

# Singapore – lessons from the rise and fall of great cities

Singapore is unique in being a city, a state and a nation all at once. Yet its continued success depends on drawing lessons from the likes of New York City, Chang'an and Jericho, said Minister for Health Ong Ye Kung in his keynote speech yesterday at the Singapore Perspectives 2022 forum organised by the Institute of Policy Studies. Here are edited excerpts from his speech.



What we lack in resources and strategic mass, we can make up with nimbleness, and unity of purpose and action, says Health Minister Ong Ye Kung. We may be small, but we can move fast and we do things together.  
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I will start by recounting the stories of a few great cities – past and present. I will then draw out key lessons from these cities, and talk about their implications for Singapore, both our present and our future.

My first example is Jericho. It was one of the oldest human settlements dating back to 9,000BC. An old city born of geographical advantage – a combination of good climate, fertile soil, and an abundance of fresh water. These conditions enabled hunter-gatherers to settle over time and cultivate crops. These were a close-knit people. As their numbers grew, a city was formed.

With accumulated wealth from agriculture, the people of Jericho established the city as a trade station, leveraging their strategic location along the Jordan River, to trade with peoples as far away as Egypt and Anatolia. With wealth came the need for defence and protection. Inhabitants built up fortifications, most famously the walls of Jericho. For a city to defend itself, it needs to raise taxes, mobilise and organise resources. And, therefore, we see the emergence of a state administration.

This leads to my second set of examples – political capitals, such as Rome, Chang'an, Constantinople, Kaifeng and Pataliputra.

These too began as well-located settlements, but gained strategic significance, as their rulers consolidated territories around them. Eventually, they became the full-fledged political and economic capitals of empires.

The third set of examples are present-day metropolises – New York City, London, Paris, Tokyo, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Singapore.

With industrial revolution and technological advancement, came the free flow of capital, and the world became increasingly globalised.

The globalised world is characterised by complex networks of trade, financial services, maritime, aviation, infocomms and other activities, and these networks in turn need to be served by nodes or exchanges. Global metropolises managed to establish themselves as those nodes in a global economy.

Their significance is determined by the breadth of their networks, strategic clustering of industries, rich flow of capital and ideas, and most importantly, their ability to attract and retain talents from all over the world.

Hence London no longer depends on the Thames because it is not tethered to its maritime roots. Its transformation into a

global financial centre and a hub of creativity, culture and the arts has allowed it to keep its position in the world.

## CITIES RISE AND FALL

However they come to be, cities rise and fall with the tide of history.

The same geographical luck which gave rise to ancient cities such as Jericho can also be their undoing. Natural disasters, climate change and foreign invasion – they can all turn a city's fate. Today, Jericho is a pale shadow of its former self, as part of a disputed territory in the West Bank.

As for political capitals such as Rome or Chang'an, their character and significance shifted along with the rise and fall of their parent empires. Chang'an was decimated at the fall of the Tang dynasty as the empire fragmented.

As for the great modern metropolises, they are constantly jostling for relevance in a hyper-competitive global economy. If a global node can be established, it can also be unplugged by a competitor.

Maintaining the vibrance and relevance of a city over generations is, therefore, no mean feat.

## SINGAPORE – A CITY, STATE AND NATION

I cite these examples because I think there are lessons in each one that can enrich our collective endeavour to keep Singapore a thriving city at the cutting edge, as well as a stable and sustainable home for all of us.

Singapore cannot be modelled against any of the examples I raised, and not even the modern metropolises.

This is because history has made us unique. We are a city, a state and also a nation of one people, all rolled into one. In Singapore, we find some of the essence of New York City, Chang'an and Jericho. Our future success depends on us recognising the importance and combining the essence of all these great cities – past and present.

## THE CITY OF SINGAPORE

Let me start by talking about the New York City in us.

We are a global economic node. This is central to our survival as a city. Without economic opportunities and the prospect of a better future for its people, a city loses its dynamism and life.

Especially for a city like Singapore, without a natural hinterland, maintaining our economic viability has always meant being connected to the world.

One of our pioneer leaders, Mr S. Rajaratnam, set out our ambition of becoming a "global city" in a speech to the Singapore Press Club in 1972. Mr Rajaratnam saw Singapore as a growingly important component of the global economic system, side by side with the economic giants of the world.

In large part, we achieved this ambition through decades of hard work and enterprise. We leveraged our geographical location to build a trading hub, and from there, other strategic industries – manufacturing, tourism, biomedical, finance and infocomms, aviation, research and development.

We have become like a smartphone with a good operating system and all kinds of apps. Your contacts, schedule, group chats, music, photos are personalised and stored in here.

This is the value proposition we want to keep offering to the world. Strong enough, so that it is not easy, though not impossible, to switch out of Singapore.

The great task before us is to keep reinventing ourselves to stay relevant. We have made good progress as a smart nation. We are fast becoming a centre for green finance.

We have long-term plans to reinvent our cityscape, such as developing the land to be vacated by Paya Lebar Air Base, and reimagining our city centre with the inclusion of the Greater Southern Waterfront, which is the size of three Marina Bays.

The city centre will look entirely different, decades from now.

But I believe the biggest opportunity for reinvention lies in the post-Covid-19 world. In many ways, the crisis is like a reset

## The most crucial aspect of Singapore is the Jericho in us.

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button, forcing us to rethink the way we do things in smarter and better ways.

For example, the post-Covid-19 working world should embrace a combination of working in the office or at home, as a more efficient arrangement to be outcome-focused, and to help people juggle their lives.

We should rethink the concept of "peak" commuting hours, which has so long dictated the planning and development of transport infrastructure. We can flatten the traffic curve too.

Covid-19 has pushed many hard-hit brick-and-mortar establishments onto digital platforms.

Having gone through home-based learning, education is undergoing another renaissance, kicked off with every secondary school kid equipped with a personal device, embracing the digital medium for education, and encouraging self-directed learning.

In healthcare, we now have a much better appreciation of the importance of primary care, which includes things like good hygiene, vaccinations, and home recovery with the support of telemedicine. This may be a new beginning for primary preventive care, which will be the most important component in an ageing population.

Through the pandemic, we have positioned ourselves as a hub for vaccine manufacture and distribution.

The process of coping with the pandemic has tested our mettle as a city. We had to roll with the punches and adapt to many twists and turns. We didn't try to shut down every infection cluster, but we braved through, and rode the infection wave. To do this, we have had to rely on people's personal responsibility and civic consciousness. We have to trust that people will do the right thing, in testing themselves, and isolating themselves if they are tested positive.

While these have been done out of necessity, I believe it has helped us grow as a people. I hope it is the start for a societal attitude that is more forgiving of imperfections, embracing setbacks and failures, appreciating resilience, ruggedness, enterprise and even being unconventional.

## THE CITY STATE OF SINGAPORE

There is also a Chang'an in us, even though we are no empire.

This is because we need to run an effective state. In Singapore, our people do not have a choice between a free-wheeling urban economic centre or a quiet life in

the suburbs.

There is also no equivalent of Washington, DC, Canberra, or Brasilia outside of our global city. This city is all we got. Within these 730 square kilometres lie all the possible choices for five million people.

The Government of Singapore must defend our city and maintain law and order.

It must ensure that all our infrastructure and services – from healthcare, education and transport to utilities and refuse collection, libraries and parks, are all well provided for and working well.

What Singapore has been blessed with is a founding generation that has built up a good Government, with a capital "G".

This includes the various arms of the State – an executive branch that is effective and can get things done; a non-politicised civil service; and a judicial system that upholds the rule of law without fear or favour. It also includes democratic institutions such as Parliament, formed through free and fair elections.

But the affairs of the state cannot run away from politics. Therein lies a duality.

On the one hand, politics facilitates public discourse, puts the fate of the country ultimately in the hands of people, keeps powers in check and maintains accountability of the executive branch.

On the other hand, politics gone wrong can polarise the population and destabilise societies. We have seen many recent examples.

So a critical factor for good governance is to get politics right. Rather than endless bickering and stalemates, the political process must be constructive, and help bridge divides. The objective of politics must be to help the country find a way forward even if the decisions involve very difficult trade-offs.

This is especially important to Singapore. For what we lack in resources and strategic mass, we can make up with nimbleness, and unity of purpose and action.

We may be small, but we can move fast and we do things together.

Inequality, protectionism and climate change – these are some of the biggest issues that nations and their governments across the world have to grapple with today.

To reconcile the dilemmas of modern societies and deal with these issues, we need a strong state. Otherwise, it will not be possible to do difficult but necessary things such as a carbon tax to reduce emission, or redistributive policies to help the low-income, or reform education,

health or other significant public policies and programmes.

Our policies need to be consistent for the long term to make an impact. Unlike bigger countries, we cannot afford to be caught in fractious politics with frequent change of governments and reorientation of policies that come with it.

This does not preclude the value of healthy discourse that takes in diverse views, and the proper functioning of checks and balances – both of which can strengthen our health and functioning as a state. The success of the Singapore state depends on our ability to achieve both aims.

## SINGAPOREANS

But the most crucial aspect of Singapore is the Jericho in us.

The sense that despite being in a global city, we are members of a close-knit tribe, sharing a common fate and destiny. Except, unlike the inhabitants of Jericho, we are not a natural tribe of similar origins. Singapore is a far more diverse and complex society than any ancient city.

Having a seat at the table at the United Nations, or a flag to compete under in the Olympics, does not a nation make. The litmus test of what it means to be a nation is in our Pledge – "One united people".

This makes nation building a long-term, subconscious process. A nation's people will need to have common experiences, and go through trials and tribulations together. Over time, this togetherness will forge common ideals that transcend primordial tribal instincts, and overcome forces that deepen social fault lines.

Then something mysterious emerges, beyond security, beyond making a living, beyond creature comforts – like, the soul of a nation.

For ancient civilisations like India and China, the sense of nationhood is almost second nature, having been born of millennia in time. In Singapore, we are working on what it means to be Singaporean, day by day.

Students singing *Majulah Singapura* daily at school assemblies; different communities living side by side in HDB estates, visiting the same hawker centres and public parks; cohorts of young people performing national service together, total strangers instinctively connecting with a Singlish phrase, even thousands of miles away from home, like our shared secret code; and, battling crises like the Covid-19 pandemic together. These are all acts of nation building.

Many of these come through deliberate policies and programmes implemented by the state.

Take our bicentennial commemoration in 2019 for instance. We wanted to figure out what best describes the Singapore DNA. After consulting widely, we shortlisted three descriptors – openness, multiculturalism and self-determination.

At the end of the exhibition at Fort Canning, members of the public were asked to vote for the descriptor that resonated with them most. By a wide margin, we chose self-determination.

It is not surprising. Cities don't need it; many states don't even think about it; but a young nation like us dreams of and cherishes self-determination.

It was a pity Covid-19 disrupted the process and we could not take the exhibition further. But we should think of other ways to do so, because there is a growing consciousness about why we exist as Singapore and what makes us Singaporean.

To put that consciousness into words, it is perhaps:

That we are not just a key node of the globalised world, but the one that connects East and West, and different parts of Asia, creating vast opportunities that surpass the limits of our borders, for our people and future generations.

That the consistent strengths of the institutions of state will always strive to ensure justice and fairness to all, uphold meritocracy, bring out the best of people, bridge our divides and put us on the right path for the long term.

That, therefore, in this nation, there is a solemn commitment to give every community that calls Singapore home a place under the sun, where everyone also exercises a spirit of give and take rather than pushing for their own agenda at the expense of others, and in so doing, provides space for something that we collectively own as Singaporeans, to evolve over time.

With all of these, we will determine our own future, and be a city, state, and nation that continues to thrive for many years to come.