

EPISODE

Singapore Society

SUB CATEGORY

Main Article

TITLE

Modern Singapore: How have we progressed?

EXCERPT

Understand the transformation of Singapore and the challenges that Singapore needs to overcome till date.

CONTENT

The Modern Singapore

Ever since Singapore was thrust into independence on 9 August 1965, its founding fathers, led by charismatic and shrewd statesmen like Lee Kuan Yew and Dr Goh Keng Swee, had begun laying the foundations of a prosperous and flourishing city-state. Under the auspices of skilled and knowledgeable foreign professionals, the political leaders had already envisioned an advanced economy that would capture the attention of those who were keen to set foot on this island nation for trade and investment purposes.

Five decades later, as Singapore celebrated its Golden Jubilee in 2015, international observers have lauded the pioneers and its successors for the remarkable transformation of Singapore. In this featured issue, we will examine the challenges that modern Singapore will and have encountered from different perspectives, namely economic, social, educational, health and political.

How has Singapore embraced technology?

In order to comprehend the reasons behind the economic successes that have placed Singapore on the world map, it is imperative to start by focusing on the government's emphasis on technological innovation. Evidently, as demonstrated by other advanced economies, like South Korea and Japan, Singapore recognised the importance of technology in propelling its economic advancement. Through Research and Development (R&D) and interaction with Multinational Corporations (MNCs), the exchange of ideas facilitate greater innovation that augments quality assurance and maintains international competitiveness in the export markets.

According to global consultancy firm Deloitte, Singapore has been identified as a 'global leader' in embracing technology by exploring myriad ways to tap on new ideas to entrench its dominant position in the globally-competitive markets.

For instance, the Smart Nation initiative that began in 2014 had made nearly 98% of public services accessible online. In addition, as Singapore chairs ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) in 2018, it has made technological innovation the thematic agenda, as exemplified by the establishment of the ASEAN Smart Cities Network (ASCN). THE ASCN functions as a collaborative platform to promote smart and sustainable urban development for its ten ASEAN Member States via technological means. Hence, Singapore has welcomed technology with open arms and capitalised on its wide-ranging benefits to enhance its economic development extensively.

How Singapore develop modern institutions?

The second feature to explain the transformation of modern Singapore is the formation and evolution of public and private institutions that provided a firm foundation for the city-state to compete internationally. Institutions play a crucial role in creating a systematic and consistent mechanism for the public and private agencies to achieve desired aims, such as economic modernisation, educational development, digitisation and enhancements to social assistance.

From the economic standpoint, the Economic Development Board (EDB) was one of the most critical institutions that contributed to the advancement of the Singapore economy. On 1 August 1961, the EDB, led by permanent secretary in the Ministry of Finance Hon Sui Sen, replaced its predecessor Singapore Industrial Promotion Board (SIPB) and received a capital of S\$100 million to chart out its industrial development plan.

The EDB consisted of four major divisions: Investment Promotion Division to attract local and foreign entrepreneurs; Finance Division to manage investment activities; Projects Division to assess the technical and economic feasibility of projects; and Industrial Facilities Division to ensure sufficient provision of land for industrial projects.

In the 1960s, EDB's efforts had expanded to include investment promotion and industrial development. In 1968, the government established the Jurong Town Corporation (JTC) to assume the role of overseeing industrial estate development, as well as the Development Bank of Singapore (DBS), which focused on industrial financing. Over time, these economic institutions had led to the inflow of foreign investment and greater employment.

As for educational development, the Ministry of Education (MOE) was formed in 1955 and undergone continual reforms to prepare Singapore for the challenges that lay ahead. Led by the first education minister Chew Swee Kee, the government introduced the Education Ordinance on 13 December 1957, which was later known as the Education Act, which advocated equality in education for the Singapore population. In 1964, the government established secondary vocational schools to prepare individuals for employment in industries. Basic vocational skills were taught at these schools, such as woodworking and technical drawings.

Similarly, in 1968, the Technical Education Department was set up to expose secondary pupils to technical subjects. As a result, these educational institutions contributed to the development of skilled workers that matched industrial needs, like shipbuilding, oil refinery and woodworking.

In preparation for the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution', the Singapore government has guided existing and newly-established public institutions to facilitate the digitisation of economy. To maintain international competitiveness, the government has initiated wide-ranging projects to create an integrated digital infrastructure that provides a seamless and efficient experience.

As part of the Smart Nation initiative, the government announced its Digital Government Blueprint in June 2018. Within this Blueprint, six strategies are undertaken. For example, the Singapore Government Technology Stack (SGTS) is developed as a common digital platform for all government agencies to provide online services. The government aims to digitise 95% of its services by 2023.

Additionally, in 2016, the Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore (IDA) and Media Development Authority (MDA) were restructured into two new entities, namely the Infocommunications Media Development Authority (IMDA) and Government Technology Organisation (GTO). As part of the integrated Infocomm Media 2025 masterplan, the purpose of this restructuring was to capitalise in the digital convergence in areas, such as telecommunications.

Besides, the government has prepared for newer forms of threats in the face of digitisation. The Cyber Security Agency (CSA) was set up in 2015 to protect Singapore's critical areas, like the banking and energy sectors. The rising prevalence of cyber threats has shown the importance of such institutions, as seen by the SingHealth breach in July 2018 and the data theft on the Ministry of Defence in February 2017.

From the social perspective, the government has also formed institutions to promote social development. In view of the imminent and major demographic change, particularly the ageing population, the National Silver Academy (NSA) was formed. The NSA is an interconnected network of educational institutions, such as Institute of Technical Education (ITE), polytechnics, universities and community-based organisations, that promote lifelong learning amongst seniors.

Also, the Lifelong Learning Institute (LLI) was established in 2013 by SkillsFuture Singapore to provide professional skills upgrading programmes for adults, featuring a variety of courses, like business management, retail services and human resource management.

Besides, the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) was restructured as Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) to support the government's focus on the provision of social services and assistance to families in Singapore.

Therefore, these examples demonstrate the importance of institutions in providing well-structured frameworks for national progress that were instrumental in the creation of a modern Singapore.

How Singapore embraced modern values?

The third aspect that is essential in analysing the track record of modern Singapore is the cultivation and acceptance of modern values. Following the abrupt separation from Malaysia on 9 August 1965, Singapore was identified by some as a deviant that embraced foreign values to overcome its lack of natural resources and commit to self-reliance.

In contrast to its regional counterparts in the newly-independent Southeast Asia that adopted nationalistic policies to raise domestic ownership of industries, Singapore took a bold step forward by welcoming foreign-owned enterprises that were accompanied by the much-needed foreign investments for industrial growth.

Eventually, the perceived risky move had paid off as the emphasis on export-led industrialisation gave Singapore a first-mover advantage, seen in terms of the sharp decline in unemployment and tremendous boost to its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the manufacturing sector.

Furthermore, the implementation of a bilingual education policy in 1966 was evident of Singapore's willingness to accept modern values. Under this policy, all students in Singapore learnt English as the common working language, while their 'Mother Tongue' (Chinese, Malay and Tamil) were taught for cultural preservation.

By learning the basics of the English language, the Singapore workforce could tap on the advent of trade liberalisation by attracting foreign companies that found such a business environment conducive for expansion into the Southeast Asian region.

Although Singapore was commonly referred to as a successful case study to showcase its effective economic strategies that transformed the nation, critics have commented on the paternalistic rule that were seemingly in conflict with Western liberal democracy. As such, this observation gave rise to the 'Asian values' debate in the early 1990s.

Since then, the government have introduced more tangible forms of national ideology, such as the 'Shared Values' on 15 January 1991 to cultivate a national identity that matched the evolution of modern values. This official set of shared national values was formulated by then First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong on 28 October 1988 as he pointed out that the exposure to 'Western values', like individualism would threaten the social cohesion of a multicultural and multiracial society. Therefore, a state ideology was essential to encompass a more suitable set of modern values to maintain national unity.

How modern Singapore affect us?

In view of the above-mentioned developments of Singapore, we can now examine the economic, social, education, healthcare and political consequences. By doing so, it will be a more feasible undertaking to identify the desirable impacts as well as the challenges that the government strives to overcome.

Economic impacts

Starting with the economic implications of modern Singapore, one of the positive consequences is the improvement in standard of living. Starting out as a developing country that was rife in poverty and crime, Singapore undergone rapid economic transformation, as measured by the surge in its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita from \$516 in 1965 to \$50,123 in 2011, which was nearly a fifty-fold increase.

Through its shift from import-substitution industrialisation to export-oriented industrialisation, Singapore's double-digit growth rates were accompanied by a subsequent fall in unemployment rate from 10% in the 1960s to 2% by the early 1990s.

According to the 2016 Quality of Living Survey by Mercer Human Resource Consulting, Singapore was ranked at the top in Asia, meeting the requirements that affect quality of life, like access the public healthcare services, education, recreation, housing and public transportation.

Nevertheless, modern Singapore is not exempt from criticism, as its economic progress has given rise to income inequality, which perpetuated social discontent amongst the lower- and middle-income segments of the population. Underneath the veil of a peaceful and stable society lies traces of social fractures caused by the income disparity. Class divide may be a major contributor to social division in Singapore, rather than differences in race or religion.

The 2017 Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Study on Social Capital in Singapore revealed that on average, Singaporeans who live in public housing have less than one friend who lives in private housing. IPS deputy director Gillian Koh and National University of Singapore (NUS) sociologist Tan Ern Ser who were involved in the study pointed out that those who live in private homes had more ties with those who resided in private properties, than those who lived in public flats.

In 2018, a joint survey was conducted by OnePeople.sg and Channel NewsAsia. 50% of the 1036 respondents shared that income inequality was likeliest contributor to social divide, whereas 20% stated race or religion was a possible factor for these fault lines.

Social consequences

As for the social implications of modern Singapore, the government's prioritisation on the recognition and preservation of a multicultural and multireligious society has paid off, as observed by the harmonious co-existence of diverse ethnic communities.

One positive implication of modern and cosmopolitan Singapore is the recognition of a national identity, which is characterised by different aspects, such as cuisine, linguistic patterns and celebration of festivities.

According to a Channel NewsAsia-Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Survey on Ethnic Identity conducted in 2017, most respondents identified more with the combined national and ethnic identities. Clearly, this shows the recognition of a national identity was pivotal in creating a peaceful and stable society that is free from inter-ethnic conflicts.

However, the clash of new alternative values with traditional family values has contributed to a disenfranchised society. The openness of the Singapore economy has allowed diverse ideologies to influence the mindsets of individuals, especially the youths.

For instance, Senior Minister of State Dr. Maliki Osman shared on the President's Address in 2018 that Singaporean youths adopt a 'You Only Live Once (YOLO)' attitude. Youths are increasingly drawn to the desire for the fulfilment of personal experiences, rather than the conventional desire for material success as held by the older generations.

Additionally, the influx of alternative values is evident in the rising prominence of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community. Ever since its inaugural event that began in 2009, the Pink Dot movement has gained traction amongst some locals. Although the social movement has advocated the values of inclusivity and freedom to love, religious groups have expressed harsh criticism, such as the 'Wear White' event to defend traditional Islamic values in 2014.

Also, there is a growing trend of singlehood in Singapore. According to a 2016 General Household Survey, 70% of respondents in their mid to late 20s chose to remain single as they prioritised career pursuits over marriage. Associate Professor Paulin Straughan attributed the survey results to rising literacy rates of youths, who chose to prioritise careers.

Education

From the educational point of view, modern Singapore has become a knowledge-based economy that takes pride in its internationally-recognised education system. As a role model, Singapore's comprehensive and well-organised learning tracks have been studied and emulated by other countries.

One notable consequence of its remarkable formal education and research institutions is the influx of foreign talents and top-notch academics that reflected Singapore's standing on the world map as a regional education hub.

For example, Singapore hosts world-renowned educational institutions, like INSEAD (European Institute of Business Administration). In 2018, Quacquarelli Symonds ranked the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) at the 11th and 12th positions in the assessment of the world's top 1000 universities.

Besides, the Singapore government embarked on many initiatives to promote creativity and innovation. In 2018, Singapore was ranked third on Bloomberg Innovation Index, overtaking the highly-advanced Germany. Its remarkable achievement can be traced to the persistence of the Education Ministry in revitalising the learning curriculum to match the ever-changing demands of world.

For example, students in Tanjong Katong Girls' School are given one hour and twenty minutes to explore their interests every Tuesday morning. Similarly, students in Queensway Secondary School developed a sea perch and water quality sensor to analyse the water, as part of the Applied Learning Programme in Environmental Science Education. Hence, the continued emphasis on innovation has proven beneficial in cultivating a pool of creative and future-ready workforce.

However, skeptics have argued that Singapore's results-driven education system has cultivated conforming individuals that lack creativity and critical thinking abilities. Although the Ministry of Education (MOE) has taken bold steps in shifting its focus away from grades, such as the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) revamp in 2018, the public's preoccupation with aggregate examination scores that is associated with potential career prospects remains deeply entrenched.

Furthermore, Singapore is also faced with the challenge of maintaining its international competitiveness due to the complexities of the current challenges in various sectors. Although it is commendable that the government has stressed the importance of continual education, as observed by the establishment of the Lifelong Learning Institute and the SkillsFuture national movement, individuals also have to bear the responsibility of expanding their knowledge and keeping their skillset relevant.

As such, the growing accessibility of accredited massive open online courses (MOOCs), like Coursera and Udacity, have challenged the role of formal educational institutes, particularly schools, in fulfilling the responsibility of knowledge expansion and skills acquisition.

Healthcare

As for healthcare, citizens in modern Singapore benefit from the advanced and integrated systems that ensure the accessibility of basic healthcare services for all. Under the purview of the Ministry of Health (MOH), one significant benefit is that individuals can tap onto affordable basic medical services from a wide range of public facilities, like hospitals, community health centres and nursing homes.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), Singapore was ranked sixth in terms of healthcare systems in 2000. Therefore, good quality and greater access to healthcare have extended the life expectancy of individuals in Singapore. The 2017 World Health Statistics report by WHO revealed that Singapore was ranked third in the world for average life expectancy, at about 83.1 years.

Additionally, the report also indicated Singapore was ranked one of the lowest globally in indicators, like mortality rate attributed to air pollution, lack of hygiene and chronic respiratory diseases.

Although the Singapore government has introduced three healthcare programs to maintain the affordability and accessibility of healthcare services, namely the MediFund, MediSave and MediShield Life (also known as the “3 M’s of healthcare”), Singapore bracing for impact in view of the burgeoning demand by the ageing population.

Senior Minister of State for Law and Finance Indranee Rajah commented that healthcare expenditure on the elderly is one of the major items in the 2018 Budget. As such, the working population may have to bear the brunt of a more extensive tax hike, as shown by the controversial deliberation on the increase in the Goods and Services Tax (GST) from 7% to 9% between 2021 and 2025.

Additionally, the fast-paced modern life in Singapore has undermined the mental well-being of individuals. According to the Samaritans of Singapore (SOS), about 530 teenagers contacted the suicide prevention centre in the 2017/2018 fiscal year, which is a 53% increase from the previous year. SOS points out that common contributors to the higher risk of suicide include academic pressure, relationship issues at school and home.

Also, according to the Statistics on Marriages and Divorces Reference Year 2016 report, the number of divorces in Singapore increased, citing reasons like infidelity and unreasonable behaviour. Besides, the Singapore Police Force (SPF) revealed that there is an increasing trend of juvenile delinquency in 2017, particularly crimes like shoplifting and possession of offensive weapons. Hence, it is clear that the management of mental well-being of individuals is an important challenge that Singapore must deal with the minimise these threats to social stability.

Politics

From the political standpoint, Singapore has been hailed as one of the most politically stable country in the Southeast Asian region, which has been affected by considerable bouts of political unrests and revolts in the neighboring countries. The one-party dominance of the Singapore government, under the People's Action Party (PAP), has enabled policymakers to spearhead social and economic policies consistently without encountering much resistance from the ground.

A 2018 report by the World Justice Project revealed Singapore as the top country for order and security, in which its indicator was based on the level of political unrest and management of crimes. Besides, the 2017 Corruption Perceptions Index showed Singapore ranked 6th out of 180 countries in the world, indicating that its one of the least corrupt. This positive implication was vital for the development of a conducive business environment as foreign investors value political stability, which has contributed to the stable and strong exchange rate.

However, in the recent decade, the incumbent has encountered resistance from the political opposition attributed to the social grievances. For instance, the 2011 General Elections was recognised by political observers as a turning point as the Aljunied Group Representation Constituency (GRC) was the first-ever GRC to be won by an opposition party, resulting in an electoral defeat of a foreign minister and cabinet minister. Major issues that were raised during the electoral campaigns included the cost of living, housing affordability and the immigration policy.

Furthermore, critics argue that the government's extensive use of oppressive measures have curtailed political freedom. According to the Human Rights Watch report in 2017, the government's tight control of the expression of political views, as seen by the Public Order Act, Broadcasting Act and Sedition Act, had a chilling effect on free speech and assembly.

For example, former activist and blogger Roy Ngerng received a defamation suit by the Prime Minister of Singapore. In Dec 2015, the Supreme Court ordered Ngerng to pay S\$150,000 in damages to the Prime Minister as his accusations, such as the government's usage of Central Provident Fund (CPF), have "severely undermined the credibility of the target". Nevertheless, the ruling party's track record in its five decade of governance, seen in terms of its competent management of economic and social challenges, has ensured its political dominance.