

50 Ways to Celebrate 50 years of Singapore

Nur Asyiqin Mohamad Salleh

Straits Times, 9 August 2014

One nation, many parties. No, we're not talking about Singapore's possible future political landscape.

Instead, The Straits Times comes up with 50 ways to mark Singapore turning 50 next year, canvassing people from Pioneer to Pasir Ris for their suggestions.

These vary from a rash of bashes, to naming a baby "Singapore", to hoping for a \$500 hongbao.

Whether serious, irreverent or hilarious, they produce an interesting snapshot of a country soon to turn 50 - and offer a look at the very people who make it tick.

Insight also speaks to experts, such as sociologists, about what these wishes mean in terms of national identity.

You might say, "Wait, we're not yet 50. We're turning 49 today". But for milestone-embracing, "hub for everything" Singapore, why look back at the past 49 years when you can look ahead to the Big 50?

The country is already gearing up, with an SG50 committee and a slew of celebrations lined up.

But Singaporeans are finding their own ways to mark the occasion.

Sure, ST was confronted at times with blank stares. Hands went up over faces. "Celebrate for what?" Shoulders shrugged. "I'm going overseas lah. Long weekend."

This is the Singapore many sigh about: cold, distant, dispassionate.

But the flip side - warm, witty, chatty Singaporeans - is not hard to find. From void decks to Raffles Place; stern-faced senior citizens to Facebook-ing youth; even those caught mid-meal, head dipped, sipping a gooey mess of soft-boiled eggs at a hawker centre - they were happy to share their ideas.

These tell stories about national identity; the persisting desire for money and freebies ("We can't lose our kiasu spirit. That's why we progressed so fast," says 52-year-old Ang C.K.); and a yearning for the nostalgic - laid-back "kampung days" and vanished landmarks.

The range of ideas defies stereotypes. National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser says: "There's a lot of creative energy in Singapore, though some people's image of Singaporeans is that they are conformist, play safe, and prefer to have some structure."

These ideas show a combination of "nostalgia, patriotism and instrumental orientation". **Some people, he explains, still see their ties to the nation in "instrumental terms": "What value can I get for being a citizen?"**

But Dr Tan adds: "I believe there is a reasonably strong sense of national identity - who we are as a people. The influx of foreigners has paradoxically enhanced Singaporeans' consciousness of who they are as a nation and people."

There is also growing awareness among Singaporeans that they are not "customers" but members of a national community who "have a role to play to make ours a great nation", spurring organic, ground-up efforts, he says.

Speaker of Parliament Halimah Yacob, a member of the SG50 steering committee, says such efforts should buoy Singapore's 50th birthday.

"It's not a top-down approach. We want it to be a bottom-up process. We want people to feel a sense of belonging, ownership and pride, and celebrate it in their own way," she explains.

"It should be about the community taking ownership. These ideas are what we want to see. Spontaneity, that's what really adds the sparkle."

The ideas suggest Singaporeans do not take Aug 9 as "just another public holiday", says sociologist Paulin Straughan.

"They see the social significance attached to celebrating our nation's Independence, and the activities suggest unique ways of celebrating 'home'."