

What defines the soul of Singapore? IPS forum panellists say culture, community and a spirit of solidarity

Justin Ong

The Straits Times, 14 January 2021

The coronavirus pandemic presents a chance to build a new narrative for Singapore, as the search continues for exactly what defines the soul of the nation, said panellists at a Singapore Perspectives forum on Thursday (Jan 14).

Culture, community and solidarity were the varying responses from experts across the fields of arts, media, sport and mental health, when asked to describe the essence of Singapore at the annual flagship event organised by the Institute of Policy Studies.

For veteran actor and former Nominated MP Janice Koh, the answer is shared memories.

She also noted that one silver lining of the coronavirus situation was a chance to hit the reset button on the Singapore story.

"We've been living with narratives about our nation-building that are post-colonial, post-1965," she said.

"We can now forge a new narrative that resonates with the younger generation of Singaporeans. They have a chance to write that as their struggle, as how they have built resilience and fortitude in this time."

Ms Koh added that the soul of Singapore could be captured in the way Singaporeans make sense of their collective experience and past perceptions of both the landscape and of living together.

"It is where we feel most at home, that we are closest to in our hearts," she said.

Professor Audrey Yue, who heads the department of communications and new media at the National University of Singapore's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, offered a definition centred on both traditional and everyday culture.

"Singapore is a land of old and new migrants. Through our ancestors... we continue to maintain traditional cultures, but also mix them with new practices and meanings," she said. "This is important to the essence of who we are as a rich multicultural nation with diverse ethnic groups."

Everyday culture, on the other hand, is manifested through the likes of shared family values and language. "For example, Singlish is quintessentially Singaporean - it is the soul of the nation, in a way," said Prof Yue.

For Dr Munidasa Winslow, a psychiatrist and chief executive of Promises Healthcare, a clinic focused on mental health and addictions, the answer lies in a sense of community.

"We saw that during Covid-19. Within the first few weeks of the lockdown, psychologists, various ministries started putting together teams manning hotlines for anybody who needed to just call and talk about their feelings," he said. "You can feel that whatever crisis comes at us, we're going to get through it."

An outside view was shared by Mr Asahi Takano, partner and Asia-Pacific head at Portas Consulting, a global management consultancy that promotes sport and physical activity.

"One of the things that always struck me in Singapore is going into shops and trying to buy something, and an auntie or uncle in that shop would actually dissuade you because it's cheaper (at a shop) down the road," he said.

"It's something I've not come across in many places and to me, that hints at a certain Singaporean notion of solidarity - this idea of looking after each other and not wanting any of us to get ripped off."

Added Mr Takano, who was born in Japan and raised in Britain: "That cuts to a lot of the things that Singapore is renowned for, in terms of multiculturalism and the focus on well-being and equality across society."