

## What makes Singapore brand tick

*The Straits Times*, 19 September 2017

A reminder that Singapore's success is built on intangibles as much as physical development, from former civil service head Lim Siong Guan, reiterates the importance of not taking the obvious for granted. Few who have lived through the transformation of the city-state since the impoverished and lawless 1950s might overlook this fact. But it's easy to be swayed by material gains made over the years. Then, habitual virtues generated by a difficult past can be forgotten in a present that creates an illusory comfort zone.

Mr Lim referred to a sense of honour and a drive to overcome its smallness as examples of intangible assets. Honour manifests itself in the ability of the different communities to respect social differences and maintain everyday harmony. These aspects of honour constitute a substantial part of the Singapore brand name, Mr Lim declared at a recent lecture that he delivered as the Institute of Policy Study's latest S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore.

His comments underscore the need to retain certain core values, not in spite of Singapore's continuing evolution but precisely because of it. The growth rates made possible by Singapore's entry into the global economy in the 1970s are a matter of the past. That era made possible massive exercises in economic redistribution, none more so than the revolution in public housing policies which sought to turn a nation of sojourners into one of stayers. The transformation of economic life in Singapore in recent times reflects international shifts as well. The entry of China and India into a globalising world, which they once despised or feared, expanded the global market immensely. But this also put pressure on smaller nations to find an interstitial existence in the interplay of great-power economics. Overcoming smallness became an even larger task for an island city-state.

This challenge will persist in a country which must remain a price-taker in international relations. However, it does not have to subvert the sense of common purpose and endeavour which has matured in Singapore over the decades since independence. Singapore's way of life revolving around multiracialism, meritocracy and principled diplomacy must not waver in a global economy undergoing transformation. Realism without and cohesion within define the parameters of Singapore's presence on the world stage.

Branding works only to the extent that others buy into it. They will be convinced of what makes Singapore tick when Singaporeans themselves show they are not at odds. Thus, citizens owe it to themselves to fully appreciate the essence of the nation's brand and to see that constant effort at all levels is required to bolster it. This will be all the more critical amid the ongoing economic disruption and possible social dislocation.