



Singapore Perspectives 2025 Panel 3: Community and the Polity

By Faseehudeen

Background

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) held its annual flagship Singapore Perspectives conference on 20 January 2025.

The conference theme was “Community”, recognising that the world today is being pulled apart by political polarisation, economic fragmentation and a myriad other disruptive forces. As 2025 is also the 60th year of Singapore’s independence, the conference challenged Singaporeans to ask: what might bind us more strongly together as a people and a nation as we confront these challenges?

The third panel of the conference, titled “Community and the Polity”, addressed how Singaporeans can find common ground while understanding and respecting the growing diversity of beliefs, viewpoints and values in society. As new groups of identities emerge, how can an inclusive and nurturing sense of community be fostered across people with different beliefs and how can politics driven by clashing identities be avoided?

Before the discussion, a video about two organisations was screened: the Centre for Interfaith Understanding (CIFU) and Don’t Say Ok, Kanmani (DSOK). CIFU seeks to embolden empathy through genuine dialogue and engagement, and serve as an inspiration to the larger society. DSOK enables close ties amongst South Asian women to share through the platform it provides them.

This panel featured Assoc Prof Daniel Goh from the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore; Mr Chng

Kai Fong, Permanent Secretary (Information and Development) for the Ministry of Digital Development and Information; and Ms Yulianna Frederika, founder of Lepak Conversations. The panel was moderated by Mr Laurence Lien, Chairman of Lien Foundation.



Caption for photo: (From right to left) Discussion among Ms Yulianna Fredrika, Mr Chng Kai Fong, Assoc Prof Daniel Goh and Mr Laurence Lien.

Holding onto Multiculturalism: Superdiversity in Singapore

Assoc Prof Daniel Goh described emerging ideas on race and culture in the world today. One such concept — superdiversity — is becoming popular in academic discussions. It refers to diversity that is hyperdynamic, such that racial and ethnic groups are no longer concrete or cohesive groups. The concept of superdiversity has garnered attention across the world, especially in Europe; this is because superdiversity is deemed to better reflect current realities as compared to the older concept of multiculturalism.

While superdiversity could be a useful concept to explain changes in Singapore’s social realities, to use this concept meaningfully, he said we must first translate the concept to our local context. In Singapore today, there are shifting multiculturalism trends such as growing cross-ethnic and cross-national marriages; immigration; internationalisation of work and culture; a greater marketplace approach to religion and spirituality; and modern mother tongue language policies.

In Singapore’s context, superdiversity is translated as the emergence of “super-new” cultural identities and practices. These practices are linked to new migrants of economic globalisation mixing, with and within not-so-new/old ethnic nationalisation of past colonial racial classifications and ideology. In short, superdiversity in Singapore is expressed through

layering and diversification across and within the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) grid. Identities are also becoming more fluid, flexible, formative and fungible. For instance, the notion of being Chinese could mean hailing from China, the Chinese language, ethnic identities and cultural practices. In addition, when we exchange stories, our personal narratives shift according to circumstances and how we relate to one another.

Superdiversity implies that to understand one another, we need to go beyond the politics of representation and recognition. For many, the CMIO grid is no longer a primary mode of identification and recognition. Instead, it is a “legacy” frame of reference that Singaporeans layer upon to interpret current social realities. Superdiversity also mean that we must allow for pluralities and multiplicities, where people are represented in many different groups, and many are represented within these groups. These groups often intersect and overlap with one another. Assoc Prof Goh also noted that inclusivity is possible when there is common ground.

In this fluid context, it is important to understand the mechanics of superdiversity, he added; for instance, in observing and questioning how groups include and exclude, and its implications for doing so. For instance, there is a need for more spaces to allow the articulation and listening with the purpose of finding common ground. One way to do so is through story telling by both Singapore’s institutions (such as museums and the state), and everyday Singaporeans. This creates space for people to find common ground in personal life histories. If no common ground can be found, said Assoc Prof Goh, another tactic is to listen and hold on to multiculturalism as the Singapore way.

Superdiversity has three key implications for policy and civil society. First, we must recognise that culture is not one of belonging, i.e., a person belonging to a cultural ethnicity, religion or race. Instead, culture is a process — an everchanging process of becoming. Second, we have to think about affective citizenship, where citizenship is made up of a cluster of emotions. Third, we must see inclusion as a continuous work of progress, rather than an achievement.

Individual Efforts to Build Social Capital

Mr Chng Kai Fong asserted that social capital and social networks are important because they have value. He explained that social networks enable a sense of generalised reciprocity. This refers to mutual trust being established and people in the community coming forth to help their connections.

Mr Chng differentiates between bonding social capital (which is formed with people similar to oneself in some way) and bridging social capital (which is formed across different group identities). He clarifies that while bonding social capital showcases where one is comfortable, bridging them presents opportunities to connect different people.

On the different dimensions of social capital, Mr Chng used the metaphors of the choir and the village. He likened the experience of going to a gym to that of being part of a “village”. Mr Chng also referenced Robert Putnam’s work, *Making Democracy*. He described how Putnam had chanced upon a choir in Italy, which led him to identify associations — such as clubs, memberships, networks of social and civic engagement — as the key to making governance succeed. Moreover, social capital is identified as a leading indicator of success, where more social capital points to success, instead of vice versa. Focusing on the here and now, Mr Chng said there are concerning statistics about Singaporeans being lonelier today. For instance, food delivery orders and takeaways have increased, suggesting that fewer people are eating in the “village”. Mr Chng wondered if Singaporeans were joining and engaged in the “choir”, e.g., local platforms and clubs.

Next, Mr Chng referenced Derek Thompson's idea of the village. The village represents the social milieu in-between one's immediate nuclear family and the people who share our interests (i.e., our tribe). Between our nuclear family and our tribes, our connections with one another have gotten stronger. We are better connected to our closest loved ones and distant tribe members through technology, such as telecommunications, the internet and social media. However, we are missing the link to those familiar people who live around us in the neighbourhood, which is the village. Mr Chng explained that families teach us love, while tribes teach us loyalty and the village teaches us tolerance. This is because the village is where we are physically close to each other. Hence, we can expect many future social transactions. In this context, people would remain civil, even if they disagree.

Mr Chng emphasised the importance of the civic mindedness of the village, such as knowing one another's names and making small talk. Here, he highlighted efforts like FriendZone and the Singapore Conversation, which have brought people together to talk. He also shared how spontaneous events like Halloween are bringing the neighbourhood together and enhancing relationships in the village.

Last, Mr Chng talked about his experience at a neighbourhood gym. A community was built around the gym members, done intentionally by the gym owners who made it a point to have gym staff greet all members by name and celebrate events like birthday celebrations and gift exchanges. Gradually, the gym became a "village" space.

To conclude, Mr Chng described how social capital can be built deliberately. He noted that we first need to rethink measurements of social capital. We should move away from economic efficiency and scale, and instead measure "village"—enhancing qualities — such as how many volunteers from the neighbourhood were engaged in an initiative and perhaps, and how many beneficiaries eventually became volunteers. He added that the internet should be used with intention, to enhance the physical and provide village spaces.

Mr Chng also noted that Forward Singapore has had a strong focus on social capital. The focus is about working together and helping one another out. Singapore has to make a determined effort to build social capital. He challenged Singaporeans to join a neighbourhood club, noting that more will be interested once someone makes the first move; and that the key to forming a community is not asking the government to do more, but in the effort that every individual takes.

Uniting Through Values

Ms Yuliana explained that Lepak Conversations started as an Instagram account, with posts educating the public about Malay-Muslims issues in Singapore. At the time, she felt there was an absence of such content online, even though there was a need for young people to talk about these issues. As Lepak Conversations grew, she felt that young people wanted offline engagements as well. Hence, Lepak Conversations began organising community events in-person, by collaborating with other organisations and the government.

At these events, the conversations are moderated with a stated terms and conditions, enabling strangers to discuss social issues online and offline respectfully. This is because the motivation behind Ms Yuliana's work is her belief that empathy is the start of social change. She urged communities to unite around values, instead of identities, where allyship is embraced as a core value. Although the organisation primarily advocates for the Malay Muslim community, they intentionally include non-Malay/Muslims in their events. Ms Yuliana said that

through allyship, minority voices can be amplified and advocated. Furthermore, she noted that allyship enables the exchange of knowledge and wisdom. One way allyship is encouraged is through language. For instance, in the materials advertising an event on Malay men's mental health, women were intentionally mentioned to recognised how they are allies for men. Ms Yuliana asserted that it is important to think about those who were not in the room, and to include the invisible, excluded and forgotten.

This has the added benefit of preventing echo chambers from forming. When Lepak Conversations bring people together, they also leave room for adjustment to what the community needs. For instance, when organising the event on Malay men's mental health, they had not expected to explore religious perspectives on mental health; however, because the participants were interested, this was subsequently accommodated.

Ms Yuliana reminded the audience that just because we are in a multireligious and multiracial society, we cannot assume that everyone has the skills to be inclusive and share their views constructively. To address this gap, Lepak Conversations welcomes diverse views, while also facilitating learning by being open and welcoming to all. For instance, for Lepak Conversations' Gaza Monologues event, they had encouraged people-to-people conversations and discussed ways to bridge the communication gap between the state and people. She expressed her gratefulness that the government was open to collaborating with Lepak Conversations. Finally, Ms Yuliana emphasised the importance of being willing to learn from mistakes, take risks and be willing to try new things in Singapore.

Question-and-Answer Session

Q: We accept the need to listen and to understand one another, to build bridging social capital, but politics is about finding consensus and co-designing real solutions — talking about the big issues that count. So how do the tactics and strategies you have described roll up to the co-creation of solutions for the future of Singapore?

Mr Chng said that everyone, including the government, has a part to play to understand the areas that require more engagement. He recalled his experience with having to give an audience classification of Disney's *Lightyear* amid the 377A repeal. The film depicted a homosexual scene, and this was against the guidelines at that time. Mr Chng engaged active advocates from the LGBTQ+ community, as well as religious leaders. There were two different views: the LGBTQ+ community felt that a PG-13 rating was suitable as art should lead society to depict what was possible, while religious groups felt that an M-18 rating was suitable as the homosexual scene would promote or normalise behaviour.

IMDA eventually took a middle path and went with an NC16 rating. However, Mr Chng wondered if it would have been better to bring LGBTQ+ advocates and religious leaders together to have a discussion, instead of engaging with them separately. Mr Chng thinks that there's potential to build more social capital from bridging groups with different views together.

Assoc Prof Goh shared his experience at NUS College. He explained that NUS college had wanted to teach critical thinking in a more grounded fashion, where it was infused in the real world. He noted that a lot of university students have limited real-world experiences. Hence, he began by connecting university students in interdisciplinary teams. On learning journeys overseas, the students were faced with superdiversity directly. There, they confronted real-life problems where people did not agree with one another nor have common ground. Thus, students had to focus on the situation to bring communities together, ask difficult questions, experiment and try different ideas. Assoc Prof Goh gave this example to articulate that trying

different solutions is important. He noted that in Singapore, we often think of solutions directly. He suggested that we be less risk-averse and try different things. This way, failure itself can become a common ground.

Ms Yulianna added that when people from marginalised communities are included in civic engagement between the state and communities, there needs to be a level of trust and acknowledgment that their considerations are taken seriously. She added that Mr Chng's example of LGBTQ+ and religious groups began with identities. Drawing from her presentation, she suggested that if common values could be established it would have been possible to connect both groups.

Q: On social media, people often self-select their echo chambers, which reinforce their beliefs and values. What role should the state play, if any, in reducing the negative effects of digital fragmentation?

Mr Chng said this is why the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) is used to combat misinformation and disinformation. However, he asserted the POFMA is insufficient since Facebook's content moderation is going to become less stringent, and different platforms and their algorithms carry different values. Singapore, as an open society, can be influenced by these ideas. But all is not lost as we can use the internet to benefit, and it is alloyed with local news and government channels. Ultimately, Singaporeans trust the government and mainstream media, and we have physical connections due to our living closely with one another; and this means that we have various sources of information, he added. He shared that his role is to ensure that the government can reach out to as many people as possible using all means available (for instance, TVs at HDB buildings), including the niche and forgotten populations, to combat misinformation and articulate a shared consensus on what our values are and what we stand for.

Q: Short of policies, how can the community step up, to bond and bridge social capital? If we consider schools to be part of the community, then we must understand there's inequalities among schools.

A: Ms Yuliana shared her experience of joining Malay-Muslim Mutual Benefit legacy groups. She was surprised by the sense of community she gained by joining the chapter in her neighbourhood. Hence, there might not be a need to reinvent the wheel; instead we could work with engaging legacy communities, she said. She added that this builds on the wisdom of continuing traditions.

Assoc Prof Goh said that the interaction between schools and their neighbourhood is important, as schools actively going out into their community will moderate inequalities. He said the government should take note of the importance of how schools are located, because good schools have somehow become concentrated in certain areas; and if these can be spread out, a space of inclusion can be created. Here, he referred to how HDB and URA have been effectively mixing various types of housing, to prevent exclusion and ghettos, and mentioned that school locations need to follow suit. He said that schools have taken an active role in reaching out to the neighbourhood, citing Catholic High School where his son had been involved in newspaper collections for a charity. Assoc Prof Goh said more needs to be done, and these efforts that students take pride in participating are a start and should be encouraged.

Mr Chng said he was encouraged by the efforts of ground-up initiatives, like Lepak Conversations and social running clubs on Instagram. A challenge he anticipates is in measuring the rate at which the initiatives are happening. He added that the government has

to reflect on whether the platforms put the community first, since the prevailing thinking is to attract people first before connecting; but perhaps this can be flipped. By connecting first, it could broaden the parameters of who is being attracted to take part in communities.

Q: With regard to social solidarity and social capital, what is the role of the youth? What would be your ideal outlook on youth being involved in a community?

A: Ms Yulianna said that youth can join one of the many existing ground-up initiatives. These initiatives often have a strong social media presence, and it can start simply as mutual aid and fundraising among friends for causes that they care about. The National Youth Council has done a good job of reaching out to youths and providing funding. She shared that what she found most valuable was seeking out seasoned activists as mentors, and tapping their wisdom and learning their approaches and practices, to attain information not readily available. She added that the ideal outlook of youth being involved to her is embodied in the name of “Lepak Conversations”, since it can start simply through talking with friends. She simply started sharing on Instagram about the news, and eventually, that led to her becoming an activist and starting Lepak Conversations, and now partnering with the government and other organisations.

Assoc Prof Goh noted that while the youth have energy and new ideas, and push the frontiers, he hoped that they will not forget the elders, but to bring them along. Using himself as an example, he added that, as he ages, he may not always be open, but he would also want to be involved. Here, he described how NUS College students created a charity impact project that has brought in the elderly who hang out at HDB void decks to meet manpower needs. He shared that there was palpable excitement among the elderly in being involved and doing something for the community.

Mr Chng agreed with Assoc Prof Goh and added that the elderly are good at pointing out if something is wrong. He adds that those who are middle-aged might be less interested and willing to engage with others, unlike the youth, who are interested in working out messages and policies. He referred to Putnam’s work about the upswing in the 1960s for political and civic engagement in the United States, where youths and progressives brought on a cultural wave and movement. He believed youth can play a similar role in Forward Singapore.

Q: In a superdiverse Singapore, what is the role of national history in building common ground and social capital, facilitating inclusive conversations and finding common values? How should we think of national history? What is the role of the state and our various communities?

Mr Chng asserted that the government has a role to play, as it tries to catch our history at various places, to get Singaporeans to understand their shared beginnings. For example, the Singapore Bicentennial exhibition did not just feature the British, it also featured a vibrant Singapore with Sang Nila Utama and connected it to our values today. Other examples include the SG50 celebrations and the upcoming Founders Memorial. He added that our individual histories are also important in connecting us.

Q: Ethnic-based associations, such as CDAC, MENDAKI, SINDA and the Eurasian Association have historically played significant roles in supporting their respective communities in Singapore. However, as Singapore becomes increasingly “superdiverse”, what does the future hold for these organisations? Will they evolve to remain relevant, or risk becoming less significant over time?

Mr Chng said these organisations were not irrelevant because they enable bonding social capital, by providing a safe space for shared interests and concerns. The danger, however, is exclusiveness. The test is whether these communities are exclusive, if their activities centre only bonding capital, or if they are also investing in bridging capital. The Inter-Religious Organisations in Singapore is a classic example of interlocking and weaving networks that are built upon religious organisations.

Assoc Prof Goh noted that these organisations have evolved a lot, and explored new avenues to keep themselves relevant and engage their communities. Superdiversity is not replacing diversity and multiculturalism; these are still relevant and superdiversity is layered on top of it. He added that we should not go down the route of declaring multiculturalism as dead and throw it out; instead, we should rethink and evolve it.

Ms Yulianna asserted that there are social and structural issues that self-help groups like MENDAKI to continue their legacy of connecting the state and people. She added that these ethnic-based associations have relevance even in policy. For example, the solution for climate change seems to be general and focused on corporations. However, she questioned how the state was reaching out to ethnic groups on this issue, and whether it was using culture-specific solutions, given that Malays in the past have had a history of sustainable practices prior to urban living. Placing importance on ethnic-based associates at the national and policy level can connect people to their historical and cultural knowledge; and without it, one does not see the relevance of these ethnic-based associations.

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