

Many personal stories, one Singapore identity

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The Singapore identity can be based on diversity, yet be cohesive, says Ho Kwon Ping, who is the first Institute of Policy Studies S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore. This essay is based on his fifth and final lecture on Singapore: The Next 50 Years - Society And Identity, delivered on April 9. An essay based on Part 1 of the lecture was published last Friday, on the Singapore Dream and aspirations.

History comprises both the universally experienced, historically momentous events and the small, personal milestones of each person. In this way, SG50 is a special year of meaning for me because while we collectively commemorate Singapore's 50 years of independence and simultaneously mourn the death of the first and last of our founding fathers Lee Kuan Yew, I shall also celebrate the arrival of my first grandchild.

Such is the cycle of life, of persons dying and babies being born.

My grandson due next month, and who will be 50 when Singapore celebrates its 100th anniversary, can only say he was born a few months after Mr Lee passed away. But even for my children, who are young adults, Mr Lee was always more a legend than a real person. Few young people today have ever known him other than as the textbook father of independent Singapore. My eldest son's only memory of Mr Lee was when he and his wife visited my family on the funeral of my father, some 16 years ago when Ren Hua was only a teenager and Mr Lee was already 75 years old.

When I was detained by Mr Lee under the Internal Security Act, I was only 24 and he was already 53 years old - in his fearsome, intimidating prime.

When I joined the board of GIC, which he chaired, I was 44 and he was 72; when he inaugurated the Singapore Management University's Ho Rih Hwa Lecture series, named after my father, I was 50 and he was nearing 80.

Such is the age gap that most of the people who worked with him have passed on and those who worked directly under him have long retired. To the extent that in our initial years Singapore was almost synonymous with Mr Lee Kuan Yew, he defined our national identity and we looked towards him for signals on how to behave, to think, to view ourselves.

He said rugged society, and that was our identity during my generation's youth. As nation-building gained traction and we started to embrace ourselves as a people, a society, and a nation, we started to experiment with our own personal markers of identity. Today, I daresay, Singapore comprises multiple identities.

Identities in creation

WE COMMONLY describe a national identity as something constructed from tangible markers such as Singlish or durian or chicken rice, or intangible values such as pragmatism or tolerance, or whatever. If we put that all together to sculpt a single, proverbial Merlion identity,

it will be iconic and recognisable more to foreigners than to us. This is because identity is not a static snapshot of a people, frozen in time.

It is a continual and never-ending work in progress of an evolving people. Our identity may have started more as a rojak salad than as an artificial Merlion but over time even the rojak salad will evolve further, with new and unusual ingredients, while the Merlion remains an unnatural and static animal.

Identity is what you are attached to, what you would fight for, what you care about. In a previous lecture, I proposed that we develop a uniquely Singaporean human development index which would measure our overall "well-being", besides only having GDP as an indicator. These intangible markers, which measure our progress as a nation, will in part also form our identity, because it will give heft and weight and shape to what we value. We should put in place a framework for this fluid discussion to take place, to be mapped and to be expressed.

While Singapore's identity is rooted in its immigrant heritage, and that openness should always be a cornerstone of our sense of self and underpin our receptivity towards those from other cultures, we should not feel lost if we are not able to define a single common identity.

We are all identities in creation, and the end result will not be uniform. Instead, by sharing stories of who we are, we find resonance with each other. These collective stories can kindle a sense of "being Singaporean", even if we cannot articulate or pin down specifics.

Sharing personal stories

AND so I would like to close not by defining the Singapore identity but by simply sharing with you my personal journey as a migrant to these shores. My father was a fourth-generation Singaporean, with his forefathers working as boat builders in Tanjong Rhu. They built the tongkangs or deep-bottomed bumboats and barges which ferried goods and people between Singapore and the hundreds of ships which made Singapore the pre-eminent port in Asia since several hundred years ago.

But I was not born here, neither did I study nor live here. I received my naturalised citizenship by a technicality - because my father was Ambassador of Singapore to Thailand and our home since childhood became, technically, sovereign Singapore territory.

So for several years as a teenager I raised the flag every morning at our hastily erected flagpole on technically Singapore soil, and eventually I qualified to be a citizen. But my first extended stay in Singapore, for more than a week or so at a time, was at the age of 20 when I came here for national service. Not ever having lived here, I wanted to see what it was like to be a Singaporean.

During NS I was taunted by some as *jiak kan tan* which means "eat potato" and is a derogatory term for someone who has lost his roots and apes the West - much like a banana in Asian-American slang. Though I can do a decent Singlish by now, my natural accent is between English and American, and my Mandarin has no dialect overtones.

Although I studied at Taiwanese and American universities, I finally graduated from Singapore University. So what is my identity? I'm not sure; and I will always remember that Mr Lee Kuan Yew once told me to my face that the only smart thing I ever did was to marry a Singaporean - because he was wise to know that through Claire, I would find a sense of home.

I have lived and worked in this country since 1972: altogether 43 years. I met my wife here, my children were all born and grew up here. My simple answer as to why I chose to live and put down my roots here, is that here I do not feel like a stranger.

In Thailand where I spent my childhood, I spoke Thai but was always an outsider. In Taiwan and in America, I learnt much and made good friends, but I was a stranger in a strange land.

However, Singapore's multitude of races and cultures made me feel no longer alien. Perhaps that is also what makes other new migrants decide to settle in Singapore - the fact that they could create their own identities here.

An openness and acceptance of foreigners - and indeed, of other Singaporeans who may be different from the mainstream in various ways - can perhaps become a defining characteristic of our identity. We can create our own identities even as we inherit certain common characteristics.

Singapore is my home because whoever I was, or am now, or want to be, I feel I can be that person here.

However, this statement of pride is not universal. I am fortunate because I am a privileged, Chinese, heterosexual, male businessman. Can other persons, whose music is the silent spaces between the notes, also believe what I just said, so that we can honestly declare that cohesive diversity - this delightful oxymoron - is the unique marker of the Singapore identity? For the sake of the next 50 years, I fervently hope that we can, and will.

In the next 50 years - the Singapore after Mr Lee Kuan Yew - the line between leader and follower will start to blur; we will not just be disciplined and unquestioning followers. Our leaders will walk among and not ahead of us; they will be part of, and not simply lead, the national conversation. Other people may march to their own drumbeat and at their own pace. We may look, from the outside, to be less orderly and consensual than in the past.

After all, civil society is not a disciplined army; it is not an organised orchestra producing the soothing melodies of a lovely symphony. It is a loud cacophony of voices, of disorganised aspirations, of an exciting marketplace of ideas.

But I certainly hope that what will never change from one generation to another is the passion to make this country continue to succeed, to be proud of who we have been, are, and will be, and to revel in the cohesive diversity that makes us all Singaporeans - whatever that word means to each of us.

The 13th century Persian poet Rumi once wrote something which should speak to each of us. He wrote: "You are not a drop in the ocean. You are the entire ocean, in a drop."

In other words, you and I are not cogs in a machine, or grains of sand, or drops in the ocean. In each of us is the whole of Singapore. Each of us represents the collective identities and histories which make up our ocean and on which we shall continue our journey together.