

KISHORE MAHBUBANI, FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

Three stories to strengthen the Singapore spirit

The stories of Singapore's success, racial harmony and care deserve to be told and retold.

By Kishore Mahbubani, For The Straits Times

My Big Idea No. 3 for Singapore is a simple one: strengthen the Singapore spirit.

Why? If our young men ever go to war to defend Singapore, they will not lay down their lives to defend the physical infrastructure of Singapore. They will do so to save the lives of people who are the strangers they meet in MRT trains or buses. Clearly they feel some kind of spiritual bond with these strangers only because they believe that they are fellow Singaporeans. This is what the Singapore spirit is all about.

Since Independence in 1965, Singapore has spent a lot of time and effort in "nation-building". And, by any standards, we have been very successful in building a strong, peaceful and prosperous nation. We have done an exceptional job in "building" our physical infrastructure. This is why we can boast of having the world's best airport, port, public housing, water supply, just to name a few areas in which other nations envy our success in nation-building.

However, I do not know of any nation that envies our Singapore spirit as much as they admire our physical infrastructure.

Yet it is this invisible Singapore spirit that holds us together as a nation, not the physical infrastructure. Unfortunately, no one has written a textbook on how to bind a nation together with invisible spiritual bonds. Most of the time the process takes place slowly and organically.

Hence, when Europeans arrived in the United States in the 19th century, they saw themselves first as English or Irish, Polish or Swedish, German or Greek. Yet within a generation or two, they were able to shed their national identities and forge a new one as "American".

This strong sense of American national identity is an amazing success story as these immigrants had to shed deep, not shallow, national identities. This is why Americans can recognise each other easily when they hear fellow Americans talk in foreign lands. And they have no hesitation to die for each other.

Singaporeans have a long way to go before we can reach the same level of national identity that Americans feel about themselves. But we can expedite the process instead of allowing it to develop slowly and organically over time.

And how do we do this?

The simple answer is that nations are built through story-telling. Yes, story-telling! What binds Americans together is a common set of stories rooted in a common value system. More accurately, they should be called "myths" but people sometimes mistakenly assume "myths" to be fictional.

Most national myths are a mixture of fact and fiction. This is why Americans revere their founding fathers even though they were mere mortals. Hence, in the same way, we have to create sets of stories that will bind our hearts together as fellow Singaporeans. Let me suggest three national narratives we can build on to strengthen the invisible Singapore spirit.

The success narrative

THE first narrative is the most obvious one: the success narrative. Few other nations have gone from Third World to First World in one lifetime. Indeed, I sometimes argue that not since human history

began has any nation lifted its people's living standards as quickly and as comprehensively as Singapore has done. If my claim is true - and no one has refuted it convincingly so far - this gives us a truly unique story to tell about ourselves.

Indeed, this is the story about Singapore that other nations envy the most. I know this from my 10 years as Singapore's Ambassador to the United Nations, when I experienced how virtually every nation in the world admired Singapore's extraordinary track record in economic and social development.

This success narrative has also been well-documented. Mr Lee Kuan Yew has written at great length about Singapore's extraordinary record in this area. Mr Kofi Annan, the former United Nations secretary-general, paid Mr Lee's book an extraordinary compliment/tribute and said: "The title of this book, *From Third World to First*, expresses an aspiration of all developing countries but so far, alas, an achievement of very few. Singapore is one of those few."

Other books have surfaced to complement Mr Lee's narratives. Tan Siok Sun has written a wonderful book about Dr Goh Keng Swee, the architect of Singapore's economic miracle. Former president S R Nathan has also told his remarkable story of how his life went from truly Third World to truly First World in his autobiography called *An Unexpected Journey*.

There are more than enough materials and historical records available to document this success narrative of Singapore.

This makes it all the more puzzling that there are no good history books that tell the story of post-independence Singapore.

When I ask historians why no such book has appeared, I am told that they are still reluctant to touch upon some of the more sensitive chapters of Singapore's history, like Operation Coldstore in the 1960s and the Marxist arrests in the 1980s.

However, books have already been published on these sensitive episodes. It is a fact that no nation is perfect. Every nation, like every individual, has its warts. And for a good history book to be convincing, it must tell the stories of failures and successes together.

Indeed, the best way to escape the grip of history is to write about it openly. This is how America liberated itself from its atrocious record of slavery. Movies like *12 Years a Slave* also help cleanse the national soul of past wrong-doings. The Japanese do themselves a disservice by trying to bury history and the Americans do themselves a favour by digging up history. We should emulate the Americans, not the Japanese.

Hence, for 2015, when we celebrate our 50th anniversary, I hope that one of Singapore's philanthropists will award a \$500,000 prize for the best history book written on Singapore. A good history book can do much to strengthen the Singapore spirit.

The harmony narrative

ONE unique narrative that we can construct about Singapore centres on our harmony.

Here too we are truly a historical exception. When the British decolonised, they left behind a number of small multi-racial colonies in all corners of the world: Guyana in South America; Cyprus in Europe; Sri Lanka in South Asia; Singapore in South-east Asia; Fiji in the South Pacific. All the other former multi-racial British colonies suffered ethnic strife. Only Singapore did not. This makes our record unique.

This story of Singapore's racial harmony is one I lived through.

My parents were Hindu Sindhis who grew up in Hyderabad, which is now part of Pakistan. When the partition of India and Pakistan took place in 1947, they and their siblings left Hyderabad and went all over the world. This is how I came to be born in Singapore in 1948.

And I now have first cousins living all over the world: in Paramaribo (Suriname), Georgetown (Guyana), Boca Raton (Florida), Lagos (Nigeria), Mumbai (India), Hong Kong (China), Tokyo (Japan), and this list is not complete. I am in touch with many of them. With this global network of peers to compare against, I can confidently say that I have become more deeply integrated into the nation that I was born in than many (but not all) of my first cousins.

What makes my integration into Singapore even more unique is that I belong to a minority within a

minority. Out of Singapore's 3.3 million citizens, 9.2 percent or 300,000 are Indians. Most of the Indians come from the South, from Tamil Nadu and Kerala. There are barely 10,000 Sindhis in Singapore. Yet we have become fully integrated into Singapore society.

This may explain why my best friend since childhood, the best man at my wedding and two godmothers of my children are Chinese Singaporeans. We have done a truly extraordinary job of overcoming our racial identity and identifying with Singapore society in one generation.

Sadly, unlike the success narrative, this racial harmony story has not been as well told. This job cannot be done by historians; it has to be done by our poets, playwrights and novelists. And we have to get more plays like *Cook A Pot Of Curry* by Alfian Sa'at to tell us why all Singaporeans feel comfortable with different cuisines and feel that they are part of their soul.

The caring narrative

As a student of philosophy, I studied deeply Karl Marx and John Rawls. Both cared deeply about the people at the bottom of their societies. Indeed John Rawls suggested (and I may do injustice to his complex ideas) that the most just society was not the most equal society but the society where the least well off were better off than other societies' least well off. In short, how a society takes care of the people at the bottom determines how truly caring a society is.

Singapore is not number one in the world in this area. The Scandinavian societies are. This is why they have a well-deserved reputation of being the most caring societies in the world. We went through a phase of scorning them.

At the height of the Reagan- Thatcher revolution, we warned our population of the danger of becoming an unsustainable welfare state. These warnings were justified. Yet, remarkably, the Scandinavian states have proven that they can remain both economically competitive and socially caring.

Paradoxically, even though we scorned them for a while, we have come closest to matching this unique Scandinavian track record than any other state in the world. The actual level of transfer to the people at the bottom of our society is massive and we are clearly transferring more and more. The recent \$8 billion package for the pioneer generation (including me) is extraordinarily generous.

Indeed, if John Rawls were alive today and if he travelled around the world to study the least well off in all societies around the world, he could have well placed Singapore among the top 10 in the world in the list of most caring societies.

In short, even though we are a very young nation, we have at least three compelling narratives we can tell about ourselves to strengthen our Singapore spirit. And we need to expedite this process.

Why? My Big Idea No. 4 for my next column is: Prepare for a political crisis.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

The writer is the author of *The Great Convergence: Asia, The West And The Logic Of One World*. He has been listed as one of the top 50 world thinkers this year by Prospect magazine.