

# Preface

The conference theme for Singapore Perspectives 2007 was “A New Singapore”. It was one, when I started to conceive the programme, that I thought would be particularly apt at a time when the nation appeared to be on the cusp of changes that would likely prove to be momentous. I wished the conference to discuss some of these societal transformations — whether impending or already ongoing — and to perhaps suggest solutions to potential problems.

The tradition of our annual Perspectives conference is to have a panel on economics (the others being politics, society and foreign affairs), and in this area, one of the most interesting questions of late is the disparate effects of globalisation on different segments of society, the poor and the rich, the domestic and the globalised. Chua Hak Bin and Manu Bhaskaran’s papers deal with that, including the politically delicate issue of addressing the income-suppressing consequences on the poor of an aggressively open economy and an open-door policy towards foreigners. Both ask this fundamental question: who is the growth of the economy for — the transient workers, the Permanent Residents or Singaporeans? Both, as is also Perspectives tradition, gaze into their expert crystal balls to glean the prospects for the economy. As can be seen from their papers, they more than adequately acquit themselves.

The second panel grapples with the “New Politics of Identity” in the face of immigration policies and the Singapore diaspora. Brenda S. A. Yeoh outlines the changing demographic make-up of Singapore, namely, the increasing diversity that has arisen through the arrival of “non-traditional sources” of residents and citizens, many as marriage partners. Greater

efforts need to be made to integrate not just these people but also the “use-and-discard” foreign workers that come here as maids and low-end wage labour. This call is echoed by Kwok Kian Woon, whose wide-ranging and philosophical reflections on identity are a reminder of the immensely complex nature of the issue. Interestingly, his discussion ends with the notion of the “cultural clash” caused by diversity, positing that it is productive of creativity, and questioning whether Singapore’s predilection for safety and security is therefore counterproductive to the flowering of new thinking. Beatrice Chia-Richmond brings her own humourous and endearingly off-beat take on not just her identity but the state of the arts in Singapore. If there is a paper in this volume that needs to be heard rather than read for its fullest effect, then the director/actress’ is the best example. Harming by charming is her subtle method: for instance, her criticism of censorship in the infamous Josef Ng snipping of pubic hair incident at the end of her speech is made the more cutting by the counterpoint providing at the beginning when she professes unwillingness to engage in “whining” about the arts scene and the establishment.

In the third panel on the impact of the Internet on society, Cherian George discusses the differences — and the connection — between traditional, controlled broadcast/print media and unbridled online media. His view is that the latter has led to the formation of a public sphere — a network for communicating information and points of view — that is informal and works on different rules from the formal public sphere of old media. His paper segues nicely into the second by Lim Sun Sun, whose main message is the need to ramp up the hitherto insufficient efforts at equipping Internet users with the deconstructive tools of media literacy. She also takes the subject back to questions raised by George, venturing that the unwillingness to narrow the gap between functional and critical media literacy has causes that are not so much educational as political, namely, the desire of the government to control traditional and now online media.

The last session dwells not so much on a new Singapore as the possibility of “A New ASEAN”. The implications for Singapore of whether and how the regional grouping reinvents itself may not be made explicit in the presentations by the three speakers but there are no doubts that they will be far-reaching. Azmi Mat Akhir’s paper, delivered on behalf of the ASEAN Secretariat, deals with why change is imperative. Amitav Acharya

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provides a perceptive historical account of the association's successes and analyses the tightrope that it must walk in balancing opposing demands as it remakes itself. Rodolfo Severino paints a stark picture of the three possibilities for the charter that ASEAN is drafting, and warns that it is actually better to have a weak charter than a strong one that its member states do not comply with.

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