

According to former Head of Civil Service, Singapore may be decadent

TL;DR – Is the high noon over for Singapore?

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Mr Lim Siong Guan is a Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, instructing on leadership and change management, as well as a Senior Fellow of the Singapore Civil Service College, since 2006.

Currently Advisor to the Group Executive Committee of GIC Private Limited, Lim was the Group President of GIC from 2007 to 2016. The GIC manages the financial reserves of the Singapore government.

He was Chairman of the Singapore Economic Development Board from 2006 to 2009. Lim was the Head of the Singapore Civil Service from 1999 to 2005. Over a span of 22 years from 1994 to 2006, he had been the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Defence, the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance.

Lim is also IPS' 4th S R Nathan Fellow – and he recently [gave the first](#) of a series of three Institute of Policy Studies' Nathan Lectures. The theme of his three-lecture series is ***Can Singapore Fall?***

In the [first lecture](#) which took place on 12th September, he spoke of how Singapore was an accidental nation. He also spoke about how Singapore succeeded despite our small size and hostile environment.

He reminded his audience that the legacy our founding fathers left us is their indomitable spirit. He said:

“The real legacy of Mr Lee Kuan Yew is the indomitable spirit that drove him and our founding fathers to do all that they could to secure the survival and well-being of the nation and its people. “Don't be weak” as a crucial principle for national survival and success never escaped Mr Lee's heart and mind. And he was fully vindicated with Singapore's peace, progress and prosperity in the years since independence.”

In that lecture, Lim also pondered about whether Singapore could fail. In doing so, he used ideas from Sir John Bagot Glubb's [essay](#), “The Fate of Empires and Search for Survival”, which analyses the lifespan of great nations from their genesis to their decline.

Lim examined the stages of the rise and fall of great nations that Glubb presented in that essay.

The stages are as follow:

- Age of Pioneers
- Age of Conquests
- Age of Commerce

- Age of Affluence
- Age of Decadence and Decline

Lim was of the opinion that Singapore is somewhere between the Age of Affluence and the Age of Decadence. He pointed out that there are already signs of the characteristics of the Age of Decadence.

Characteristics of the Age of Decadence

- **Defensiveness.** People are obsessed with defending their personal interests to the extent that they fail to fulfil their duty to their family, community, and nation. There is civil dissension and intensification of internal political hatreds with various political factions holding on to rivalries and refusing to reconcile differences.
- **Pessimism.** People have lost hope.
- **Materialism.** People enjoy high standards of living and consume in more than what they need.
- **Frivolity.** As people become more pessimistic, they start to think: “Let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” They forget that material success is the result of courage, endurance, and hard work. Their heroes are not the statesman, the general, or the literary genius, but the athlete, the singer, or the actor.
- **Influx of foreigners.** Self-explanatory.
- **The welfare state.** The state spends so much on the welfare of its people that its people are free from the responsibility of taking care of themselves.
- **Weakening of religion.** Religion does not only mean institutionalised faith, but represents a set of moral values which in turn influence social norms. Without morality, men are more likely to snatch than serve, and the spirit of self sacrifice is weak.

Here are the signs that we are decadent

As you are reading the characteristics that mark the Age of Decadence, you were probably nodding your head to some of those characteristics. Probably more so at the point about the influx of foreigners. The line “Jobs for foreigners, NS for Singaporeans” probably flashed in your mind. But influx of foreigners isn’t the only sign that of the Age of Decadence that exists in Singapore.

There are signs of frivolity too. Not sure if it’s just me, but it seems that there are far more concerts in Singapore now than in the past. Ask youths who their heroes, who they look up to, and chances are, they’ll name a movie star or celebrity.

And many people would certainly say that Singapore and Singaporeans are quite materialistic. And defensive too. Some of us just want to fatten our own pockets rather than take care of one another.

BUT... are we really *that* decadent?

Yes. Singapore certainly show some of those signs. But we are much more than that. There are examples where Singaporeans aren't defensive. The most significant and recent example is that of the CEO of Razer, Tan Min Liang. Recently, he made a proposal to implement a cashless system in Singapore. That drew criticisms from the CEO of NETS. Tan's response was classy.

He stated that his interest in moving Singapore to a cashless nation is purely one for national interest and not for personal/corporate gain. He said that he's more than happy to support NETS 100% if NETS can roll out the e-payments network for Singapore. That certainly doesn't sound like defensiveness to us.

And our youths aren't completely frivolous. Many of them contribute actively to society in various ways. Some raise money [for charity](#), others volunteer with [different causes](#).

That shows that there is still hope for Singapore yet.

We can choose to succeed

Lim did note that Glubb's observations are not predictive. He points out that we can make a choice as to whether the decline Glubb wrote about is inevitable and unavoidable.

Lim believes that, if we make a choice, we can start a new age of Pioneers.

But how?

That's one of the questions that Lim will want to address in his next two lectures in the series. He also wants to talk about the sort of First World Society we would wish to be, the sort that is right for Singapore and Singaporeans, not just for the current generation but for the generations to come.

Indeed, we can still continue to succeed. We need not be pessimistic. There is still much going for us. But it'll take conscious decision and united action from all of us to keep this accidental nation going. Let's see what advice Lim will give us in the next two lectures to help us along the way.

In the meantime, read the transcript [here](#) or watch the video,