

Singapore's strength lies in its openness to plurality, but the challenge is in reminding Singaporeans of this plurality, said Associate Professor Elaine Ho from the National University of Singapore's department of geography, who was speaking at a virtual panel on the topic of how being an open cosmopolitan city affects national identity. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG



Panel: Move away from 'us versus them' when discussing foreigners

Goh Yan Han
Political Correspondent

Singapore needs to move away from the "us versus them" dichotomy when discussing foreigners, and recognise and accept that its national identity evolves even through immigration and emigration, said Associate Professor Elaine Ho from the National University of Singapore's department of geography.

At the same time, the country has to remember its heritage and use it as a way to promote understanding, said Ms Chang Hwee Nee, chief executive officer of the National Heritage Board, who also noted its potential to be a double-edged sword used to justify exclusivity, familiarity and antagonism.

Both were speakers on a virtual panel on the topic of how being an

open cosmopolitan city affects national identity at the Singapore Perspectives conference, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) yesterday. It was moderated by IPS principal research fellow and head of its social lab Mathew Mathews.

Prof Ho said migration policy is integral to Singapore's cosmopolitanism – both in the attraction of international talent as well as the recruitment of low-skilled migrants to build and support infrastructure. But she also noted that the outflow of Singaporeans who move abroad and return with international exposure is a contributing factor.

She said current debates on the topic of differences tend to assume a Singaporean-versus-others dichotomy.

But Prof Ho's research has found there are also social divisions within immigrants, such as

the earlier cohort of immigrants feeling a greater sense of belonging than newer ones.

"We need to move past the Singaporean-versus-others dichotomy to consider other aspects of difference-making as well," she said.

In response to a question on whether promoting cultural differences reinforces pride in particular identities and contradicts the notion of developing a national identity, Prof Ho said Singapore's strength lies in its openness to plurality, but the challenge is in reminding Singaporeans of this plurality.

She said: "It's easier to just fall back on what we know rather than recognise that or accept that national identity continues to evolve through migration."

Ms Chang noted that each person has different aspects of identity, and differences naturally lead to tensions and disagreements.

"Our goal is acculturation, in which different groups maintain their distinct cultural identities while sharing a common sense of rootedness. Our goal is not assimilation, which demands conforming to the same norm," she said.

Ms Chang said heritage is vital in defining national identity in the years ahead. She added: "Heritage, however, is a double-edged sword. It can be used to justify ex-

ASSIMILATION NOT THE GOAL

Our goal is acculturation, in which different groups maintain their distinct cultural identities while sharing a common sense of rootedness. Our goal is not assimilation, which demands conforming to the same norm.



MS CHANG HWEE NEE, chief executive officer of the National Heritage Board.

clusivity, familiarity and antagonism, as much as it is a way to celebrate diversity, promote understanding as a medium to show that through all these differences, we can be more than the sum of our parts."

But to ensure the role it plays is positive requires sensitivity, understanding and an open mind, she said.

When asked about the relevance of the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others categorisation in a cosmopolitan Singapore, Prof Ho said it remains relevant as a policy framework, but is one that "at an appropriate juncture, we may want to revisit from time to time to see whether it is still the most appropriate way to manage our social differences in Singapore".

Ms Chang said the question is whether Singapore is better off with or without the categorisation, given that it has served the country well. She added that it is a necessary policy at this point in time.

"Is it better for us to continue with it or discard it altogether at this point in time?"

"It's not a perfect policy framework, there are a lot of shortcomings... It continuously needs to be refined, but the challenge is how to do so."

gyanhan@sph.com.sg