

Sink the old sampan, S'pore now a cruise ship

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At a recent seminar on what Singapore and Switzerland can learn from each other, the focus turned to the "secret ingredients" of global success for these two small states.

The event, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and Avenir Suisse, a Swiss think-tank, produced interesting metaphors capturing the national psyches of the two countries.

The Swiss think of their country as a hedgehog - an idea that influences especially defence and foreign relations. It was forged around World War II, when Switzerland was surrounded by unfriendly nations, including Nazi Germany. Like a hedgehog, Switzerland can hunker down and show its spikes against potential enemies. No equivalent national metaphor, it seems, relates to global business.

For Singapore, national metaphors of the past have been mostly maritime.

During the two previous administrations under former prime ministers Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong, Singapore was often described as a sampan, all too easily tossed about by the waves of global competition. At the other end of the scale of vessels, the United States has been compared to an aircraft carrier, and Britain, a supertanker.

Over the years, metaphors involving Singapore's small size and vulnerability have persisted. As Singapore became better resourced, it was also compared to a motorised canoe, sailboat, speedboat, yacht and ferry.

Under the current administration of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, no prominent use has been made of similar watercraft imagery. But if we were to continue the tradition of seafaring national metaphors, what would Singapore be today? To float just one proposal, might Singapore have become a small "cruise ship"?

Of course, one should never over-analyse a metaphor. But if you think about it, Singapore now carries aboard some of the main elements of such a vessel.

Singaporeans make up the bulk of passengers, just as domestic travel is the mainstay of most cruises. They are also a vital part of the cruise management and crew.

Like on a cruise, "different pathways" offer quality of life for everyone, from round-the-world voyages to weekend cruises to nowhere, from private balconies to rooms without portholes. You can book a table for fine dining, or join the sumptuous buffet line.

Lifelong learning is provided for - on board with expert talks and educational shore excursions.

For entertainment, there are the integrated resorts, Formula One, World Gourmet Summit and ZoukOut.

Some people think cruise ships are all lazy fun. But, in fact, cruising is a well-oiled business with precise planning and untiring hard work behind the scenes, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This is true from the engine room and kitchen to cargo handling and business development. Cutting-edge radar and other technology must be maintained. Some cruises, such as to the Galapagos Islands, also offer serious nature study.

Above all, cruises offer the smoothest journeys - this is all down to trust in the reliability of the craft and the capabilities of a captain who will avoid hazards along the way and navigate safely into port. Satellite Wi-Fi offers connections to the world. And when the passengers feel secure, they can relax.

Even topical socio-political concerns fit the cruise metaphor. The more limited imagery of a sampan has little room for the weak. But, catering for an inclusive society, a cruise ship has a sick bay and duty medical personnel, and activities for the disabled, seniors and children.

Amid a competitive travel industry, demand for good management and service becomes more assertive. Like Singapore's multiculturalism, a cruise ship's crew and clientele are cosmopolitan; always hiring, always welcoming more passengers - within the carrying capacity, of course.

As for the present worry about social safety nets, this, too, has its parallel. Once past the welcome party in Hawaiian shirts, some passengers check if there are enough lifeboats.

Indeed, the Singapore ship can be said to have even grown into a cruise line with a global brand. Its extensive resources and connections include international networks such as free trade agreements, national reserves and individual savings, and sovereign wealth funds invested globally. There are also Singapore companies and organisations expanding overseas (smaller "ships" flying the Singapore flag), a diaspora which relishes chicken rice on Singapore Day, and all the assets global investors have berthed in Singapore.

Whether you prefer another vessel, or another metaphor altogether, can be debated over cocktails or kopi-C at sundown. But some old metaphors might no longer be seaworthy.

The mentality of using the sampan as a red flag against complacency, or to justify the status quo, still surfaces. But it belongs to an earlier era - and should stay there. The downside is too costly. It risks becoming deeply embedded small worldviews and small-mindedness, cramping national self-confidence and ambition.

Instead, Singaporeans should keep enhancing the cruise ship, and grow the line to set sail, with all hands on deck, for more frontier destinations and global aspirations for the country and for every citizen.

But first, the top item on today's cruise programme is to sink the old sampan and the outdated ideas that came with it - once and for all.

The writer is a poet, and author and editor of over 20 books, including *Brand Singapore*.