## The Straits Times

**OPINION**

# Singapore: Butterfly or frog?

Singaporeans seem to have grown unhappier over the years, but as individuals and as a society, we can count our blessings and decide which path to take.

By Kishore Mahbubani For The Straits Times

SINGAPORE is undergoing a metamorphosis. Indeed, it is likely to be a mighty metamorphosis. Having lived in Singapore for 64 years, I find it hard to recall a period of greater transformation.

Unlike previous transformations, this one is not taking place in the material or mental spheres. Nor is it taking place in the economic or political spheres.

Instead, it is taking place in the spiritual sphere. The soul of Singapore is being redefined.

No one can predict the final outcome of this metamorphosis. There is a range of possibilities. Let me suggest two extreme possibilities using analogies from natural results of metamorphoses.

Singaporean society could either emerge as a happy butterfly, flitting around in a garden city, or it could emerge as a lonely frog, croaking away unhappily in a little well.

Objectively, the odds should favour a happy outcome. Subjectively, we seem to be headed for an unhappy outcome.

Half full or half empty?

SEVERAL recent studies have emerged to suggest that Singapore is an unhappy society. Gallup polls taken last year found Singapore to be both the least positive nation out of 148 countries surveyed, and the least emotional country out of more than 140 countries surveyed.

A book titled Happiness And Wellbeing: A Singaporean Experience, written by two National University of Singapore Business School professors, found that Singaporeans have grown unhappier over the last 10 years.

Fortunately, unlike the metamorphoses in nature, the outcome is not preordained. It will not be a result of unchangeable DNA.

Instead it will be a result of decisions that we make. Yes, we can decide to be happy.

And I can speak from personal experience.

When we are born, we inherit tendencies to be optimistic or pessimistic souls.

I was born with a pessimistic streak. But I have learnt to control or balance it with conscious thought processes. When I slide into pessimism, I carry out a thorough analytical process of counting my blessings and my challenges.

Singapore as a society can do the same. And it can also decide to define itself as a happy or unhappy society, just as many individuals often choose to live their lives believing that the glass is always half empty.

To help along this natural process of deciding whether we want to be happy or unhappy, I plan to write several columns in 2013. Some will count our blessings and some will spell out our challenges.

The final two columns will spell out what the butterfly and frog scenarios will look like. My goal is to be helpful to my fellow Singaporeans and help them decide where to go.

Tension over immigrants

LET me illustrate this process with one clear contemporary challenge.

One of the biggest sources of unhappiness among Singaporeans is the surge of foreign migrants in recent years.

This unhappiness surfaced clearly in the General Election of 2011 and continues to reverberate in the blogosphere. Some of the reactions are rational. Many of them are emotional. And we have to try to understand both the rational and emotional dimensions.

I have had first-hand experience of the emotional dimensions.

A little more than two years ago, on Christmas Eve 2010, an Australian driver tried to physically nudge me twice with his sports utility vehicle after I complained about his unnecessary honking off Siglap Road. Fortunately, I was not hurt.

I am glad that I had this experience. It made me understand the resentment that Singaporeans feel towards insensitive foreigners.

What made this experience unusual is that Australian drivers are generally more courteous than Singaporean drivers. The wide open spaces in Australia don't create the psychological pressures that a crowded Singapore does.

A month ago, a fellow professor (an American citizen) at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy experienced road rage from a Singaporean. After watching the erratic driving of a small truck, the professor rolled down his window at a red light to advise the Singaporean driver to be careful.

The Singaporean driver rewarded his courtesy by running into the professor's car. And he would have physically assaulted the professor if his father had not restrained him.

This incident made me aware that I had failed to alert this American colleague of mine to the dangers of road rage in Singapore.

After driving for over 40 years in Singapore, I know that the capacity for road rage exists in many Singaporean drivers (including, as my wife can confirm, sometimes in me).

We can try to resolve this rising tension over immigrants in Singapore with rational arguments. And rational analysis does help.

However, we also have the emotional dimension.

A long-time permanent resident of Singapore, who has contributed a lot to Singaporean society, told me recently that for the first time in decades he was beginning to feel unwelcome in Singapore.

When I asked him whether any particular incident had affected him, he could not think of any. Yet he said that he could distinctly feel less welcome than before.

The Singapore story

IN SHORT, we have to go beyond the material and mental spheres and beyond the economic and political spheres to understand the spiritual direction of Singaporean society. What forces have generated this new-found unhappiness with the previous status quo?

Normally it is the poets and novelists, the playwrights and artists who explain a society's soul to its people. Yet we all know that the great Singaporean novel has not been written. Nor have we had an in-depth discussion among Singapore's artistic community on the forces generating this unhappiness.

The simple goal of my columns for 2013 is to try to unearth these happy and unhappy strains of Singaporean society. Yes, like any other society, we have both.

What we don't have is a good understanding of these different strains.

It will be impossible for me to unearth these strains on my own, even though I have been a Singaporean

for 64 years and carry the Singaporean soul in my blood. I will need some help.

I therefore welcome readers' views to the e-mail address below.

Civilised comments will be shared: Yes, I did use the word "civilised". I know that it is old-fashioned and not chic to specify "civilised discourse". Rants are often the order of the day.

However, I believe it is possible to express sharp and fundamental disagreements in a civilised manner. And, indeed, one of the best ways to ensure that we emerge as a happy butterfly rather than as an unhappy frog is to have a civilised discourse in Singaporean society on how to manage the sharp disagreements that have emerged.

And, if as a society we cannot have a civilised discourse, we are choosing an unhappy destination for ourselves.

In short, we can choose to be happy or unhappy.

As Karl Marx wisely said: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it."

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