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By Martin Vaughan

A new ranking of Asia's most innovative cities puts Singapore at the top while looking askance at Shanghai and snubbing Jakarta all together.



The study, conducted by Asia-focused consulting firm

Solidiance, aimed to identify the top spots in the Asia-Pacific region where entrepreneurs are likely to thrive. It aims to single out not just the cities where business conditions are ideal, but also places where the quality of life is such that “creatives” – artists, academics, inventors and the like, whether homegrown or imported — will want to live there.

Singapore earned high marks for stable politics, low government regulation and high saturation of global brands. It also scored well in the “human talent” category, which takes into account ethnic diversity and percentage of migrants in the population. On freedom of expression and creating an environment for art and ideas to flourish, the city-state fared less well.

Singapore’s government is often criticized for hindering freedom of expression. It came in at 149 out of 179 in Reporters Without Borders’ 2013 report of world press freedoms.

It has also lagged other Asian cities in terms of being welcoming to gay men and lesbians — another factor that Solidiance considered in its rankings. A January study by Nanyang Technological University found that 64.5% of Singaporeans surveyed expressed negative attitudes towards homosexuals. That was slightly lower than the 68.6% recorded in the same survey five years earlier.

The Singapore Ministry of Communications and Information was not immediately available for comment.

Damien Duhamel, one of the report’s authors says Singapore is becoming more open to a broader spectrum of ideas, and encouraging more dissent and debate in post-secondary education.

“Singaporeans have become a lot more bold. The whole concept of staying in the background because (the cultural norm of) ‘you don’t want to lose face’ is fading away,” Mr. Duhamel, himself a Singapore resident of 13 years, said in an interview.

Sydney, Melbourne and Auckland, with their diverse populations and business-

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friendly conditions, also stood out as innovation centers.

Shanghai fared poorly, ranking 14 out of 16 on the list. Despite having “fantastic skyscrapers, renowned nightlife and amazing cuisine,” according to the report, the city is held back by a culture of imitation rather than innovation.

“Yes, there are entrepreneurs in China, but they are still locked into the ‘me-too’ syndrome,” said Mr. Duhamel. He said that imitations of U.S.-born companies like YouTube and Twitter sprout up frequently, but few new groundbreaking ideas.

China’s rapid growth rates relative to other countries, paradoxically, may also serve to discourage innovation, Mr. Duhamel argues, as even mediocre ideas may be rewarded in such a booming economy. “Typically you are innovative when you are in a corner, when you have to fight with a knife or die. China is growing at 8 percent a year, so why be innovative?”

Jakarta wasn’t even ranked. In the judgment of the report’s authors, it lacks the leadership, human capital, and regulatory enforcement to even be considered innovative. “Investment in the human talent in the public and private sector is crucial to fully leverage Jakarta’s vibrant economic landscape,” the report states.

Correction: The study was conducted by Asia-focused consulting firm Solidiance. A previous version of the story and the graphic misspelled the name.

Asia, Entrepreneurs, Innovation, Singapore

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