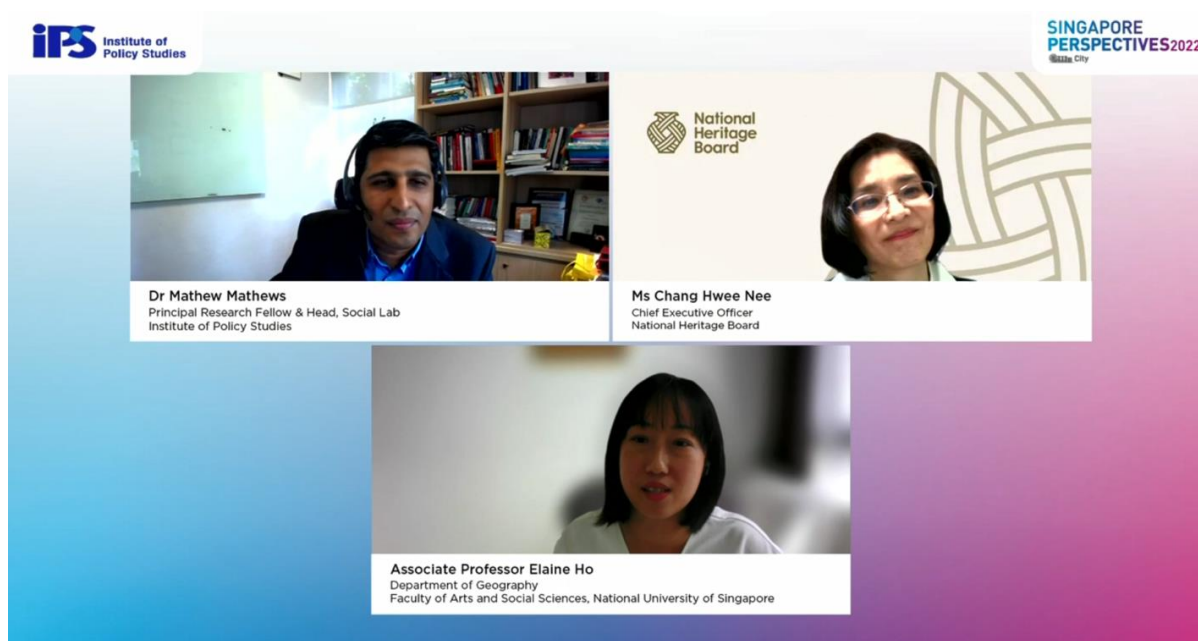


## Singapore Perspectives Conference 2022: City Forum 3: City as a Cosmopolitan Space

By Fiona Phoa



*Caption for photo: Panellists engaging in a discussion during the third forum of Singapore Perspectives 2022, moderated by Dr Mathew Mathews*

The third forum of Singapore Perspectives 2022, “City as a Cosmopolitan Space”, was moderated by Dr Mathew Mathews, Principal Research Fellow and Head of Social Lab at the Institute of Policy Studies. The speakers featured were Ms Chang Hwee Nee, Chief Executive Officer of the National Heritage Board, and Associate Professor Elaine Ho, Department of Geography at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore.

### **Opening Remarks by Ms Chang Hwee Nee**

Ms Chang Hwee Nee shared her insights on Singapore as a cosmopolitan space from a heritage perspective. She highlighted that while *cosmopolitanism* is commonly associated with modernity, progressiveness and seemingly the anti-thesis of heritage, it is also defined as having people from many different countries, who in turn influence culture. She suggested that cosmopolitanism is part of Singapore’s heritage, and heritage will continue to be vital in defining identity in the years ahead. She noted that myriad influences contribute to the Singapore identity, and shared that the challenge was in how heritage could continue to

strengthen identity without stifling development. She added that individuals have multiple identity markers as individuals and belong to different groups of society, and these differences may lead to tensions. Nevertheless, she recognised that these differences define our cosmopolitanism, and in turn, our heritage and collective identity.

By promoting the understanding of different cultures, the heritage sector aims to safeguard practices and expressions, while reinforcing pride in our identities and engendering intercultural understanding and harmony. Ms Chang shared, however, that the challenge was in achieving a fine balance between embracing differences and having a unified common identity. Ms Chang noted that our identity is an amalgamation of various influences over geography and time, and being a small young city-state has made it easier to understand one another's cultures because people live in close proximity. She shared that heritage and culture must continue to evolve to remain relevant, and that efforts are ongoing to involve the community on celebrating heritage.

### **Opening Remarks by Assoc Prof Elaine Ho**

Assoc Prof Elaine Ho offered her perspective on how migration trends have changed diversity in Singapore. While cosmopolitanism is associated with urban branding and space making, migration policy is also integral to Singapore's cosmopolitanism today. She noted that even though cosmopolitanism meant being open to diversity and accepting of differences, there lies a tension between being a global city where cultural differences are respected, and a nation state where it is important to maintain social cohesion through integration. She highlighted different sources of diversity in Singapore that contribute to the cosmopolitanism character of Singapore, such as immigration, emigration and international marriages.

Assoc Prof Ho suggested four interventions for discussions on cosmopolitanism in Singapore. First, Singapore will need to move beyond the "Singaporeans versus Others" dichotomy and acknowledge the other aspects of difference making. She added that there are social divisions among immigrants and polysemic immigrant hierarchies exist where immigrants draw on differences among themselves to assert superiority. Second, she felt that Singapore should continue to build and capitalise on social anchors in urban spaces for diverse groups, to enable Singaporeans and immigrants to establish footholds that can help to connect diverse identities, provide emotional security and foster integration. Third, she shared the need to move from thinking about integration as an achieved homogeneous condition to recognising that there is differentiated embeddedness where Singaporeans and immigrants can be embedded in social anchors at different times and ways. Lastly, she suggested treating remigration positively by mobilising the affinity diaspora, where remigrants become informal ambassadors when they migrate to another country.

### **Question & Answer**

When asked about the relevancy of CMIO categorisation in cosmopolitan Singapore and whether enough was being done to allow Singaporeans to accept the broader diversity in Singapore, the panellists maintained that the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) model remains relevant as a policy framework. Ms Chang shared that government agencies have been making efforts to promote understanding of cultures, and that more conversations on diversity would need to take place. Assoc Prof Ho shared that more attention could be given

to interactions happening organically on the ground, and to promote understanding through food. The panel also agreed that race and religion are closely related and one cannot be prioritised over the other when forging a cohesive cosmopolitan Singapore.

On the topic of Singapore's cosmopolitan identity, Ms Chang shared that Singapore has the ability to combine opposing elements, and that having a short history and nascent arts scene gives us an opportunity to innovate and progress. She said it is important to be forward-looking and to innovate, and efforts are being made to help traditional businesses digitalise. Assoc Prof Ho added that policymakers should be aware of the organic and spontaneous interactions happening on the ground which can help to foster deeper understanding among people, and stated that it was important to identify what brought people together. She shared that Singapore has a unique Asian cosmopolitanism, as Singapore blends different Asian cultures together while being comfortable with western ways of being.

When asked about the possible implications of removal of racist monuments in the West on Singapore, Ms Chang shared that it is important to respect history and recognise the ups and downs in our past and be confident with our own identity, in order to embrace diversity and our history. Assoc Prof Ho agreed, adding that history is subjective, and it was important to make clear different perspectives on monuments so that people can decide for themselves on their view on history.

Assoc Prof Ho also shared that people have been socialised to subscribe to a version of our national identity, and may not recognise that national identity continues to evolve with migration. Older cohorts of immigrants in Singapore strongly see themselves as Singaporean, and have stereotypes about newer immigrants. Hence, there is a form of difference making happening, and the challenge for Singapore is on how to accommodate multiple waves of identities as a nation in change.

The panel also agreed that beyond looking at common spaces, there could be more programmes to encourage Singaporeans to socialise with people of different groups and with migrants. They noted that it is important to have more ground-up initiatives and for people to take an interest to interact with different groups. In order to identify elements in the city's diverse tradition that value social cohesion and social well-being, the panel felt that there could be more dialogues with Singaporeans, and organic initiatives will be needed to foster connections across social differences, noting that these will require a whole of society effort.

The topic of how social media has changed the cosmopolitan space was also discussed. Assoc Prof Ho shared that the social media is a double-edged sword that enables greater connections but also allows for the perpetuation of negative stereotypes; it is a necessary evil. Ms Chang agreed and added that we will need to learn to live with social media in order to reach out to the youngest, even though social media can lead to echo chambers.

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