

Singapore turns 50: local issues in a global city

Singapore turns fifty this year. After a brief merger with and eventually an unfortunate expulsion from Malaysia, Singapore became an independent nation on 9 August 1965. These fifty years as an island-nation, city-state and ultimately one of the most 'global' of cities in the world have been marked by exceptionally rapid change. The week of mourning that followed the recent passing of Singapore's first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, who was at the helm of the country's spectacular transformation, once again brought to light the underlying narrative of survival in the Singapore story. The many reportages on TV and in newspapers that were united in their focus of 'Remembering Lee Kuan Yew' often revolved around how Singapore had faced its issues and challenges head-on from the start and how it had turned them into its advantage.

Michiel Baas

Four books on Singapore

While Singapore is widely recognized as an incredible success story, the question of survival continues to be relevant to the policies and strategies it adopts as a city-state. *Can Singapore Survive?* is the fitting question Kishore Mahbubani, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, also poses on the cover of his latest book. 'Can we survive as an independent city-state?' he wonders on the first page. In this article I will explore the implications of this question, and how it continues to guide the way Singapore reflects on itself, by engaging in three other recent publications on Singapore. What do these books reveal about the 'Singapore story' in terms of the country's history, present and future?

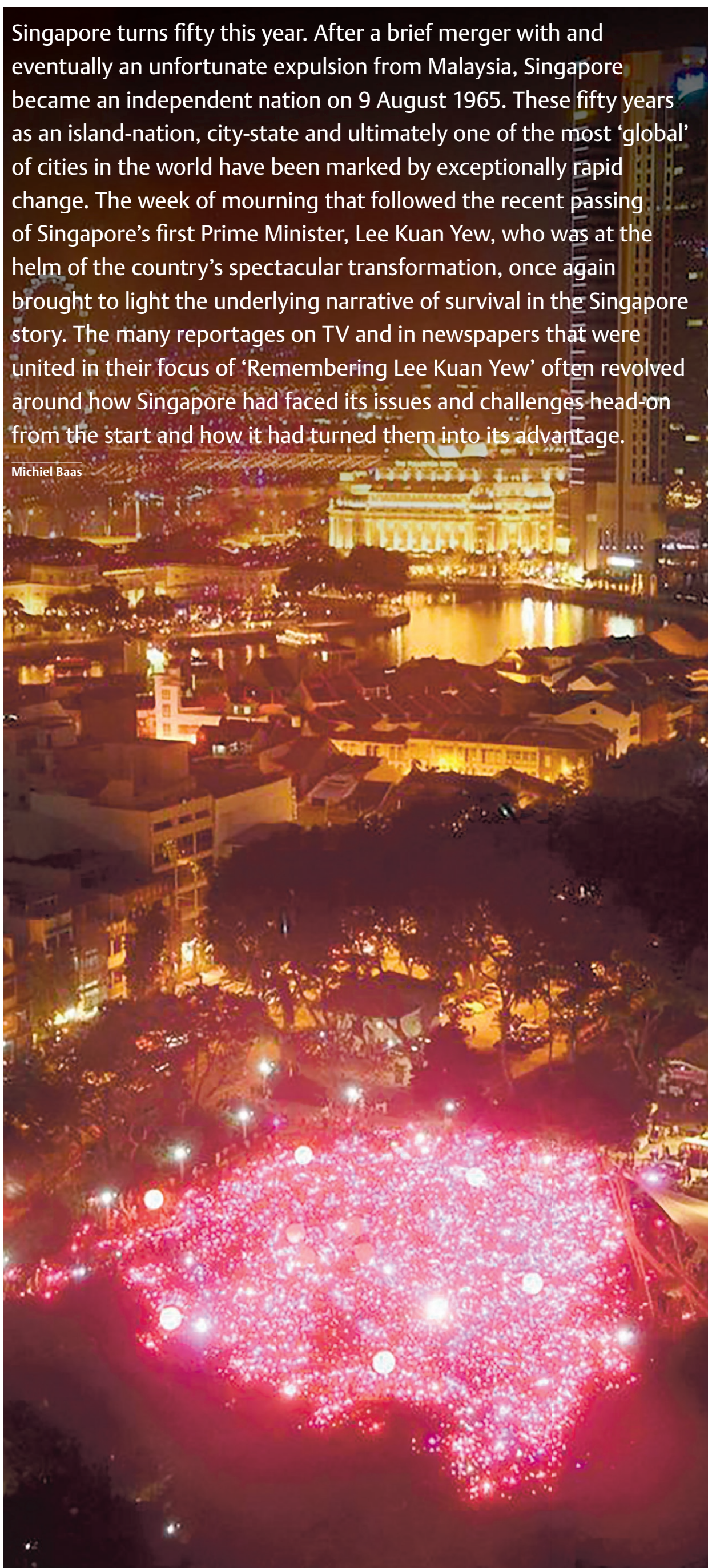
The first of these publications is Rajesh Rai's historical study *Indians in Singapore*, which covers the period of 1819-1945. Typically a history of arrival, departure and settlement its focus is on a 'diaspora' in the making, which would eventually become one of the four pillars on which modern-day multicultural Singapore firmly rests. This multicultural reality, however, has become considerably more complex in recent years with the arrival of an ever-increasing number of migrants. The second book, *Immigration in Singapore* (edited by Norman Vasu et al.), is particularly illuminating in this regard. It discusses the impact that waves of migrants have had on the socio-cultural landscape of Singapore and the growing voices of discontent. With respect to this, the third volume, *Mobilizing Gay Singapore*, not only provides a detailed account of how LGBT-rights have been negotiated, contested and pushed forward over time in Singapore, but also how through this a broader narrative emerges of the complexities of population management, sociocultural sensibilities and Singapore's quest for survival. As such, in the final section I will come back to the possible answers to Mahbubani's question – Yes, No, and Maybe – and how all three are part of the same ongoing story.

The arrival of (Indian) migrants

For most of the colonial period migrants saw their stay in Singapore as temporary, as Rajesh Rai explains in the Introduction of his book. "Toiling for years, often under arduous conditions, they held on to the glimmer of hope for a return to the warmth of their kith and kin, one day." (p. xv) It seems that many did eventually return but a minority didn't and it was here that the first seeds were planted of what would eventually grow into a sizable and highly visible Indian community. Rai's study is basically the first to provide a comprehensive overview of Indian arrivals in Singapore and the subsequent formation of a local diaspora.

The first Indians to arrive on the island of Singapore were the *lascars* and *sepoys* of the 2nd Battalion 20th (Marine) Regiment of the Bengal Native Infantry who accompanied Raffles himself in 1819 (p. 5). These 'Bengalis' generally hailed from what is now modern Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and comprised mainly upper caste Hindus. However, Tamil Muslims from the Coromandel Coast had been active and influential in the Malay region as early as the fifteenth century and even occupied prominent positions in the Malacca Sultanate. As such they were in the vanguard when Raffles set foot on Singaporean soil (p. 8). Parsis, who had already begun to venture to the Chinese coast from the mid-18th century onwards, exporting cotton and opium (p. 10), started to arrive on the scene during this period as well. And so did Nattukottai Chettiars, a merchant class initially involved in the salt trade and later also in cotton, pear and rice. It was in particular through money lending schemes that the 'Chettiars' were able to amass considerable fortunes, something that also enabled them to make a more lasting imprint on Singapore's cultural landscape through the building of temples such as the Thendayuthapani temple located on Tank Road. During the annually held festival of Thaipusam, the 'Chettiar temple', as it is locally also referred to, continues to mark the destination for devotees who have taken part in the four kilometre long procession from the Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple in Little India. Piercing their bodies with spikes and carrying or dragging so-called *kavadis* adorned with images of Goddess Parvati and Lord Murugam, the devotees pay tribute to the spear (*vel*, also symbolic for 'knowledge') with which Goddess Parvati attributed her 'son' Lord Murugan and which allowed him to slay the demon Soorapadman, and as a result ridding the world of evil.

Rajesh Rai's well-researched study of how the idea of an 'Indian community' developed over time is not just revealing for the imprint it left on Singapore's geographical set-up, but also how it impacted the country's socio-cultural make-up. His narration takes us past such staging posts as Singapore's history as a penal colony (Indian convicts rarely exercised the option to return to India after completing their sentence); the employment of Indians in labour-intensive jobs by the Singapore harbour and river; the (initially unregulated) arrival of indentured labourers on the scene; and also the shift in attitudes to and heightened suspicion of Indians in Singapore after India's first war of independence in 1857 (and the growing preference for Sikh men for the maintenance of law and order in the colony); the concerns over Indian involvement in various



Chinese secret societies (at war with each other); and the impact made by the establishment of the Straits Settlements as a crown colony in 1867 (from which moment Singapore starts to assume a commercial position of global significance).

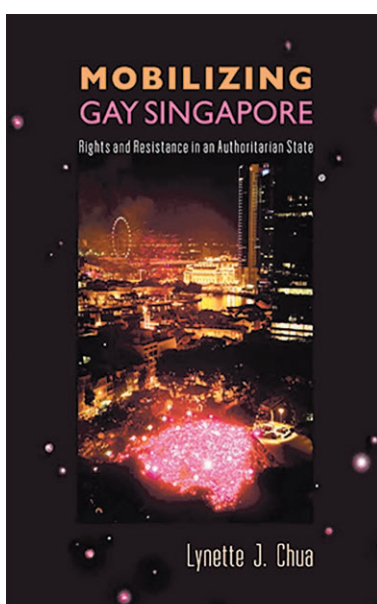
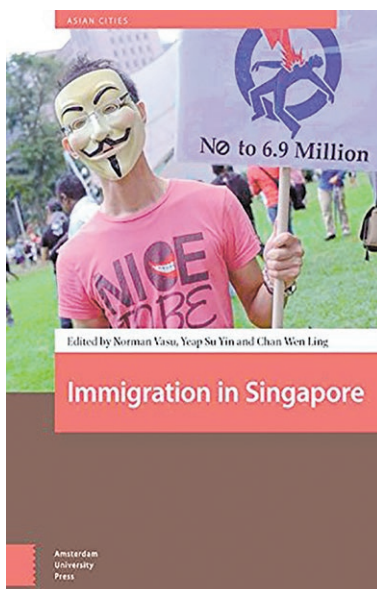
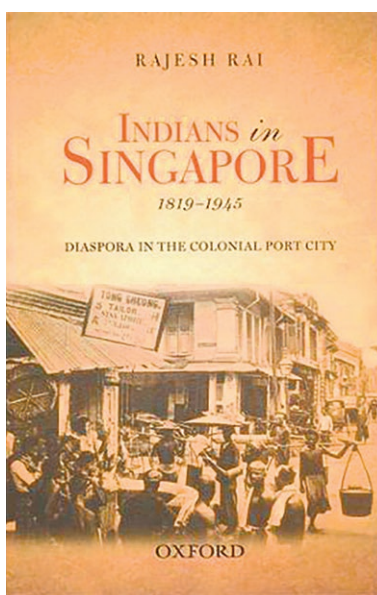
In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Indian social formations started transforming in terms of socio-economic profiles. As Rai explains, the port city became an important stopover for luminaries, preachers, and pilgrims, who brought with them not only skills, capital and labour power, but also ideas, cultural practices, sacred symbols and ways of life (p. 133). Although the period from the 1880s till WWI were relatively 'problem free', the gradual spread of education and the (easier) inflow of information from 'outside', most notably the Indian subcontinent, did have socio-political implications in the long run (p. 137). It was during this period that the first vernacular presses were established, for instance, and various new organizations were founded which made visible the diversity along ethnic, linguistic and religious lines. The interwar period then sees the establishment of 'Indian outfits' that are directly influenced by political developments within the Subcontinent itself (p. 167). The influx of lower-caste and *Adi Dravida* labourers further adds to this as it lays bare caste divisions.

In the final section of *Indians in Singapore* Rajesh Rai turns to the Japanese Occupation, a three year period during which Singapore became the nerve centre for the Indian Independence Movement in East Asia. In those three years Singapore played host to the Indian Independence League, the civilian-political arm of the Movement, and the Indian National Army, its military wing. Mid-1943 this would also bring the renowned Indian nationalist leader, (Netaji) Subhas Chandra Bose, to Singapore. The end of the Japanese Occupation in August 1945 marked the start of a ten-year period during which Singapore moved to partial internal self-governance. Independent Malaysia, the product of a merger between the Federation of Malaya, North Borneo and Sarawak, grudgingly also welcomed Singapore on-board when it was formed on 16 September 1963. However, an unstable arrangement from the start, Singapore was expelled less than two years later and had to face the reality of being an independent nation.

Migration society and national identity

Immigration in Singapore, the edited volume by Norman Vasu, Yeap Su Yin and Chan Wen Ling, provides an important insight into how Singapore subsequently developed post-1965, particularly with respect to its population strategy. Initially faced with high unemployment and a severe housing crisis the People's Action Party (PAP), under the leadership of its first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, embarked on an ambitious program to address these issues. With demand for labour quickly growing, the initially strict immigration rules – implemented to reinforce the idea of an independent and sovereign state – were relaxed and in the subsequent decades the arrival of an ever-growing stream of newcomers became key to the country's economic growth. Now firmly recognized as one of the greatest economic success stories, Singapore is also frequently referred to as one of the most globalized, open and competitive economies, one of the world's richest nations, and one that ranks in the top of various quality of living indexes. What then to make of the approximately four thousand Singaporeans who joined a protest held at Hong Lim Park in 2013? The impetus for the protest, which various contributors in *Immigration in Singapore* also refer to, was the recently released 'White Paper on Population' in which the government proposed to increase the country's population from 5.3 to 6.9 million by 2030.¹ Citing concerns over an aging population and declining fertility rates, the Paper was widely understood as a plan to further increase the inflow of new immigrants.

The Introduction of *Immigration in Singapore* opens with a quote from the former Minister for Trade and Industry, George Yeo (2000), which argues that Singapore has become a migration society all over again, referring to the fact that not only one in four marriages in Singapore is to a foreigner, but also that for every two babies born one permanent resident is welcomed (p. 8). In discussing Singapore's ongoing history with immigration, a 'global city' narrative is never far away. Yet as the first contributions in the volume also make clear, Singapore's ambitions of becoming and maintaining its position as a global city and its large migrant labour force does not always agree with the country's nation-state building efforts (p. 10). As such, the influx of new migrants has considerably complicated the original multi-ethnic make-up of Singapore (a carefully managed mix of four ethnically diverse groups – Chinese, Eurasian, Indian and Malay – each with their own 'national' language: Chinese, English, Tamil and Bahasa Melayu). It seems that part of the opposition to increasing Singapore's population further can be explained by, as Eugene K.B. Tan argues, a lack of an 'affective connection' with the country's immigration policies. While the focus is largely on 'material and pragmatic' explanations for the policies (aging population, low fertility rates, global competitiveness), Tan argues that "[t]here is limited appeal to the affective



dimension that a contested major public policy like immigration is so badly in need of." (p. 55) Singapore's nation-state building efforts, which have fostered a growing sense of national identity and belonging, plays a part in this as well. Signs baring slogans such as 'Singapore for Singaporeans' and 'I Miss Singapore' indicate an affective relationship with the national identity, which newcomers may not necessarily share.

In an important chapter, Bilveer Singh unpacks the politics of immigration with respect to both official (PAP) policy and opposition received. It confirms the impression that an increasing number of Singaporeans appear to feel threatened by the policies implemented (p. 74) and that this is fuelled by integration-related issues. Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho's chapter makes this particularly 'visible' by discussing how this plays out in Singapore's so-called Heartlands. Ho raises the question how migration impacts the cultural landscape and in what ways these features of landscapes are called forth to impact upon other social relations and processes in Singapore (p. 116). As such, she argues, that within the context of the Heartlands, spatial proximity fails to promote meaningful social interaction and fosters stereotypes that fuel social tensions (p. 115). Ho's focus is particularly rewarding as it regards the often-overlooked middle ground of migrants and locals who exist in-between the realities and narratives of low- and highly-skilled migration; each category coming with its own concomitant associations and expectations. It is here that we realize how much Singapore's multicultural landscape has changed. No longer is the divide simply one of Bangladeshi and Tamil migrant workers (employed in construction and the harbour) on the one hand, and highly-skilled 'expat' professionals from Western nations on the other hand; the arrival of mainland PRC Chinese, Indians, and also those from Western nations competing with local Singaporeans for mid-level skilled jobs is clearly impacting dynamics between locals and newcomers. In the discussion that frames this conundrum the Heartland has come to stand for the ordinary Singapore of everyday, the embodied collocation of which is represented by Singapore as a global city, actively seeking out to bring in 'global talent' (p. 124).

Pragmatic resistance in a 'global' city

The site of the 2013 protests over the White Paper, Hong Lim Park, is also the location for the annually held Pink Dot, which raises awareness for LGBT-related issues in Singapore. Lynette J. Chua's account of *Mobilizing Gay Singapore* not only provides a fascinating account of how LGBT-activism and politics have developed in Singapore over time, but in more general terms is also revealing in terms of how opposition and dissent are mediated within the context of a nation that witnessed rapid economic growth, but also seeks to strike a balance between its local ('Heartland') identity and 'global city' aspirations.

Central to Chua's exploration in *Mobilizing Gay Singapore* is the concept of 'pragmatic resistance'. Section 377A of the Penal Code, a colonial left-over, criminalizes 'gross indecency' between men and effectively makes homosexual acts illegal in Singapore. Although not actively maintained as such, members of the LGBT 'community' in Singapore face various challenges such as getting access to public housing, in which the majority of Singaporeans live; but more generally, receiving recognition of issues and challenges faced. The ban on publicly 'promoting' or 'glamorizing' LGBT 'lifestyles' further complicates matters (p. 39).

The annually held Pink Dot is an intriguing deviation from the norm.

Internationally recognized as an important 'gay pride' event, not just for Singapore but for Asia in general as well, the slogans and formulations that provide a frame for the event – such as 'Supporting the Freedom to Love' – actively appeal to Singaporean mainstream family values. Chua argues that Pink Dot can be interpreted as a pragmatic way of resisting opposition from, for instance, Christian movements and the authorities, which have (partly successfully) hindered earlier attempts to organize gay rights events (such as a Pink Picnic and the Pink Run). As only Singaporean permanent residents and citizens can participate, Pink Dot is also a 'decidedly' local Singaporean event. This is further emphasized by the use of the color pink, which the organization suggests is a blend between red and white, the colors of Singapore's flag. In addition, the name 'Pink Dot' clearly references Singapore's epithet 'Little Red Dot.' Publicity material furthermore underlines that Pink Dot is not a political event or protest.

While Pink Dot has faced growing opposition from religious groups over the years it not only continues to 'survive', but as the stunning aerial photographs made each year illustrate (main image), the event continues to grow in size as well. Building upon Richard Florida's well-known argument of creative cities, Pink Dot can also be understood to enhance Singapore's image of a global city that actively seeks to attract talent migrants who will find a welcome and stimulating home there. Attracting these migrants is part of Singapore's on-going quest for survival, one that will continue to influence strategies and policies in the years to come.

The survival of the Little Red Dot

In relation to the question of survival Kishore Mahbubani provides three potential answers: yes, no, maybe. While it is obviously the 'maybe' that guides Singapore's engagement with the future, it is 'no' that succinctly symbolizes how the unlikelyness of the city-state's survival guided policy and politics over time. The unequivocal 'yes', which percolates throughout Mahbubani's decidedly optimistic text, however, resonates with how Singapore likes to celebrate its own success-story as one of the wealthiest, healthiest, safest, cleanest and most competitive nations in the world. Mahbubani's focus is, in that sense, very much on the resources and knowhow available in Singapore, an obvious indicator of the country's ability to cope and deal with issues raised.

Yet taking all four studies together a more complex image emerges of a country that will increasingly be confronted with the challenge of striking the right balance between global city aspirations on the one hand, and 'local' issues and sentiments on the other. As much as Singapore appears to be a unique case in terms of its size and position, other highly-developed nations appear to face comparative issues. Singapore's issues with its limited space, scarce resources, dependence on migrants and those that emerge from increasing population density and multicultural complexities, are not only comparable to issues that other city/states such as Hong Kong or Dubai face, but also, for instance, much larger countries such as Australia and Canada. In that sense, it would be a mistake to simply 'read' Singapore as an exceptional case because of its unique socio-political setup, small size and short history.

Singapore turns fifty this year. But even if this year the celebrations zoom in on Singapore's fifty years as an independent nation, four years from now it is likely the city will pay attention to the fact that Raffles arrived on its shore two hundred years ago. Meanwhile the National Museum has recently opened an exhibition that provides an overview of 700 years of 'Singapura'. Taking such 'temporal' matters into account reminds us of the fact that although Singapore is a relatively young nation, its recent history is connected to, as well as the product of, a much longer and more complex story. As one of the world's leading 'global cities' there is no doubt that Singapore's on-going story will likely provide fertile ground for future research in terms of how it negotiates and engages with globalizing influences and local realities.

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References

- 1 In response to the protests the Singapore Government now argues that it does not see the number of 6.9 million as a target per se and will again review the situation in 2020.