

# The curious case of Singapore's 'Eastie' identity

Those who live in eastern Singapore have developed a distinctive 'Eastie' identity. Regional identities are not a bad development, but they should remain inclusive.



## Melvin Tay and Mathew Mathews

At a Marine Parade grassroots event in April, residents passionately shared their love for their neighbourhood, citing the fresh sea breeze they enjoy, the proximity to East Coast Park, and the convenience of nearby markets and shopping malls.

Their pride in their community – and of living on the eastern side of Singapore – was palpable, making it clear why they would never dream of living elsewhere.

Such sentiments beg the question: Is it possible to forge an identity based on the region where you live in Singapore?

Given the city-state's modest size, ethnic integration policies and the fact that public services are provided uniformly across the island, some would feel that the concept of a distinctive regional identity – akin to being a New Yorker in the US or perhaps a Penangite in Malaysia or a West Londoner – appears far-fetched in Singapore.

How can a country, barely spanning 50km from one end to the other, nurture such pronounced local allegiances of being an Eastie, a Westie, or a Yishunite?

But it happens, especially in eastern Singapore, and this phenomenon aligns well with Benedict Anderson's notion of an "imagined community". Although geographical distinctions on such a small island may not lead to profound cultural divides, the regional identities that emerge are nonetheless real to those who embrace them.

So, does a distinct east-side identity exist, and if so, what defines an Eastie?

### EAST-SIDE ESSENCE

The east-side enjoyed a historical head start in playing host to and cultivating vibrant communities well before the nation's independence.

According to the 1957



population census, the eastern parts of Singapore were already significantly more densely populated than the west and had a faster rate of urbanisation.

Numerous housing estates and suburbs such as Geylang Serai, Bedok and Siglap had begun to develop, laying the groundwork for a strong community identity.

This is contrasted with farming and industrial activities in the west, which generally accommodated smaller kampungs spaced farther apart.

History notwithstanding, one source of pride in the east-side stems from the wealth of unique amenities the area offers.

In many countries, beachfront living carries a premium. This is also true of the eastern side of Singapore which offers views of the sea from both HDB flats and private properties – a rare and cherished feature not commonly found in other parts of the island.

While residents from other parts of Singapore can readily

commute to the east's beaches and seaside parks, Easties know that beachfront recreation is right in their backyard.

So, too, is Singapore's pride – the Changi Airport. The location of the airport also means that many parts of the east will always remain low-rise – which explains the many golf courses in the area – lending the region a unique charm and air.

The east is also famous for its culinary heritage and scene, from hawker stalls serving local fare to Michelin Guide-endorsed upscale establishments offering diverse cuisines.

The east's architectural diversity also profoundly influences its distinct identity.

The colonial black-and-white houses in Siglap and in Fort Road, and colourful Peranakan shophouses adorned with intricate tiles and ornate facades in Katong and Joo Chiat, provide a glimpse of Singapore's past. Juxtaposed with large swathes

of HDB estates, high-rise condominiums, and megastructures such as Our Tampines Hub and Jewel Changi featuring the world's tallest indoor waterfall, this eclectic and visually arresting array of buildings reflects a deep cultural heritage intertwined with modern urban progress.

### REGIONAL RIVALRIES

The Eastie identity is fuelled not just by a distinctive living environment, but also by the narratives conceived and articulated by residents.

These narratives involve a benign "othering" of those from other parts of Singapore through jokes and playful competitiveness.

For instance, an oft-cited justification for "east-side, best-side" is the perceived convenience or accessibility associated with residing in the region relative to others. Analysis using data from the

latest available 2020 Population Census seems to lend some credence to such perceptions.

For one thing, the east is well-connected. While the central region predictably had the largest proportions of residents in employment spending 30 minutes or less commuting from their homes to work (60.8 per cent), the corresponding proportion for the east was still a high 49.3 per cent.

This was 43.6 per cent for the west, 41.5 per cent for the north-east, and 37.5 per cent for the north.

Of course, those in the west can point to their proximity to most of Singapore's institutes of higher learning, as well as high-tech and heavy industries.

In this regard, the potential for regional rivalries or distinctions to spur the forging of shared identities is certainly present. This spirit is something that government-driven initiatives have sought to harness and

channel into community-building with varied success.

The S. League (predecessor of the fledgling Singapore Premier League) featured one such attempt with the involvement of football clubs affiliated with various neighbourhoods such as Geylang United and Woodlands Wellington.

Meanwhile, the People's Association's Community Sports Network has seen more success in fostering local spirit and pride through neighbourhood teams competing in a variety of sports including basketball, badminton and pickleball.

The concept of Identity Corridors mooted by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) is another example.

These tap distinctive features of the neighbourhoods along the corridors – such as the railway tracks of the former West Coast Rail Line for the Rail Corridor – to build a stronger sense of community.

In other words, the distinctions become a source of unity rather than division. They never spill into the sort of bitter feuds seen among supporters of football clubs in other countries, which sometimes have their roots in historic regional rivalries.

A football match between Balestier Khalsa and Tampines Rovers will, thankfully, never descend into a mini war, as games between Real Madrid and FC Barcelona often do.

### INCLUSIVITY AMID IDENTITIES

While pride in one's neighbourhood fosters a sense of belonging, it is essential to ensure that these identities remain accessible to all residents, regardless of their socioeconomic background. They should continue to be inclusive.

For one thing, moving to the east, often touted as the "best-side", may indeed signify upward mobility for some. The allure of beachfront living and access to unique amenities can attract those seeking a higher quality of life.

However, changes in these areas, such as an influx of expatriates or the development of more private housing, may inadvertently create barriers to entry for certain segments of society.

In this regard, Singapore's public housing model will continue to play a crucial role in promoting social cohesion by providing accessible, affordable and fair options for home ownership.

For instance, the application of the Prime and Plus housing models to public housing projects in choicer locations such as Baysshore and the future Long Island will enable residential communities to remain inclusive and diverse.

It is also essential to recognise and celebrate the varied benefits of living in all parts of the island. While the east may boast its coastal charm, other regions offer their unique allure and opportunities.

Community development councils and residents' networks spotlight the value and benefits that each precinct or area brings to its residents.

This will ensure that place-based identities – be it the Eastie, Westie, or Yishunite – stay rooted in place-based attributes such as amenities and appeal, which would complement rather than compete with the broader Singaporean identity that is founded on person-based attributes including our shared values.

As Singapore continues to grow and evolve, these regional identities will likely persist and adapt. Understanding and appreciating them is not just about acknowledging diversity, but also about reinforcing the collective ethos of adaptability and unity.

Thus, while some Easties may never want to move to the west, their sentiment is a testament to Singapore's success in creating not just a place to live, but a place to call home.

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Above: Shophouses in Koon Seng Road in Katong. The east's architectural diversity influences its identity. Peranakan shophouses in Katong and Joo Chiat provide a glimpse of Singapore's past. Left: Singapore's pride – the Changi Airport – is also in the east. The airport's location means that many parts of the east will always remain low-rise, lending the region a unique charm. PHOTOS: LIM YAOSHUI, ST FILE