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The Singapore of My Dreams

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Opinion Asia

I have not stopped dreaming for Singapore. What are my dreams in my old age?

First, I dream that Singaporeans would be less obsessed with money and that we would grow in kindness and graciousness. I have always heeded my mentor, Singapore's first Foreign Minister, S. Rajaratnam's warning that Singaporeans should not become a people who know the price of everything and the value of nothing. I think we are in such danger. We seem to calculate everything in terms of money. We seem to think that a person's worth is measured by the amount of money he or she makes. We have imitated one of the worst aspects of American capitalism by paying our senior executives inflated salaries while, at the same time, stagnating the salaries of our middle and lower strata.

I am glad that the President recognizes annually members of some of the professions which do not pay well but which make enormous contributions to our society, such as, teachers, nurses, social workers, librarians, etc. I also thank the media for showcasing selfless Singaporeans who help the poor and the disadvantaged, both at home and abroad. Money is important. We all need enough money to live in reasonable comfort and with material sufficiency. Money cannot, however, buy you good health, a happy family, good friends, peace of mind and joy. I hope that one day, Singapore's favourite film-maker, Jack Neo will make a new movie, entitled "Money Enough Lah".

Are Singaporeans a kind people? I am inclined to say, yes, when I remember the generosity with which Singaporeans responded to the Boxing Day tsunami, cyclone Nargis, the earthquake in Szechuan, etc. I am constantly impressed by the letters written to the forum page of the Straits Times, thanking certain Singaporeans for the kindness they had shown to strangers. At the same time, I am shocked by the unkindness and even cruelty shown by some Singaporeans towards their foreign domestic workers and foreign workers more generally. Some of our foreign domestic workers are denied a decent place to sleep in, adequate food and rest and are treated as less than fellow human beings. As

for the reports of wanton cruelty towards animals, I often wonder who these monsters are who commit such evil deeds. The record is therefore a mixed one. There are many kind Singaporeans but there are also many unkind Singaporeans. My good friend, Koh Poh Tiong, the Chairman of the Kindness Movement, therefore has a challenging job to do.

Are Singaporeans a gracious people? One area in which we are definitely not a gracious people is our driving manners or lack of them. From our driving practices and habits, one can infer that Singaporeans are aggressive, self-centred, inconsiderate and ungenerous. Is this an accurate portrait of ourselves? Let us hope that our driving manners, our selfish behaviour on our buses and trains, and in our elevators, do not reflect the kind of people we really are. The Minister Mentor, Lee Kuan Yew is probably right when he said recently that we still have a long way to go to become a gracious and cultured people.

Second, I would like Singapore to become the Geneva of the East and the Venice of the twenty-first century. I think Singapore is a welcoming, efficient and secure meeting place for representatives of adversaries. We have already hosted some such meetings, for example, between the People's Republic of China and Taiwan in 1993, and between the United States and North Korea, more recently. Venice existed for almost 800 years as an independent city-state. One of the reasons for its success and longevity was that it welcomed the merchants, artists, and other talented people of different countries and civilizations to live and work in Venice. In the same way, Singapore should continue to welcome the talented people of all nations and civilizations to live and work here. We can become the Venice of the twenty-first century.

Third, Singapore can be the cultural hub of Southeast Asia and the home city of the Asian cultural renaissance. Singapore already has the best cultural infrastructure in Southeast Asia. We have the best museums of the region. The Esplanade is the region's best centre for the performing arts. Singapore has turned necessity into a virtue. Because of our small size and short history, we have no choice but to collect the history, heritage and visual arts of the region. As a result, we have the best and most comprehensive collection in the world of the nineteenth century and twentieth century visual arts of Southeast Asia. It was fitting that the world premiere of Robert Wilson's staging of the Buginese epic, *I La Galigo*, took place in Singapore.

Beginning in 2008, the National Heritage Board will organize annually a festival to celebrate the civilization of an ASEAN country. The inaugural festival on Vietnam in 2008 was a great success. In 2009, we will showcase the Philippines. We have also taken the initiative to organize the first conference of ASEAN's museum directors. Singapore can however serve an even larger region. Because of our ethnic composition and our vision, Singapore can bring together the civilizations of Southeast Asia, China, South Asia and even Islam. The Asian Civilization Museum is a living example of our aspiration to be the home city of the Asian cultural renaissance. The recent initiative by the Arts House to organize the conference and festival, "Asia on Edge", should be applauded. I also welcome the proposal of the new President of the National University of Singapore, Tan Chorh Chuan, to set up a new Global Asia Institute at the University.

Fourth, Singapore can be Asia's "greenest" city. Singapore is already Asia's greenest city in the physical sense. Recently, some friends from Hong Kong, France and UK told me how impressed they were by our trees. Our Botanic Gardens have been awarded three stars by Guide Michelin, putting it in the same category as the iconic Eiffel Tower of Paris. We will soon open two new gardens in Marina Bay. But, Singapore is green not just physically but in its policies towards water, sanitation, air pollution, land use, sewage treatment, etc. The book, "Clean, Green and Blue" by Tan Yong Soon, Lee Tung Jean and Karen Tan, tells the remarkable story of Singapore's journey in reconciling rapid economic growth with care for the environment. Singapore should also be "green" in the protection of its nature reserves and biological diversity, in the more efficient use of energy and the reduction of carbon dioxide emission, in the recycling of waste, and in the promotion of clean and renewable energy.

I would like to see Singapore becoming a centre for the financing of green business and technology, a preferred venue for test-bedding new green technologies, products and services and for the trading of carbon credit. I am glad that a major Norwegian company has opened a plant to manufacture solar panels in Singapore. I am also encouraged by the seed money which the National Research Council has invested in research and development in solar energy. In the twenty-first century, with more than half of humanity living in cities, one of our greatest challenges is to make our cities as sustainable as possible. Singapore can be a role model for Asia and for the world.

Fifth, I think Singapore can become an important intellectual centre of the world. Our two leading universities, National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University, have been recognized as world class universities. I am confident that the Singapore Management University will soon join them. Our polytechnics, institutes of technical education, primary and secondary schools are much admired in the region. As a result, Singapore is beginning to attract a large number of foreign students to study here. There has also been a quantum leap in the percentage of our GDP invested in research and development. The culture of respect for learning and research is growing and more and more young people are taking careers in research and scholarship. Our think-tanks are expanding in number and ascending in quality.

Our Japanese friends have sometimes referred to Singapore as "a think-tank country". What more can we do? We can invest more money in research in the social sciences and humanities. At the moment, the Ministry of Education is the only source of such funding. The National Research Council does not make grants to support such research and there is no local equivalent of the U.S. Social Science Research Council. We can be more open in releasing data to researchers. We also need to grow the culture of tolerance for alternative and dissenting views. Without such a culture, scholarship, especially in the social sciences and humanities, will not flourish. Singapore is a microcosm of the world of the twenty-first century. It is globalized and multicultural. It is both urban and green. It is situated at the confluence of the civilizations of Southeast Asia, China and India. Because of its colonial heritage, Singapore is part East and part West. It is a leading candidate for Asia's most global city. Let us make Singapore one of the most liveable cities in the world.

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