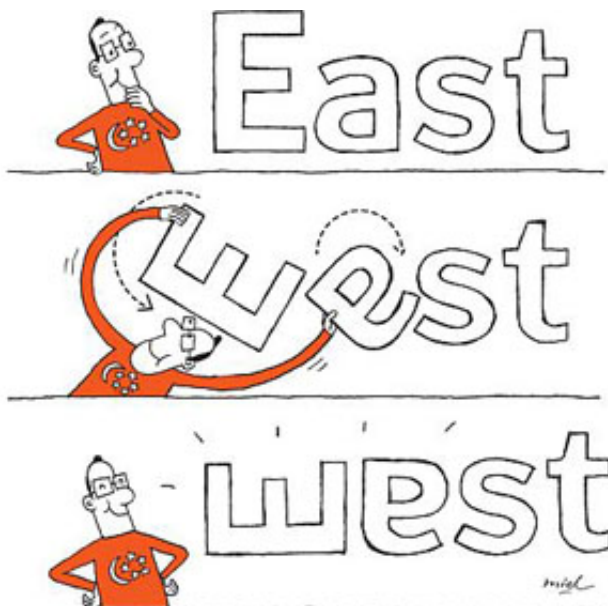


Seven pillars of Singapore's soft power



ST illustration

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Singapore has many strengths, including a unique ability to bring the East and West together in a way that provides hope to those who worry that such competing civilisations may be incompatible.

CAN Shanghai learn anything from Singapore's soft power?

This was the question posed to me for my opening keynote address for the Shanghai Mayor's International Business Leadership Advisory Council (Iblac) meeting in Shanghai on Oct 27.

I was tempted to go to the podium and say: "Nothing". It would have been my shortest speech ever.

However, on deeper reflection, I realised that even though Shanghai's population is almost five times that of Singapore, it might learn a lesson or two from Singapore's experience. I therefore gave a speech on the seven pillars of Singapore's soft power. It was well-received by the mayor and Iblac. Hence I thought it might be worth sharing it with my fellow Singaporeans in the hope that it will generate a robust discussion and produce a more authoritative list of the key pillars of Singapore's soft power.

Leadership and governance

THE first pillar is obvious: exceptional leadership. The quality of mind of our founding fathers is equal to that of America's. One of them, Dr Goh Keng Swee, even became an adviser to the great Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping. There is also no doubt that Mr Lee Kuan Yew is one of the best known global leaders of our time. I told my Shanghai audience that even though he is highly respected in the West, he never hesitated to convey hard truths to Western audiences. One of Dr Henry Kissinger's favourite stories is about how Mr Lee once told a distinguished group of Harvard professors at the height of the Vietnam War: "You make me sick". Mr Lee has clearly put Singapore on the global map.

The second pillar is good governance. As I tell every student of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, Singapore's success is based on three key elements: meritocracy, pragmatism and honesty (with honesty being the toughest part). Fortunately, even though rule of law is a Western concept, it works equally well for Eastern societies.

I emphasised that in Singapore the law stands above the Government. The entire Cabinet is subject to the same laws as the rest of us. Hence, when a former law minister was found to have been driving recklessly, he was charged in court for driving without care. No one in Singapore is above the law.

Multiculturalism, language

THE third pillar is multiculturalism. I emphasised that four major world civilisations interact on a daily basis in small Singapore: Chinese, Malay-Muslim, Indian and Western. It is not necessarily an easy thing for people of different cultures to get along. Hence, there are strong laws in Singapore against racial and religious insensitivity, and regulations to ensure that minorities are represented in each public housing estate. Few other societies in the world could match Singapore's record in managing multiculturalism.

The fourth pillar is the English language. Indeed, Singapore is possibly the city whose people have the strongest English-speaking skills in Asia. Each Singaporean child is taught both English and his or her mother tongue. Exposure to the English language does not just provide linguistic skills. It opens windows into the rich heritage of Western civilisation, giving Singaporeans another competitive edge.

Food and environment

THE fifth pillar is food. As Mr George Yeo has famously said, eating is the "tao" of Singapore. Singaporeans feel comfortable eating several different cuisines in one day, or even in one meal. I told the story of how the butler at the official Malaysian guesthouse was shocked one morning when then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong asked for Indian thosai for breakfast. Peranakan cuisine is also a local innovation, with the mother of Mr Lee Kuan Yew having produced one of the best cookbooks in this area. As I learnt later, this revelation surprised the Shanghai audience.

The sixth pillar is the green environment. Singapore is only one-fifth the size of Rhode Island, the smallest state in the United States. Yet it has more tree species than the entire 48 continental states of the United States combined. Singapore also has Tree Planting Day every year, to emphasise the importance of staying green.

Open to the world

FINALLY, the seventh pillar is that Singapore is the most open and globalised country in the world. Singapore's total trade is 31/2 times the size of its gross domestic product (GDP). This is one of the reasons the World Bank ranked Singapore as the easiest country in the world in which to do business. The Economist Intelligence Unit ranked Singapore as the third most competitive city in the world after New York and London.

Given the current sceptical environment in Singapore, I would not be surprised if some Singaporeans react to this list with the comment: "So what? Other cities got lists also, what." That is true. Other countries also have their lists. But the combination of these seven elements gives Singapore a truly unique position in the world, as I emphasised to the audience in Shanghai.

Soft power depends a lot on the global context. In the 19th century, when Europe was dominant, London and Paris dazzled and attracted the world with their soft power. But times have changed. Power is shifting from the West to East. But the West is not finished. It will remain the world's strongest civilisation for some time to come. Hence, the cities that will do well in the area of soft power will be those that bring together the best of the East and the best of the West. This is where Singapore stands out.

Dual identity

SINGAPOREANS enjoy a unique dual identity of living in the most Asian modern city (Seoul and Tokyo remain fundamentally Korean and Japanese cities respectively), as well as being the most Westernised. All this brings me to the key aspect of Singapore's soft power that I emphasised in Shanghai.

If Singapore can continue its practice of bringing together the best of the East and the best of the West in one city, it may provide a hopeful example to a world that believes that it will be difficult for the East and West to live together. Hence, if we succeed in Singapore with our soft power, we may be achieving something that is globally significant, even in the metaphysical dimension.

And, why do I say metaphysical? Rudyard Kipling once famously said: "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." Many in the world today still believe that Kipling was right.

Hence, if Singapore can bring together the East and West, this will change our dominant global world view (Weltanschauung). Anything that changes our Weltanschauung is metaphysically significant.

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