

By Invitation

Split-screen Singapore – what does the future hold?

Tied economically to the optimistic East but mentally to the pessimistic West, Singaporeans are blessed with many big existential questions to answer.



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For *The Straits Times*

Should we Singaporeans feel optimistic or pessimistic about the future, especially as we look ahead to 2022?

Not an easy question to answer. Our feelings are also influenced by the communities we belong to. And, in this regard, Singapore is a truly unique global city.

Almost without exception, all the other truly global cities are rooted in either their Western or Eastern cultures. New York and London, Paris and Berlin clearly breathe and exude the Western zeitgeist, which is wallowing in pessimism.

Beijing and Shanghai, New Delhi and Mumbai and much of Asia view the future with optimism. Data confirms this. Singapore is the only truly global city with one foot in the West and one in the East.

Surveys from Pew Research, Harvard and Cambridge University confirm the pessimism in the West. A poll this month from the Harvard Kennedy School found that 52 per cent of young Americans believe that their democracy is either “in trouble” or a “failed democracy”. Even more shockingly, only 7 per cent of young Americans believe that they enjoy a healthy democracy.

A 2019 Pew survey found that 44 per cent of Americans expect standards of living to worsen in 2050, compared with 20 per cent who expect an improvement.

A report titled “Global Satisfaction with Democracy” by Cambridge University published in January last year found that dissatisfaction with democracy in Anglo-Saxon countries (the US, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom) has doubled from about a quarter of all

individuals in the 1990s, to approximately half today.

By contrast, even though China, India and even Indonesia remain poorer developing societies, their populations view the future with optimism. A Unicef-Gallup survey released last month found that a majority of young people in Indonesia (82 per cent), Bangladesh (74 per cent) and India (66 per cent) think they will be better off than their parents, compared with 43 per cent in America and 32 per cent in the UK.

The Cambridge survey also found that Asia has been a notable exception in the global decline in satisfaction with democracy. As it points out: “Whether among the emerging democracies of South-east Asia, the developed democracies of north-east Asia, or in the world’s longest-established major developing democracy – India – satisfaction with democratic governance in the East seems higher than in other parts of the world.”

WESTERN ANGST

So, why are Western populations filled with existential angst? There are deep structural reasons. As I document in great detail in my book *Has China Won?*, the incomes of the bottom 50 per cent in the US have essentially stagnated for several decades. There is an angry white working class in the US. This explains the 74 million votes that US president Donald Trump got last year.

And, here’s the real shocker. Despite losing the presidency, Mr Trump’s control of the Republican Party is almost absolute. If he runs again in 2024, he may well win.

In short, there is a deeply divided and polarised polity in the US. Existential angst about the future is a natural result.

The European polity has its own obsessions. Migration remains a deep and polarising issue. Just watch the raucous exchange between Belarus and Poland or the UK and France over migrants.

All over Europe, far right parties are becoming stronger and even respectable in societies as moderate as Sweden.

In their book *The Light That Failed*, published last year, authors Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes document in vivid detail how the “liberal” philosophy of European elites (matched by those of American elites) have led to a severe backlash among the working classes.



As they write, “for many disillusioned citizens, openness to the world now suggests more grounds for anxiety than for hope... Spooked by the phantom of large-scale migration, electorates in parts of Europe and America are increasingly drawn to xenophobic rhetoric, authoritarian leaders and militarised borders”. The stable, centrist governments that used to dominate the European political scene in Europe are clearly under threat.

So, why should all these distant travails of these Western societies matter to Singaporeans? The simple answer is that Singapore is the only truly global city that has one foot firmly in the West and one foot firmly in the East. As a result, we absorb both the pessimistic zeitgeist of the West and the optimistic zeitgeist of the East. Quite naturally, this makes us schizophrenic.

SINGAPORE’S NEIGHBOURHOOD

It is telling that Minister for Finance Lawrence Wong, when he

was discussing questions of Singapore’s identity, highlighted the dangers of the rise of tribalism in Singapore as a result of importing culture wars from the West that could give rise to new identity politics that could polarise society in Singapore. It was wise of Mr Wong to highlight this danger of absorbing Western existential angst.

Singapore is without doubt the most Westernised city in Asia. We function mainly in the English language. Our governance institutions, including the Parliament, civil service, judiciary and educational systems, are firmly rooted in the Anglo-Saxon universe.

This explains why we often know more about what’s happening in New York and London than what’s happening in Jakarta or Bangkok. This is also why the pessimism of the West seeps naturally into our mental veins, while the oceans of optimism in nearby countries such as China, India and Indonesia, the three most populous countries in

Asia, rarely penetrate our consciousness.

Our ignorance of Indonesia is shocking. Most Singaporeans can probably remember a recent statement by US President Joe Biden or British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Yet, few can say the same of President Joko Widodo of Indonesia. Nor are they aware that among the most optimistic young people in the world today are the Indonesians.

We are also mostly unaware that we live in one of the most promising regions in the world. Japan’s gross national product (GNP) used to be eight times bigger than the collective GNP of the 10 Asean countries. Now it is only 1.5 times larger. By 2030, it will be smaller than Asean.

With the launch of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) early next year, Singapore’s economy can expect a significant boost as it is totally plugged into this region economically.

SCHIZOPHRENIC SINGAPORE

All this explains the schizophrenia of Singapore. Our economic veins are tied to the optimistic East, while our mental veins are tied to the pessimistic West.

To resolve these contrasting tendencies in our minds, it may be useful to spend the year 2022 reflecting on where the long-term destiny of Singapore will be.

This is why both *Straits Times Press* and I thought that it would be timely to reissue a new revised and updated edition of my book *Can Singapore Survive?*, which was first published in 2015.

The book does not necessarily provide all the answers to Singapore’s future challenges. However, it raises many of the existential questions that Singaporeans will have to grapple with as they try to find their way in this new Asian century.

As I have often stated in my previous *Straits Times* columns, the biggest gift I got from my training in (Western) philosophy was that the most important part of learning was not in finding the right answers. It was in finding the right questions. A deep questioning mind is an essential requirement for any Singaporean as we try to manage the unavoidable schizophrenia in our soul between our Western and Eastern identities.

Raising and answering questions may seem troublesome. Yet, the one key point that both Eastern and Western philosophies agree on is that a life spent in deep reflection is the most satisfying life to have. And we Singaporeans are blessed with many big existential questions to answer.

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