

The Straits Times National Day Special -- Back to the Future
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Singapore's well-known permanent representative to the United Nations, muses on the meaning of home from a little town in America.

HOME is where the heart is. It's a cliché but true. And the heart is also a repository of childhood dreams, memories and sentiments. Though I spent much of my adult life roaming the globe, I had the good fortune of spending my childhood in one home: a tiny terrace house in Onan Road, halfway between Geylang and Katong.

The house was pre-war rent control and we paid a monthly rental of \$17.60 enabling me to remember in maths tests that there were 1760 yards in a mile. The house remains standing but the neighbourhood is gone. The people have moved on. And that seems to be the pattern with most of my youthful associations.

The building which housed my primary school still stands but the school, Seraya School, has disappeared. Memories of my secondary school were also jolted when Tanjong Katong Technical School erected a huge auditorium over the happy field where I used to play cricket. St Andrew's Secondary School, where I spent my pre-university days, has moved on too.

I felt an equally strong sense of loss when the University of Singapore moved from its lovely Bukit Timah campus -- where I had happy memories of drinking tea from a sarabat stall in Pantai Valley -- to Kent Ridge.

So even though I can revisit buildings associated with my youth, they are now empty shells, associated with very different living environments.

I doubt my experience is unique. My post-war baby-boom generation has had the good fortune of having lived through one of the greatest, if not the greatest, development stories in the history of mankind.

Most of us have moved from relative poverty to relative affluence in less than a lifetime.

Throughout history, individuals have done so. But rarely have societies catapulted across several stages of development as rapidly as Singapore has. That makes the challenge of creating a sense of home a unique one.

But the sense of Singapore does exist in Singaporean hearts. Each time I board a Singapore Airlines plane to return to Singapore, I feel that I am half-way home. I am not sure why. Perhaps it is the multi-racial female crew members looking comfortable in their sarong kebaya outfits; perhaps it is the cleanliness, efficiency and warm welcome, or perhaps it is because SIA is one of the clearest symbols of the Singapore success story.

Most people would say home is where their families and friends are. True. But if all my family and friends from Onan Road were transported, say, to the northern reaches of Canada or Russia, with bitterly cold winters, none of us would feel at home there, even if all the faces were the same.

This is why many communities in exile, even while maintaining close ties with one another, nurture memories and associations of the geographical environment they came from.

One of Singapore's great limitations is our geography. We have neither natural nor artificial monuments to clearly symbolise the country.

Unlike the English who retire to Wordsworth's Lake district or the Japanese who go to Mount Fuji, we do not have a lovely corner of the woods that makes us feel spiritually reconnected. The town of East Hampton, Long Island, where I am writing these words in a friend's weekend home, provides an instructive contrast.

This town will always remain carefully manicured and always look the same elegant colonial town because of an extremely dedicated group of old ladies who protect every square centimetre from adverse development. Appropriately, this town has preserved as a museum the little house that actually inspired the song Home Sweet Home.

A sense of home comes from many sources: closeness to family and friends, closeness to neighbourhoods with happy childhood or youthful associations and, of course, closeness to the cuisine that one grew up on.

When my children return to Singapore each time, they have to have roti prata and satay. For me, it has to be char kway teow.

But what builds a common sense of home in any society is a sense of a common culture. Singapore, as a new society, has never pretended to be home to an ancient culture. We celebrate the many cultures of Singapore. We have not created, like the Americans, a great melting pot. But there is, nevertheless, a cultural pot brewing in Singapore.

In all my travels, to many corners of the globe, I have rarely encountered societies whose citizens feel naturally comfortable in multi-racial environments. Here, we take it for granted -- should we? -- that three or four different ethnic groups can live at ease with each other.

Most of the multi-racial colonies that the British left behind (for example, Sri Lanka, Fiji, Cyprus or Guyana) have had traumatic experiences.

Our unique success with multi-racialism is what gives me my strongest sense of "home" in Singapore. It's unlikely to be replicated elsewhere.

The unique combination of tolerance, mutual respect, love for each other's cuisine, mutual celebrations of key festivals and acceptance of meritocracy as a common denominator has become part of the DNA code of Singapore society.

Unfortunately, all this cannot be understood easily in the abstract.

The Singapore Story will be better understood when our poets, writers and artists play the underlying common chords on our heartstrings that make each of us feel a Singaporean. Some have begun the job. But a lot more needs to be done.

We need to have our own LAT, the much-loved cartoonist in Malaysia.

For me, the stories and songs of writer-musician Siva Choy capture the spirit of my youth. But we need many more storytellers to weave the tales of Singapore. When they do, we will all begin to understand in words what already exists in many hearts: the sense of Singapore as home.