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Got culture?

Yes, says an overwhelming majority of 100 people polled by Insight, after the seemingly permanent angst over Singapore culture resurfaced again recently. Lynn Lee, Aaron Low and Keith Lin find out just what they mean by culture.

IN MARCH 1978, months into his job as minister for culture, the late Mr Ong Teng Cheong found himself facing MPs who despaired that Singapore was a 'cultural desert'.

They had a lot to say about the desiccated environment. The television and radio programmes were of poor quality. The performing arts were inconsistent. The promotion of culture seemed to be aimed at drawing tourists rather than rooting Singaporeans to their home. The list went on.

The MPs wanted to know why his ministry could not do more.

In his reply, Mr Ong mused on his own attempts to find out what culture meant when he took on the portfolio.

He was stumped by the myriad of meanings he found. The library had offered him 300 definitions, he noted, while academics seemed to interpret the word to mean 'the sum total of human achievement and activities' in fields ranging from literature and the arts, to politics, society and the material world.

Mr Ong, who later became Singapore's first elected president, then gave his own take: 'Culture is not a mere museum but a living thing which is preserved. What is preserved must be that part of our heritage that gives us identity and yet strengthens us in dealing with the complex process of living in a modern world.'

Fast forward 28 years to today and Mr Ong's definition of culture seems to resonate with Singaporeans, going by Insight's informal poll of 100 people.

Among them, 57 felt that there was a Singapore culture; 27 said it was still developing and seven said there wasn't one but it could be developed.

Only nine dismissed the idea of a Singapore culture.

These views echo those which surfaced in The Straits Times' Forum page. They disagreed with Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew's comments on Singapore culture, which he made at a dialogue recently.

He said that a Singapore culture was unlikely to emerge, even in the future, as modern technology made it difficult to create a unique identity.

What would result would be an amalgam of influences, which could accommodate Singapore's multiracial and multi-religious make-up. Singapore did not have the confidence to create its own culture, he said.

Those who responded, including several youngsters who penned responses in The Straits Times' YouthInk page, felt that a distinctive Singapore culture would emerge.

In his Forum letter, architect Tay Kheng Soon argued: 'Precisely because of the homogenising effect of Western influences, people will react; they do not want to be nobodies.'

So why do people feel a Singapore culture exists? How do they define it? And what has caused this chasm between the culture-haves and have-nots?

The story of us

LITERATURE professor and poet Kirpal Singh was in the lobby of a Hong Kong hotel some years back when he heard raised voices. One sounded familiar, so he went to investigate. Upon seeing a Chinese man, Dr Singh asked: 'Are you from Singapore?'

The man looked away from whoever he had been arguing with and replied: 'Yes lah, these buggers want to rip me off.'

Relating this episode to Insight in an e-mail, Dr Singh cites it as one form of proof that there is a distinctive Singaporean culture which 'never stops evolving'.

'This is clearly manifested in the way Singaporeans recognise each other when they are away.'

This bond and sense of connection has come about due to shared experiences growing up in Singapore, says manager Cai Wenxian, 25.

'For my generation, it would be the education system, Singapore Broadcasting Corporation dramas and how the bus-ticket system evolved to one with ez-link cards.'

Those polled also cited local food like rojak and laksa, 24-hour kopitiam, kiasuism, the pursuit of academic qualifications, the multitude of campaigns and national service as touchstones of Singapore culture.

'It is the 'mix' that counts, even if none of the components are uniquely Singaporean,' says sociologist Chua Beng Huat.

To educationist Khartini Khalid, 30, culture cannot be separated from one's way of life.

'HDB flats, speaking Singlish, living with other races, going to a hawker centre. Things like these are unique to us and part of our culture, as we are unlikely to get the same experience elsewhere.'

The culture chasm

YET, there are those who choose to define the term more precisely. They use 'high culture', or a society's great artistic and literary achievements as a benchmark for culture.

Other forms that appeal to the masses - a common lingo, shared attitudes and food - are 'low culture', and thus do not add much to a society's store of culture.

From this viewpoint, Singapore would seem culturally barren. It lacks unique art forms, like Japan's Noh and kabuki theatre, has no artistic enclaves as synonymous as Broadway and the West End are with New York and London.

But surely, Singapore's short history makes expectations of high culture unrealistic.

Even so, marketing manager Eunice Chan, in her early 30s, believes Singapore culture has a respectable store of high culture. There is a body of art and stable of Singaporean artists, including figures like Liu Kang and Georgette Chen, that she is proud of, she says.

Others cite late dramatist Kuo Pao Kun, playwrights Elangovan and Alfian Sa'at, film-maker Royston Tan and singer Stefanie Sun to be among them.

But those like engineer Mohammed Feroz, 35, feel the arts scene still falls short.

Why are so many productions here influenced by foreign works, he asks.

'Those productions that are Singaporean, like musicals Phua Chu Kang or Broadway Beng are not pieces which inspire Singaporeans, much less the human race,' he says.

Theatre group The Necessary Stage's Alvin Tan believes one problem that could stunt the growth of the arts scene here is that local audiences sometimes demand foreign approval before giving their own. 'We are always local-bashing. We don't have confidence in our local cultural productions until we have been recognised overseas.'

Young need it more

GOING by anecdotal evidence and Insight's poll, it is the younger generation who appear more seized with defining Singapore culture. Perhaps they see it as more inextricably linked to their own sense of identity and belonging in a fast-changing world.

Indeed, the topic came up at a recent forum which featured Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and attended by some 200 youngsters below the age of 30.

A junior college teacher asked PM Lee if Singapore culture could be less tied to racial and religious backgrounds, and shaped by a more global outlook.

His response: It would take a long time for the culture of one's ancestors, from China, India and South-east Asia, to be absorbed into one culture on its own.

Says Professor Chua, who teaches at the National University of Singapore: '(The young) rightly do not define culture in terms of racial cultural inheritance. They define culture in the way they live.'

Administrative clerk Vina Siew, 52, notes: 'In my time, we were concerned about making ends meet. We didn't have time to question what culture was.'

Says civil servant Deanne Tan, 28: 'The younger people, not having known political instability or much economic hardship, can yearn for the more idealistic things in life, like self-expression.'

Let it grow

WILL Singaporeans define culture with the same parameters 30 years from now? As globalisation sweeps through the world, the answer is unclear. But what is certain is this: Prescribing culture is unlikely to aid its preservation.

What it needs is space to grow.

Nanyang Technological University sociology don Kwok Kian Woon notes that in some nation-states, not just Singapore, there is a 'top-down' approach to constructing culture, for 'purposes of developing or projecting a particular kind of identity'.

This is not necessarily productive.

National University of Singapore political science lecturer Kenneth Tan cautions: 'Too much official control of culture can lead to cultural and artistic sterility, as the people's way of life becomes increasingly disengaged from the bureaucratically narrow and bland pronouncements of what the people should believe and what they should reject.'

One oft-cited example is the Government's efforts to wipe out Singlish with Speak Good English campaigns, to equip students with verbal skills of an international standard. Yet, over 60 Insight respondents still identified the form of pidgin English as a distinct cultural trait.

Still, there are hints of how culture, unfettered or otherwise, might evolve in the future. The digital media age has already led to new and nascent Singaporean cultural traits.

Among them is what communications director Eleanor Oh, 35, calls 'click culture', or Singaporeans' fascination with the Internet. Numerous blogs by Singaporeans have sprung up; Technorati, an Internet search engine that monitors blogs, lists over 800,000 English sites that mention 'Singapore' just in the past month.

What else is next?

To that, arts management executive Kok Tse Wei, 25, replies: 'It's like how we cannot use our human strength to open the petals of a flower before it's ready to blossom - we'll only kill it. Give the blooming flower time, to bloom.'

lynnlee@sph.com.sg

aaronl@sph.com.sg

klin@sph.com.sg

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