IPS Institute of Policy Studies

**Singapore Perspectives Conference 2022: City
Panel 3 — City: Who Belongs?**

By Fiona Phoa

Caption for photo: Dr Gillian Koh (left) and Ms Cindy Khoo (middle) and Associate Professor Ho Kong Chong (right) during the third panel of Singapore Perspectives 2022

The third panel of Singapore Perspectives 2022, "City: Who Belongs?*,* was moderated by Dr Gillian Koh, Deputy Director (Research) and Senior Research Fellow of the Institute of Policy Studies. The featured speakers were Ms Cindy Khoo, Deputy Secretary, Strategy Group, at the Prime Minister's Office, and Associate Professor Ho Kong Chong, Head of Urban Studies at Yale-NUS College and Associate Professor of Sociology at Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore. Dr Koh opened the session with an overview of the interaction and co-dependence between locals and foreigners and the diversity in Singapore, and asked how we could ensure that our political, social and cultural frameworks continue to help Singapore be a vibrant global city and a country that has generosity of spirit to maintain its fundamental identity as an open cosmopolitan city.

Opening Remarks by Ms Cindy Khoo

Ms Cindy Khoo identified three main components involved in national identity: shared values, sense of belonging, and the sense of commitment that comes with a sense of agency to make Singapore a better place and progress as a nation. She noted the need to refresh our identity as more foreigners convert to citizens or permanent residents. The texture of our society is also changing with transnational marriages and inter-ethnic marriages. She questioned what makes Singapore or Singaporean, and stated that national identity would be key in enabling

Singapore to tackle future challenges again. She talked about the presence of echo chambers, and elaborated on how people formed identities in real life and online and how it would affect the way we formed relationships, where the older generation and younger generation of digital natives would differ in the way they formed relationships and derived their identities. Given that people would have lives both online and in physical reality, she questioned how we could construct national identity with different boundaries.

She believed that lived experiences shape our sense of identity, and our reflections and choices affect our lived experiences, hence reinforcing our beliefs and norms. She shared how the government could enable this process to happen on a collective level by setting basic standards, creating an enabling environment for positive lived experiences by providing opportunities for mixing to build a sense of belonging, reinforcing a sense of commitment to contribute to nation-building, and allowing shared values to evolve.

Opening Remarks by Associate Professor Ho Kong Chong

Assoc Prof Ho began his remarks by sharing on the importance of the neighbourhood in fostering a sense of belonging. Neighbourhoods provide social spaces for new citizens or residents to develop local loyalties and attachments, and create a sense of identity, security and stability. He also believed that citizenship needs to be an actor on a regular basis. He stated that governmental belonging begins when citizens co-create and participate, and argued that there were existing opportunities where citizens could contribute at the grassroots level. He also explained the concept of a "everyday nation", which comes from the everyday routines we enjoy, such as eating at a hawker centre, which form a common platform for people to identify with. He also shared the importance of the senses in the neighbourhood, where people are able to develop place belonging without interacting with neighbours as there are many things, which may appeal to people in the neighbourhood.

Assoc Prof Ho also shared some challenges that Singapore faced. He felt that the idea of belonging was an oppressive expectation and an imposition if this issue was continually harped on. He added that people do love the city for its diversity, which gives freedom to the people. He said that when thinking about belonging, we would need to consider freedom, which is the other side of belonging. Hence, while the idea of belonging is important, it is also a challenge. He mentioned that existing practices brought over from overseas by new citizens or permanent residents would run into conflict with local practices and such conflicts could be negotiated, but he also asked how resident networks could help bridge practices. He shared his concern about having a proportion of the population living in private housing, where people would choose to live near their own communities and could result in concentrations of groups due to effective market mechanism. He also pointed to the increasing diversity in Singapore as a challenge. He suggested having private housing that are not gated, and allowing more mixing of people in rental housing by opening the criteria to own rental housing to other groups of people such as singles.

Question & Answer

The panellists discussed the necessity of the concept on belonging, defining national identity, the influence of social media and how to adapt to it, the effectiveness of neighbourhoods for

interaction and building a collective identity, and when Singapore would be able to move past labels to accept that identities are porous and fluid.

Referencing what Ms Khoo mentioned on the importance of developing a sense of national identity because we are a city state and country and what Assoc Prof Ho mentioned about the concept of belonging as being oppressive, Dr Koh asked the panel whether the concept of belonging was necessary when we talked about Singapore as a city-state and country. Ms Khoo said Assoc Prof Ho's comment was a sound reminder that sense of belonging and identity is a multi-textured concept, adding that valuing diversity could be a shared value and questioned how that could be engendered. Assoc Prof Ho commented that there are different ways in which identity and belonging are built, but a narrative of belonging would run against the reason why people are attracted to cities in the first place. The ideas of belonging and freedom are important.

On the topic of migrant workers and who gets to define our national identity, Ms Khoo shared that the rationale behind granting citizenship/permanent resident status to foreigners was based on numbers, and foreigners would need to spend some time in Singapore, contribute and form relationships with Singaporeans. She shared that while the door was not closed, it boiled down to the question of how much space Singaporeans are able to make emotionally, psychologically and socially, and how accommodating Singaporeans want to be. It could be a part of our identity to accept that people can come and leave.

Assoc Prof Ho commented that there were preconceived notions of what it means to be Chinese among Chinese migrants. He added that the process of being Singaporean was more fluid and conversations would continue to evolve. It was difficult to define what it means to be Singaporean because it would continue to evolve as the demography of the population changes.

Responding to questions on changes in national identity, Ms Khoo said that our lived experiences and everything we love about Singapore would need to go through a process of reflection — to determine what makes them Singaporean and would reflect our shared values, such as how Singlish and hawker culture reflect us living with efficiency and embracing diversity. She said that national identity was not shaped top-down, and Singaporeans should participate and be part of the conversation in shaping national identity. On top of lived experiences and things we have in common, Assoc Prof Ho added that participation was important as that was the basis for governmental belonging and citizenship. He stated that it was insufficient to have a common set of elements, and there must be an attempt to contribute, initiate and participate.

A few questions on adapting to the digital sphere were posed to the panel. Ms Khoo replied that while guardrails could be established to deal with the occurrence of echo chambers and promote standards on online behaviours, they would not create bridging across communities and enabling people to move out of their comfort zones to have constructive conversations to find commonalities. She added that the topic of national identity was challenging because real change happens at a micro level, which is very hard to intervene and requires individuals to reach out to form relationships. What was key was how much experiences happening online would translate to how people behave in the real world and she suggested enabling behaviours which appear online to appear offline as well to create consistency in terms of

identity and sense of belonging. She also added that for seniors who were less comfortable with using online technologies, the question went beyond their sense of identity, but would also include whether they were able to live a comfortable life given that many services were going online. Assoc Prof Ho added that authenticity was valued by younger people because of how interactions were now online, and suggested that there were ways to build the kind of society we envision through the use of social media to create conversations.

When asked about the effectiveness of neighbourhoods today in promoting interaction and building a collective identity, Assoc Prof Ho shared about the minimal neighbourhood model which would be more applicable for Singapore, where solidarities could be built through amenities, creating opportunities to meet neighbours and to participate at the neighbourhood level. Ms Khoo added that there are no boundaries when it comes to the neighbourhood, and people are able to participate in other neighbourhoods through their online channels. She added that neighbourliness could be built before physical spaces are ready, and gave the example of Build-To-Order (BTO) Telegram groups, where homeowners could interact before their apartments were ready.

The next question was about when Singapore would be able to move pass labels such as Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) in order to accept that identities are more porous and fluid. Assoc Prof Ho shared that identity was already fluid and porous, and diversities would be even greater moving forward. He added that the challenge was in developing a strategy that insists on common things that people agree on with regard to identity and belonging, and be flexible enough to adapt because our society is changing quickly. Ms Khoo shared that labels do not equate with identity. While certain groups might not fit neatly into these CMIO categories, she added that for a sizeable proportion of people, they were able to fall into the CMIO boxes, and shared that race was an important identifier when people formed their sense of identity. Ms Khoo further commented that labels allowed policymakers to administer policies to manage differences. Assoc Prof Ho shared that Singaporeans were "same same but different", and people drew their identities from commonalities and differences as an ethnic community. He suggested that we could look at governmental belonging where citizenship needs to be experienced, and focus on participation, bridging and understanding.

When asked about whether the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) was effective and served to create harmony, Assoc Prof Ho stated that the EIP was meant to be inclusive but could be made to be more inclusive. Ms Khoo shared that EIP would become irrelevant when enclaves do not naturally form in the absence of this policy, and the fact that there were applications that were still getting rejected today meant that there was still a tendency for people to congregate in their communities — and this may not promote cohesion and shared lived experiences in the neighbourhood. The EIP would help to build shared lived experiences for the people in the neighbourhood after they get their flat and build the community in the long run.

In closing, Assoc Prof Ho shared that citizenship matters and there was a lot of stakeholding involved in citizenship. He added that citizenship had to be experienced and the idea of participation and contribution would continue. Ms Khoo reiterated that citizenship was not taken lightly in Singapore. She said that citizens would be able to advocate for citizenship for

foreigners staying here, and it was up to citizens to do something about it if the outreach in order to be more inclusive was inadequate.

Fiona Phoa is a Research Assistant at the IPS Social Lab.

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