

'Cosmolanders' and Singapore's dual personality

This is an edited excerpt from the text of a speech by Professor Tan Tai Yong at the IPS-Nathan Lecture Series on Wednesday evening. Prof Tan, a historian, is president of Yale-NUS College and the Institute of Policy Studies' sixth S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore.

In all its earlier incarnations, Singapore had functioned as a city of sorts. It was an emporium, a cosmopolis, a colonial port city, a crown colony and then a city within a larger Malaysian Federation. But it was a most unnatural nation. It did not have any of the ingredients needed to build national identity – indigenous rootedness, civilisational lineage, cultural commonness, religious, ethnic and linguistic homogeneity; all it had was probably common political cause.

The politics of the island up to 1965 had reflected its historical experience as an open port city and the international makeup of the cosmopolis.

Internationalism and populism, more than the indigenous nationalism of the sort one saw emerging in India, for example, was the natural experience in Singapore from the 1920s to the 1950s.

The idea of Singapore as a nation-state thus sat uncomfortably with its instincts as an open commercial city that depended on international trade for its survival. Yet in 1965, Singapore had become a nation-state, very much against its own expectations. It had to get on with the business of quickly reconstituting and reimagining itself. It knew how to be a city, but becoming a nation-state, with hardly any time to prepare, was a different proposition altogether.

So two processes had to happen simultaneously, each reinforcing the other. The first was state-building and alongside it, nation-building. The process of state-building after 1965 was driven by a single-minded devotion to the goal of survival. Building on the structural foundations of the colonial state, Singapore focused on getting its economy right, establishing functioning governing institutions, educating and housing its people, and creating an efficient bureaucracy to develop and implement policies.

Very quickly, Singapore became a viable state with a thriving economy and an efficient system of governance with the wherewithal to feed, house and educate its citizens.

To defend its national territory and sovereignty, Singapore had to build its defence capabilities, so the Singapore Armed Forces came into being. As a state that had to conduct relations with other states, foreign policy became necessary. This fed into the process of nation-building, which needed a much longer time. It has been argued that nationalism, or national identity, is "not a phenomenon that appears suddenly. It is a result of a process by which a people become conscious of themselves as a separate national entity in the modern world, a process by which they become willing to transfer their primary loyalty from the village, or the region, or the monarch, to the nation-state" (W.J. Duiker, *The Rise Of Nationalism In Vietnam, 1900-1941*).

As a new nation-state, Singapore had to build in its people a sense of community and emphasise its viability, no matter how small, in a world of nation-states. But in the case of Singapore, this consciousness could not be built on the foundations of a common culture. Singapore was simply too diverse and complex to find common ground in terms of identity. Neither did the country have a long, shared history, or common struggle, on which to meld common purpose. As former minister George Yeo said: "Singapore nationalism had to be cooked in a hurry without the fire of war or revolution."

Nation-building – the building of an intrinsic national identity – was therefore a much more complicated enterprise than state-building. How do you generate a lasting sense of identity, bonding and loyalty among a diverse and largely migrant population, whose identification with the state dated back only a few years before 1965, when citizenship was introduced in



As a consequence of being both a country and a city, Singapore has had to actively and continuously connect with the wider world, while taking care of a local citizenry and building national identity within its shores at the same time, says Professor Tan Tai Yong. ST PHOTO: JAMIE KOH

1957? The population that, until August 1965, had been told that they were Malaysian citizens, now had to embrace a new identity as citizens of a new country. This was a wholly new experience for the people of Singapore, most of whom had never thought that Singapore could be independent, let alone national.

NATION-STATE AND GLOBAL CITY: A RETURN TO THE COSMOPOLIS

After decades of state- and nation-building, Singapore has established itself as a viable nation-state.

It now has all the characteristics of a nation-state – territory, sovereignty, citizens and a legitimate government. But the inherent dilemmas of a new nation-state that grew out of an old commercial city have not gone away. Global competition has given rise to the need to revive the instincts of the open city, notwithstanding the demands of nurturing a local base of citizens.

Historian Anthony Reid points out that increasing global competition by the end of the 20th century had "created an international context where (the cosmopolis) was more necessary than ever... The public rhetoric of nation appeared but less necessary in itself and less opposed to cosmopolis". "Public leaders appealed to make Singapore... a cosmopolitan centre, able to attract, retain and absorb talent from all over the world or 'a global hub where people, ideas and capital come together'."

This has generated the tensions that are innate in a country that is a city. As a consequence of this dual personality, Singapore has had to actively and continuously connect with the wider world, while taking care of a local citizenry and building national identity within its shores at the same time.

Let me cite two examples where the Singapore Government has had to mediate the contradictory pulls of "internationalisation/regionalisation versus Singapore as home" and that of "attracting foreign talent versus looking after Singaporeans".

IMMIGRATION

Decisions made in the interests of pragmatism and expedience have not necessarily remained policies that continue to produce positive results. One example is Singapore's liberal immigration policies which, at their peak, ran the risk of alienating the local population and contributed to xenophobic sentiments.

Liberal immigration policies were and are part of the Government's plan to develop Singapore into a "talent capital", attract migrants to fill the gap in manpower needs given Singapore's greying population, and ultimately sustain its economic growth. However, the non-resident population increased at an

unprecedented pace in the first decade of the 21st century, resulting in widespread public disapproval of the Government's liberal immigration policies for highly skilled labour around the 2011 General Election. Another wave of anti-immigrant sentiment, which arose when the Population White Paper was released in 2013, illustrated the continued tensions between the needs of the city-state and the sentiments of the nation-state.

Since then, the Government has continued to reassure Singaporeans that the workforce is not disproportionately dependent on foreign labour. Its stance is that foreign talent complements rather than competes with the local workforce, even as it plans to reduce the number of employment passes it grants to qualified foreigners.

In hindsight, some would argue that too quick an inflow of foreign workers depressed wages among low-wage workers and brought about avoidable social costs.

While workers from abroad filled gaps in sectors such as construction, health and social services, some locals have perceived foreigners to be taking from Singapore's economic pie rather than growing it. For instance, there continues to be resentment towards skilled workers-turned-permanent residents who are viewed as enjoying the benefits of citizenship without having to take on the attendant obligations.

As for "low-skilled" workers, they are forgotten, even as they have grown increasingly visible as part of Singapore's social landscape and public spaces. Singapore aspires to be a cosmopolis, but the cosmopolitanism in Singapore also has its clear limits. It has little room for "migrant others", which include "low-skilled" domestic, construction and manual workers.

DEVELOPING THE ARTS

Another example demonstrates how there was pushback on the ground in response to state efforts to develop Singapore as a prominent arts destination and hub. Government efforts to quickly and visibly shape Singapore into a global city for the arts were not received with enthusiasm by local arts practitioners.

A former artistic director of a local arts group argued that the hub model would "retard the growth of our indigenous arts development", because it prioritised massive infrastructural development, import of foreign specialists and tourism over benefits to local practitioners and smaller-scale development projects.

Some criticised the Government's motives – nurturing arts and culture as a vehicle for economic growth, rather than for their own intrinsic value. Cynics have also questioned if "a vibrant arts scene could ever be the result of government blueprints" and whether an artistic

society could be fostered through an economics-driven programme of change.

At the same time, from the Government's point of view, attracting international players and supporting local players may be complementary rather than contradictory goals. However, government action has an outsized footprint and influence in Singapore compared to other cities, because of our relative smallness and one-city proposition. As such, the tensions between different players that are sometimes natural for cities play out on a national level and become magnified in Singapore's context.

THE STRENGTHS OF A CITY

But this duality does have its upsides. Although there are stresses that come with balancing the needs of city and country, Singapore has also played to its strengths as a city-state without compromising national identity. As Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat said in his 2019 Budget speech: "As a city-state, we are nimble and can adapt to changes faster."

Singapore can also take advantage of its strategic location and "serve as a neutral, trusted node in key spheres of global activities". Mr George Yeo also expounded on a city-state's advantages in regulating its population and resolving urban issues.

"Because we are a city-state and not one city in a large nation-state, we are able to solve urban problems which many cities in the world are not able to. This is its great advantage. It is able to control and regulate the inflow of people. Because of this, Singapore has been able to clear its old slums and prevent new slums from forming. We have better control over our own environment. This is the key reason why we have been able to overcome problems of traffic, pollution, prostitution, drugs, crime, education, housing, healthcare and so on... This is one

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Positioning itself as a global city offers other advantages. As large nation-states turn inwards and intense nationalism generates insularity and protectionism, globally oriented cities could become important international actors in place of traditional nation-states.

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However, as seen from the example of backlash against liberal immigration policies, managing diversity has proven to be a complex task. It is not merely about locals who feel pitted against foreigners, but also about how the state manages different segments as groups within the country that include on the one end the "high-waged, highly skilled professional, managerial and entrepreneurial elites"; and at the other "the low-waged immigrants who occupy insecure niches in the unskilled or semi-skilled sectors of the urban service economy" (Brenda S.A. Yeoh and T.C. Chang, *Globalising Singapore: Debating Transnational Flows In The City*). Caught in between the two groups are middle-class Singaporeans.

These groups are unevenly affected by globalisation. Singaporeans generally accept that globalisation has brought economic success to Singapore, but globalisation processes have also brought about change and disruption, such as rising inequality and, for some, a sense of precariousness towards their livelihoods.

As the city's population continues to grow more diverse, its identity also becomes more fluid. One thing is certain: As the canvas grows more colourful, the difficulty lies in blending the colours seamlessly, while ultimately creating a harmonious whole.

LOCAL IDENTITY AND GLOBAL CITY: DIFFERENT SIDES OF THE SAME COIN?

The examples of immigration and arts and culture policies show how there are competing needs and wants, which require thoughtful responses and subsequent fine-tuning to ensure Singapore's continued flourishing.

Another way of examining these competing goals is to look at them as two differing orientations. There is a part of Singapore that is more oriented towards itself, more inward-focused, perhaps closed, even as Singapore also regards and markets itself as outward-looking,

cosmopolitan and open.

Can the division be such a neat one, and is it correct also to see Singapore as being bifurcated into two groups of population, one internally oriented and the other always looking outwards? Perhaps it is not quite accurate to characterise Singapore as comprising "cosmopolitans" and "heartlanders", as then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong referred to in his 1999 National Day Rally speech, even if this set of terms provides a starting point for us to think about the internal and external pulls that Singapore negotiates.

For then Prime Minister Goh, "cosmopolitans" were defined as English-speaking, international in outlook, and skilled in fields like banking, IT, engineering, science and technology, while "heartlanders" were defined as speaking Singlish, being local in interest and orientation, making their living within the country, and playing a major role in maintaining core values and social stability. However, some feared that the terms reflected a growing divide between Singaporeans on the basis of economic status, values and outlook, while others feared that these terms would create more of a barrier between Singaporeans, even if the barrier between the two groups started off as imagined.

Another suggestion is that rather than having these categories, perhaps there is a blending, and Singaporeans are more likely "cosmolanders" who "could lead, or could afford to lead, global lifestyles, but prefer the values of the heartlands" (Brenda Yeoh, *Globalisation And The Politics Of Forgetting*).

This is a form of "rooted cosmopolitanism" that philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah argues for. The term "rooted cosmopolitanism" seems oxymoronic, to have roots suggests the need to be embedded in a specific history, nation or people, while to be a cosmopolitan is to declare oneself a citizen of the world. For Professor Appiah, however, these two are inseparable.

Local histories, he reminds us, have themselves been shaped by the movements of peoples and their communal practices as old as human history itself. He argues for multiple affiliations, and the idea that one can pledge allegiance to one's country and still conceive of oneself in terms of global identities or universal values.

But whatever it is, Singapore the nation-state cannot close itself off from global capital or labour flows. Its continued desire to be on the winning side of globalisation while maintaining its viability as a nation-state means that the Government will have to constantly tread a fine line between protectionism and openness.

And even as globalisation continues to have a major effect on the culture and cityscape of Singapore, there is the need to navigate it without alienating and leaving behind different groups of people. These could be locals and foreigners who call Singapore home, or Singaporeans who have heeded the call to seek opportunities beyond its shores, but find it difficult to maintain ties and relationships with Singapore, this city and nation that finds itself continually changing to suit global and regional trends.

The Government has, with time, come to recognise that to attract international companies and human capital, Singapore has to emphasise both our cosmopolitanism and Singapore's "localness". As Mr George Yeo writes: "The tension between being nationalistic and being cosmopolitan cannot be wished away. It has to be gingerly managed." Dogmatic and xenophobic nationalism will "stifle initiative, inhibit trade and drive (talent) away. It has to be broad-minded, practical, idealistic... but also distinctively Singaporean".

On the day-to-day basis, and at the local level, there will be the constant need for accommodation, acceptance and adaptation as the global and local both negotiate for space in Singapore.

SMALLNESS UNCONSTRAINED

In the title of my talk, I used the phrase – the "Idea of Singapore". I wanted to capture the essence of Singapore, an underlying spirit and mentality that had stayed consistent despite the many changes to its form. For me, the idea of Singapore must refer to the meaning and significance of Singapore; it must be larger than the island itself and must extend beyond its relatively brief existence as a nation-state.

In my mind, the idea of Singapore can best be encapsulated in the concept of "smallness unconstrained". Smallness is a constant and reality in Singapore's history, but that smallness has never constrained Singapore's evolution as a city, country and nation-state.