

# Giving Singapore a richer hue

With her helicopter view as a social scientist, diplomat and arts champion, Chan Heng Chee believes Singapore's biggest challenge today is meeting rising expectations and reconciling differences as the population becomes more diverse. **DENYSE YEO** reports

**P**ROFESSOR Chan Heng Chee is describing her daily schedule. She spends half her day at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where she is Ambassador-at-Large. The other half sees her wearing another hat – that of chairman of the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities (LKY CIC) at the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD).

In addition to that, she is chairman of the National Arts Council (NAC) which involves, among other things, working lunches and attending arts performances. The day of this interview with *The Business Times*; for instance, she catches an art show at the Institute of Technical Education in the afternoon and later in the evening, *Facing Goya*, the opera directed by Ong Keng Sen for the Singapore International Festival of Arts.

If that wasn't enough, she travels up to five days a month on average in her role as Singapore's representative to the Asean Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. Prof Chan also has six books to her name. It's no wonder that her day typically starts at 8am and ends at 1am.

A routine as packed as hers is enough to make one's palms damp with anxiety. But Prof Chan, who was Singapore's ambassador to the United States for 16 years until June 2012, seems to thrive on such a relentless schedule.

With a habit of Googling on her iPhone when she can't sleep, she says: "All these different jobs make me think, and give me new perspectives. As one gets older, it is so easy to end up in a rut. What is new is interesting to me, and dealing with new issues keeps the mind young and gives me more energy."

The only challenge she faces: "Not having enough hours in the day to do everything! And I wish for good health."

## What lies ahead for the city-state

Indeed, Prof Chan is not one to take things easy. On her return from the US in 2012, she immediately got to work setting up the LKY CIC. She built it

up from scratch with an engineer, "working very hard" to establish a financial base, such as scouting for research funding, and to scope the work. Its inaugural event was the well-received Global Cities Initiatives roundtable in October 2012, with luminaries such as former UK prime minister Tony Blair and former Colombian president Alvaro Uribe attending.

The centre now has nine academic staff and works with 25 other researchers from the SUTD. Its research topics include Asian port cities, ageing urbanism as well as dense and green housing prototypes. In addition, both the centre and SUTD are working with JTC Corporation on innovation in Changi Business Park.

Of particular interest is an ongoing project called "The Future of Cities", which examines Singapore's challenges 25 years down the road in areas such as the nature of work, the economy, transport, big data and urban form. Its aim is to get a better idea of the challenges that lie ahead for the city-state, explains Prof Chan.

She spells out two possible scenarios. The optimistic version is that Singapore maintains economic growth and social harmony, with greater diversity. There is empathy for the less fortunate, who are looked after by the more fortunate. People work smart and aim towards a sustainable future in a stable regional and international environment.

The more pessimistic version sees an absence of peace in the region and internationally, with slowing global growth and countries unable to tackle the challenges of climate change. At home, the more people have, the more demanding they become. Things do not quite work, and society is fractured.

She pauses, then says: "The reality will be in between. It cannot be all rosy or all dark. The key is learning how to respond

as a people and hoping that external scenarios remain manageable. The question is: Do you want the best or the worst?"

With her helicopter view as a social scientist, diplomat and arts champion, Prof Chan believes the biggest challenge facing Singapore today is meeting rising expectations and reconciling differences as the population becomes more diverse.

She says: "It is not easy building consensus over all the issues but it is the challenge of the times. Global cities at the front-line of the globalisation process all face this. We are going to be the pace-setters, so we will need to work out the solutions and best practices."

"How much Singapore has changed surprises me. We are becoming different. There are more voices. But we have to learn each other's differences. It cannot be about my way or the highway, or my way or nothing. We share the same space so there should be a little give and take."

As an example, she points to the arts sector and the recent National Library Board furore over two children's books. "It was a learning experience. It was about living with differences."

## Seeing the beauty in things

The arts have a special place for Prof Chan, who once confessed that she would have been an art historian had she not become a political scientist. She was the head of the political science department at the National University of Singapore before serving as Singapore's permanent representative to the United Nations from 1989 to 1991.

Concurrently, she was the founding director of the Institute of Policy Studies in 1989 and started the Singapore International Foundation in 1991, becoming a director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in 1993. She was ambassador to the US from 1996 to 2012. (She notes wryly: "I have a record of wearing many different hats.")

She remembers that as a young girl growing up in the 1940s and 1950s, her father took the family to the movies, to cinemas that are no longer around: Roxy Theatre in Ka-

tong, Alhambra Cinema in Middle Road and Majestic Theatre in Chinatown. They watched matinee movies such as Chinese sword-fighting flicks and Cantonese tear-jerkers.

She particularly enjoyed the films from Hollywood's golden age, with stars like Grace Kelly and Fred Astaire gracing the silver screen. She says: "For us, it was escapism. A different world, a good life. Of course, these are all dreams but they helped us strive for change. The US was the epitome of what is modern."

Today, what has most surprised her is how lively the arts scene has become since she left Singapore for the US 18 years ago. There is a new passion and creativity within the community, she says, with many different players, from dancers to playwrights and visual artists. Public awareness and appreciation for the arts are also strong.

Yet she says: "Everyone wants to do something and there's a lot of enthusiasm, but the arts needs money to support it and we have to grow the audience. People want to participate in the arts but they are too busy with family, homework and work to go to a show – too many competing things going on."

That is why it is crucial to remember that the arts plays an important role in modern society. Says Prof Chan: "The arts – plays, movies, books – teaches you to see the beauty in things and to use your imagination. It gives life a richer hue. You appreciate the blue sky and green grass. It brings peace and joy, and sharpens your aesthetic appreciation."

"Literature gives us language and words. It teaches us to communicate with sons and daughters, husbands and lovers, how to be a better friend and even to sell things better."



## Important role:

*Facing Goya*, which opened this year's Singapore International Festival of Arts. 'The arts – plays, movies, books – teaches you to... use your imagination. It gives life a richer hue,' says Prof Chan

## Asian Insights

What began as a technical correction in late July has been complicated by international crises and conflicts. From Ukraine to Gaza to Iraq, these developments add to the reasons already out there for traders not to be in the markets right now. The DBS Chief Investment Office believes they pose no globalised risk and equities will head higher on a combination of accommodative policy, earnings and global growth once these geopolitical clouds have cleared. For those looking at China, we could see losses near-term, but makes it more attractive to buy into policy stimulus and growth stabilisation in the world's second largest economy. For more insights, visit [www.dbs.com.sg/private-banking/aics/home.page](http://www.dbs.com.sg/private-banking/aics/home.page)



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