

ARE WE CIVIC-MINDED ENOUGH?

After more than 50 years of nation-building and having attained First World status economically, are Singaporeans more gracious compared to 10 years ago? KC Soh explores our level of civic-mindedness.

Bike-sharing started in Singapore over a year ago. Very quickly it proved a hit, and ridership reached one million users in the first year alone for oBike, one of the earliest operators in Singapore. Mobike, another bike-sharing outfit, reported more than 10 million trips by users since the company launched in Singapore last March.

Just as quickly, however, photos on social media showed bicycles parked indiscriminately. Some were vandalised, with broken locks, pedals or chains. A couple was even caught dumping rental bikes in a canal. For many Singaporeans, these incidents are another addition to a long litany of inconsiderate behaviour.

Despite measures and steps taken to deter people from abusing rental bikes – like putting in place a credit

scoring system – such behaviour still persists.

In an informal straw poll conducted for this feature, about half of the 15 professionals interviewed felt that civic-mindedness in Singapore has not improved over the last 10 years.

“Our infrastructure may have improved,” said Ms Delphine Sng, a ceramicist who retired from a career in bank compliance, “but the software – the mindset of the people – has not really caught up with the physical environment.”

Briton Ms Emma Robertson-Chia, a graphic designer and permanent resident for more than 20 years, said: “What has always struck me is that people care quite a bit about their homes and families, but the second they step out of their front door, that space is not their responsibility.” Ms Robertson-Chia

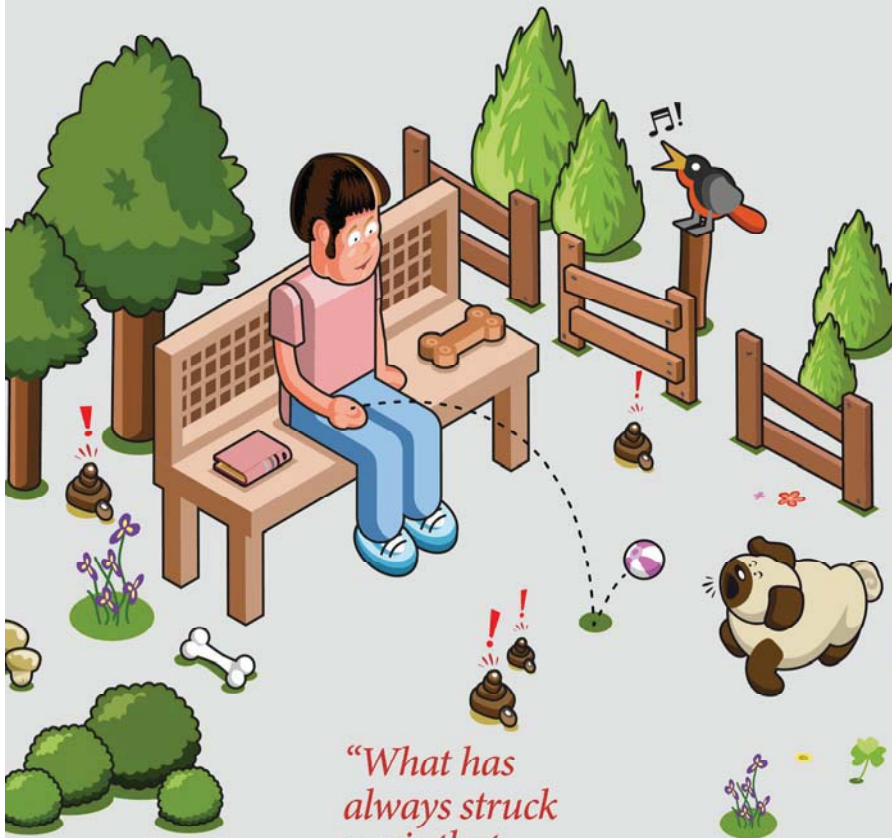
cited dog owners who do not pick up after their pets in public as an example.

NUS alumnus Mr Thomas Choo echoed Ms Robertson-Chia’s sentiments. “People just don’t display enough civic-mindedness to keep public toilets as clean as they would at home,” said the internet entrepreneur.

The way veteran journalist Mr Conrad Raj sees it, Singaporeans are less civic-minded today than they were some 20 to 30 years ago. “Just look at the litter on our sidewalks.”

A PHILOSOPHY OF ECONOMIC PRAGMATISM

How do we explain such non-civic behaviour? Dr William Wan, General Secretary of the Singapore Kindness Movement (SKM) – a non-government organisation (NGO) that encourages people to



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show and share acts of kindness – believes that Singaporeans in general pursue economic success at the expense of civic-mindedness.

This is the philosophy of economic pragmatism, according to Dr Špela Močnik, a sociologist at the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities, Singapore University of Technology and Design.

There is “little room for developing a sense of connectedness and camaraderie that would not be defined in economic terms,” said Dr Močnik. “To thrive and survive in competitive and fast-paced urban environments, individuals often find themselves seeing others as a means to an end rather than fellow citizens to whom they are connected in more profound ways.”

The reason for this? It may well be the country’s efficient infrastructure. According to Dr Wan, Singaporeans “feel less of a need to participate in the civic side of life together and believe that most things will be taken care of”. “We may be victims of our own success,” he said.

STARTING THEM YOUNG

Value systems typically start at home, and families play a crucial role in forming their children’s mindset and habits. In other words, if parents sow the seeds of civic-mindedness in the hearts and minds of their young children now, it will create a future where people are more responsible, without the false sense of entitlement that now appears to be pervasive.

The easiest way is to lead by example, as children learn more from what they see adults do rather than what they hear from adults

or think they do. Parents can start with little things like recycling and not littering, and incorporate civic-mindedness into the family’s lifestyle. Then slowly work with children through larger, more important practices such as offering their seats to a pregnant woman or an elderly person on the train, or cleaning up after themselves in restaurants.

The government, too, recognises its part in youth education. In 1998, the Ministry of Education implemented the Community Involvement Programme (CIP) to instil civic responsibility in our school children through volunteer work. In 2012, the CIP was reframed as Values In Action (VIA) to place a stronger emphasis on developing desired values through community involvement.

Both the CIP and VIA aim for civic-minded values to be absorbed naturally at a young, receptive age, so that being kind and thoughtful can become second nature and form part of one’s identity.

The SKM also partners with various organisations in the public and private sectors “to grow the kindness presence in society,” said Dr Wan. The NGO educates young students through various communication channels such as its quarterly publication *Kindsville Times*. It is also active on social media platforms like Facebook, where it regularly posts stories about kind Singaporeans, and YouTube with “Singa and the Kindness Cubbies” – a series which centres around the adventures of Singa, a cheerful lion, and his cubbie friends.

These initiatives should resonate with those who believe that inculcating civic values from a young age is key. “This is so that our society can grow as a whole to become more gracious,” said Mr Thomas Choo. “[But] it will take place [only] during the lifetime of the next generation of Singaporeans.”

SIGNS OF CHANGE

The hope is that we may not have to wait till the next generation for a more gracious society. In fact, there are already encouraging signs of a growing mindset of civic-mindedness.

For banker Mrs Constance Goh, the acts of kindness exhibited during the wake for the late former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew – such as Singaporeans handing out drinks to those waiting in long queues to pay their last respects – are heartwarming and show that Singaporeans do have a softer, more caring side.

NUS undergraduate, Ms Tan Su, also thinks that Singaporeans are more considerate now. “I’ve seen improvement in our behaviour at train stations; in the past, people did not automatically stand to one side of escalators,” she said. “People are also more proactive in offering their seats to those in need.”

There are also signs of more awareness among government agencies and businesses. For example, the National Environment Agency (NEA) has partnered with food court and fast food operators to implement tray-return systems, to encourage courtesy and graciousness. But some Singaporeans feel that progress is slow. Cynics might point out the inconvenient truth that with our philosophy of economic pragmatism, such campaigns may need to be sweetened with incentives, such as giving diners a refund when they return their trays.

However, Mrs Kimberley-Husar Chua, a Singaporean who has been living in Europe for more than 30 years and visits Singapore regularly, has observed that “these days more people clear their own trays at hawker centres and at fast food restaurants.”

Whether the result of a maturing collective psyche, education or social proof – where people imitate

socially accepted behaviours – these encouraging trends in everyday behaviour are signs of change towards a more civic-minded society.

A MORE HUMANISTIC TOUCH

Dr Močnik believes “a more humanistic touch to our world view can lead to a society where people do not compete for lunches but share them instead”.

Indeed, Dr Wan is heartened to note that “people of kindred spirit are organising their own ground-up movements on civic causes they are passionate about.”

Examples include Transient Workers Count 2, which assists low-wage migrant workers in difficulty, and Willing Hearts, a soup kitchen run by volunteers who prepare, cook and

deliver 5,000 daily meals to needy beneficiaries. The kitchen attracts up to 250 daily volunteers.

A dyed-in-the-wool optimist, Dr Wan believes that Singapore will inevitably grow in civic-mindedness. He anchors his

belief “primarily in our young people, who are among the most active incubators of ground-up movements”.

Undergraduate Ms Tan Su, who is co-leading a green initiative at her faculty at NUS to reduce plastic cup use, summed it up this way: “In the bigger, global picture, what we do here will have a small impact. But one step at a time.” ■

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