

# SINGAPORE SOUL SEARCHING

At 50, the thriving city-state is ready for a new national identity. Artists and the younger generation appear set to lead the way, says Brunswick's **JENNY YEO**



Artist **KOH HONG TENG's** illustration, featuring young Singaporeans in various professions, represents a float that might be seen in the Chingay Parade, an annual multicultural procession held in Singapore during Chinese New Year celebrations

Everyone knows the stereotype. My country has been labeled a “nanny state,” a pseudo-democracy, culturally starved, artificial, a country that bans chewing gum and a nation with a reputation for punishing graffiti and caning felons. Singaporeans have been taught to smile, be kind and courteous, not to litter, the proper way to ride in trains and to speak the Queen’s English and standard Mandarin. They were told not to have more than two children, but later, when the population started to decline, to have as many as possible.

Singapore’s highly efficient infrastructure and public transportation system, productive workforce, strong rule of law, ease of doing business, and low corruption and crime rates are the envy of the region and the country is ranked as one of the most livable cities in the world, not just Asia. Yet, the question remains: “Does Singapore have a soul?”

According to Singaporean writer Sudhir Vadaketh, “We are living through an existential crisis of sorts, with many people unsure of what the Singaporean identity really is about.” As it celebrates its 50th birthday, the city-state is busy rebranding itself, a symbolic coming of age. One of the ways it may help shed its authoritarian image is to provide ordinary people, artists and non-government organizations with more space to flourish.

Younger Singaporeans are well placed to help drive this change. A recent article in *The Guardian* quotes local young entrepreneur Samantha de Silva, “Social media ... changed everything. Kids now see things differently; they don’t have the fear of the older generations. They are used to expressing themselves ... have a real passion for creative things.”

The city buzzes with activity around the arts, culture, sports, fashion, music, film, cuisine and volunteering. It almost feels as though Singapore has a checklist of things to make the city cool, and actively pursues them. But government checklists of cool are unlikely to fundamentally change the country’s culture. “The government can only do so much to manufacture ‘excitement’ and ‘creativity,’” says Vadaketh.

Citizens themselves seem to have realized this. There is a whiff of energy, a tinge of challenge against the status quo, particularly among the young. This generation sees itself as worldlier than its forefathers, more exposed to the adventures of the technology-anchored world, and less subjected to the naggings of the initial nation-forming years.

The government already laid the foundations for this transformation. According to celebrated Singaporean playwright and film director Glen Goei, “Our art scene has been flourishing since the 1990s when the government, in an attempt to make Singapore a global city by 2010, invested heavily in the hardware – art schools, museums, world class concert halls, and funding to arts and cultural organizations.

“In the initial years, heavy government involvement was necessary to provide that push for the arts. But the arts and cultural scene need to grow organically to truly flourish, and that will only come if artists are given the freedom to find their voices, express their views, and produce cutting-edge experimental works.”

**SOME SINGAPOREANS** feel that although change is coming, it can’t be rushed. Tan Boon Huat, former Chief Executive Director of the People’s Association, which promotes racial harmony and social cohesion says, “Singapore is not perfect – we are evolving. We are gradually loosening up, but we are not doing everything haphazardly at once, because there will be chaos. We are focusing on arts, sports, culture and the succeeding generations. We do what is right for us at our own pace, not in reaction to what people outside Singapore think of us, or to soften our international image.”

Singapore was shoved to independence in 1965 when Malaysia decided the city had no valuable resources to offer. With nothing going for it other than a

deep water harbor, necessity forced the potpourri of almost 2 million Chinese, Malays, Indians and others to create their own nation. Led by the iron will of its founding statesman, the late Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore grew into a prosperous city-state, now ranked among the top 10 globally by GDP per capita.

The founding fathers mobilized the various ethnicities, cultures and languages by focusing on unity for survival and the creation of a national identity – “one people, one nation, one Singapore,” said the mantra. “It was all about ensuring

the various ethnicities unite behind the common objectives of survival and long-term prosperity,” says Tan Boon Huat.

Most Singaporeans seem to acknowledge that the “Faustian pact” between government and citizens – where some personal liberty and freedom of expression

were traded for stability and the promise of a better future – was necessary in the past. But many young people are beginning to question whether an authoritarian regime is either necessary or desirable.

Despite its reputation for a heavy hand, the government acknowledges that it cannot dictate the country’s cultural direction. Lawrence Wong, Minister of Culture, Community and Youth and Second Minister of Communications and Information says, “It is for all Singaporeans to decide the true spirit of SG50 [the country’s 50th birthday] and what it means to be a Singaporean in this important phase of our nation’s journey ... it has never been for the government to define a Singaporean culture, or a Singaporean way of life.”

As the then Minister of Law E.W. Barker said in 1969: “The evolution of a common culture is not the monopoly of the government ... culture must evolve spontaneously.”

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**JENNY YEO** is a Director in Brunswick’s Singapore office. She advises on capital market communications, corporate reputation and crisis communications in Southeast Asia.

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