

‘Singapore should aim to be gracious society’

✶ ELGIN TOH, THE STRAITS TIMES

Having developed a First World economy, Singapore should now seek to cultivate a First World society marked by graciousness, former head of civil service Lim Siong Guan said in a lecture last night.

Graciousness is about looking beyond one’s needs to the needs of others, he said. It is not just about helping the poor and the displaced, but also about “the countless little interactions” between neighbours, colleagues and others throughout the day.

“It is the little things that define culture and the reality of society,” he added.

Mr Lim gave a few Japanese examples.

A friend of his visited Japan. After lunch, he was asked if he wanted coffee. He said yes, but noticed his Japanese friends declined. They explained they saw others waiting for a table.

“So his friends decided the right thing to do was to release their table as quickly as possible,” he said.

In another instance, a group climbed the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Afterwards, most used their towels to wipe off sweat, but the Japanese in the group also used it to wipe the safety gear clean.

“They were doing it in consideration of the next group,” he said.

The examples are “not to urge everyone to become Japanese cultural clones”, but to show it is possible to forge a gracious social environment.

Mr Lim was speaking at the National University of Singapore in his second lecture as S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore.

Its main theme is building a better Singapore for its fourth generation, with graciousness being an essential trait for a happy Singapore.

Mr Lim cited a book, *The Hidden Wealth Of Nations* by David Halpern, which argues that wealthy societies can become happier only by improving the quality of relationships.

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