

# Re-engaging Chineseness: Political, Economic and Cultural Imperatives of Nation-building in Singapore\*

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**ABSTRACT** This article examines the management of Chinese identity and culture since Singapore attained independence in 1965. Due to the delicate regional environment, ethnic Chinese identity has been closely managed by the ruling elites, which have been dominated by the English-educated Chinese. There is the evolution from a deliberate policy of maintaining a low-key ethnic Chinese profile to the recent effort to re-sinicize – in form – the majority ethnic group. The article examines the policy impulses and implications for such a landmark change in reconceptualizing the Chinese-Singapore identity, which can be attributed to the needs of regime maintenance buttressed by Confucian ethos as well as the security and economic demands of nation-building.

The geo-political realities facing Singapore, an economically successful city-state with a population comprising 77 per cent ethnic Chinese, have dictated that it exercises great caution in positioning itself vis-à-vis its predominantly Malay-Muslim neighbours. The management of ethnic Chinese identity and culture as well as the relationship with communist China are delicate exercises in balancing the needs of nation-building, economic growth and regime maintenance. Although Singapore is a multi-racial and multi-religious society in its orientation, the functional and organizational role of race remains pertinent.<sup>1</sup>

In this article, “Chineseness” refers to the Singaporean perspective of the political elites placing increasing importance and prominence – in form, if not in substance – on Chinese language and culture within the political and socio-cultural discourse. Chineseness embodies an ethnic Chinese racial-cultural identity and value system that is being moulded as transnational, especially economic, processes bring Chinese-Singaporeans into contact with mainland Chinese and the Chinese diaspora. It is identified by the close relationship, on both economic and other fronts, between Singapore and China, facilitated by the belief that co-ethnics’ transnational transactions are exclusively advantaged and that China is the cultural motherland of the Chinese-Singaporeans. The overall manifestation is one of the ethnic Chinese-Singaporean nation-space gradually increasing within the political-ideological terrain which is, in turn, cross-

\* Portions of this article were presented at the international conference on “Ethnic Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia: A Dialogue between Tradition and Modernity,” 30 June 2001, Singapore. I am aware of the inherent limitation of the article’s sources of information which are predominantly in the English language but have endeavoured to reflect the nuances not captured by the English-language materials.

1. On the centrality of race in Singapore, see David Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 66–111; John Clammer, *Race and State in Independent Singapore 1965–1990* (Hants: Ashgate, 1998); Raj K. Vasil, *Asianising Singapore: The PAP’s Management of Ethnicity* (Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1995).

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mapped on to the patent need for Singapore to retain economic and cultural relevancy vis-à-vis China.<sup>2</sup>

This process of re-engaging Chineseness throws into sharp relief the persistence of subtle differences within the heterogeneous ethnic Chinese community in Singapore. The government treads a thin line between the Chinese-educated Chinese/Chinese-speakers on the one hand and the English-educated/English-speaking Chinese and the minority races on the other. The former often accuse the government of not doing enough to reduce the slide in Chinese language proficiency and complain about the lack of observance of Chinese culture among the younger generation of Chinese. In contrast, the latter are concerned about the perceived higher profile given to things Chinese.

Despite the apparent differences, the unifying theme of Singaporean-Chineseness centres on the powerful instrumentality that coheres from the calibrated use of Chinese race, language and culture in political governance, economic development and cultural imperatives. The deliberate function of “situational ethnicity” in Singapore necessarily results in the meanings of Chineseness being constantly renegotiated and rearticulated by the state and its elites, in synchrony with the ebbs and flows of their significance to state-led discourse in the various spheres of politics, economics and culture.

This article examines the policy impulses and implications for the changes in reconceptualizing the Chinese-Singaporean identity. From an emphasis on de-Chineseness for much of the 1960s and 1970s, the 1990s have witnessed an emergent Chineseness together with the assertive belief that Chineseness is a cornerstone of Singapore’s success. The article argues that the emphasis on Chineseness is predicated on development and regime objectives, including the demands of regime maintenance, buttressed by a neo-Confucian ethos, as well as the security and economic demands of state- and nation-building and is intimately linked with the rise of China.

### *Waxing and Waning of Chineseness*<sup>3</sup>

The 2000 population census reiterated that the ethnic Chinese population, while still economically dominant, is under-reproducing. It also highlighted the increasing popularity of English and Christianity, especially among the younger and better-educated Chinese. The ethnic Chinese comprise 76.8 per cent of the total resident population in

2. The concept of Chineseness is not without scholarly controversy. Recent discussion includes Wang Gungwu, “Chineseness: the dilemmas of place and practice,” in Gary G. Hamilton (ed.), *Cosmopolitan Capitalists: Hong Kong and the Chinese Diaspora at the end of the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), pp. 118–134; Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West* (London: Routledge, 2001).

3. For a succinct socio-historical overview of the Chinese community, see Kwok Kian Woon, “Singapore,” in Lynn Pan (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas* (Singapore: Archipelago Press and Landmark Books, 1998), pp. 200–217. On the mixed race Babas/Peranakans/Straits-born Chinese (officially classified as ethnic Chinese), see Jurgen Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities: A Social History of the Babas in Singapore* (Hants: Ashgate, 1998).

Singapore with a median age of 35 years (against 30 years in 1990), which is the highest among the races. Over the last two decades, the average number of ethnic Chinese children born has declined from above to below replacement level – from 3.4 in 1980 to 2.8 in 1990 and 2.5 in 2000. The average Chinese household size fell from 4.8 persons to 4.2 to 3.6 in the corresponding period. To maintain the Chinese share at a critical minimum threshold of three-quarters of the total population, immigration of ethnic Chinese professionals from Greater China is tacitly encouraged.

Most ethnic Chinese are Buddhists (53.6 per cent; up from 39.4 per cent in 1990), followed by “no religion” (18.6 per cent), Christians (16.5 per cent), Daoists and “Chinese traditional beliefs” (10.8 per cent) and other religions (0.5 per cent). Daoism and Chinese traditional beliefs, the most popular religion among the Chinese in 1980 (38.2 per cent), have declined significantly in the wake of a Buddhist resurgence among the ethnic Chinese. A pertinent trend is the “prevalence of Christianity” among the younger and better-educated (often English-speaking) Chinese.<sup>4</sup> As a result of the relatively successful Speak Mandarin Campaign and the no-dialect policy, Mandarin is the most popular language spoken in Chinese homes with 45.1 per cent (up from 30.1 per cent in 1990) and the popularity of Chinese dialects has declined significantly from 50.3 per cent in 1990 to 30.7 per cent by 2000. English language popularity among the Chinese increased from 19.3 per cent to 23.9 per cent. Younger Chinese families, although literate in both Chinese and English, are more likely to be English-speaking than older ones. In 1988, 20 per cent of the Primary 1 cohort came from English-speaking homes; by 1998, the figure had doubled to 40 per cent.<sup>5</sup> Despite Singapore’s Chinese-majority complexion, the Chinese-Singaporean sense of national pride, although high, did not rank as high as the Indians and Malays. Similarly, they recorded the lowest index scores for citizen-nation psychological ties.<sup>6</sup>

Singapore’s management of Chineseness can be divided into three phases.<sup>7</sup> The first, from 1965 to 1979, was characterized by an emphasis on “de-Chineseness” with the impetus being the strategic need to avoid being seen as a “third China” and the pressing determination to build a new multi-racial society from the ashes of the failed “Malaysian Malaysia” project.<sup>8</sup> The government consciously sought to develop a

4. “Singapore census of population, 2000: advance data release no. 2 – religion” (Singapore: Department of Statistics, November 2000), p. 3. Figures in this section are taken from the 2000 census.

5. “Ministerial statement on Chinese language in schools,” *Singapore Parliamentary Debates, Official Record*, 20 January 1999, cols. 1809–54. See also the ensuing debate at cols. 1855–1903.

6. Institute of Policy Studies press release, “Citizens and the nation – IPS survey of national pride and psychological ties to the nation,” 18 February 2000.

7. This mirrors, in some respect, Singapore’s policy on the management of its ethnic diversity: see Vasil, *Asianising Singapore*.

8. Malayan multiracialism was probably first developed in the 1920s by Tan Cheng Lock, a Straits-born Chinese community leader and founder of the Malaysian Chinese Association: see Clive Christie, *Ideology and Revolution in Southeast Asia 1900–1980: Political Ideas of the Anti-Colonial Era* (Surrey: Curzon, 2001), pp. 118–122.

“Singaporean Singapore” identity, while recognizing the special position of the indigenous Malays. The second phase (1979–90) marked the beginnings of a tentative higher profile for Chineseness in Singapore. The third phase (1990–present) sees a more confident assertion of Chineseness in everyday life.

Since independence, English is taught as the first language for purposes of international commerce, industry and science in Singapore national schools. The economic rationale alone justified the importance placed on English. More significantly, this gradually reduced the relative value of Chinese education in the eyes of Chinese parents and employers in the 1960s and 1970s. Though latent, the Chinese-educated fears of political and cultural marginalization ensured that the lobbying for a higher profile for Chinese culture, language and education were dealt with sensitively as they constituted “a sacred heritage dear to the hearts of all Chinese, especially the poorly educated merchant millionaires and shopkeepers of Singapore.”<sup>9</sup> Then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew made conscious efforts to ensure that the communists and the chauvinists could not denounce him as a “deculturalized Chinaman” who “preferred English to Chinese as the more important medium of instruction in the schools.”<sup>10</sup>

Yet the government had its way with Nanyang University (fondly known as “Nantah”) in curbing Chinese student radicalism. Widely regarded as the jewel of Chinese education in South-East Asia and a bastion of resistance to the government in the field of Chinese education, Nantah adopted English as the language of instruction in 1975, and, in 1980, merged with the University of Singapore to form the present National University of Singapore. The non-existence of Nantah today rankles a segment of the Chinese population. Founded as a symbol of Chinese culture, Nantah received widespread support from the local and regional Chinese community. Today, there are still calls to revive Nantah.<sup>11</sup>

Notwithstanding its strong economic and cultural ties with China, Singapore carefully nurtures its independent image and plays down its Chinese majority polity within the regional geo-political setting. As “the centre of Overseas Chinese achievement in South-East Asia,”<sup>12</sup> Singapore, in deference to its neighbours’ feelings, delayed the establishment of formal diplomatic ties with China until after Sino-Indonesian relations were normalized in 1990. As Leifer observed:

9. Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings & Times Editions, 1998), p. 170. The simmering issue of Chinese education was handled deftly by the ruling People’s Action Party’s (PAP) Chinese vanguards; see Sai Siew Min and Huang Jianli, “The ‘Chinese-educated’ political vanguards: Ong Pang Boon, Lee Khoo Choy and Jek Yeun Thong,” in Lam Peng Er and Kevin Y.L. Tan (eds.), *Lee’s Lieutenants: Singapore’s Old Guard* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin 1999), pp. 132–168.

10. Lee, *The Singapore Story*, pp. 221–22.

11. Nanyang Technology University (NTU), Nantah’s *de facto* successor institution, is likely to be renamed Nanyang University although the historical link with Nantah for renaming has been explicitly rejected. See “NTU to become Nanyang U within decade,” *Singapore Bulletin*, Vol. 29, No. 10 (October 2001), p. 10.

12. Michael Leifer, *Dictionary of the Modern Politics of South-East Asia*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 208.

Within its regional environment, a corresponding admiration is mixed with envy and resentment in important part because of the prevailing ethnic-Chinese cultural identity of the island-state and the persistence of the regional middleman role of local Chinese entrenched during the colonial era. That identity has been reinforced from the late 1970s by the government's policy of encouraging the study and use of Mandarin by the vast majority of the population, albeit in conjunction with that of English. That attempt at reinforcing cultural identity has made managing relations with closest neighbours a matter of continuing difficulty and those with the People's Republic of China a matter of acute sensitivity.<sup>13</sup>

The halcyon days of decolonization in South-East Asia and the communist–nationalist rivalry in mainland China engaged Malaya(sia) and Singapore intensely.<sup>14</sup> Compounded by the ideological danger posed by China's active support of communism in South-East Asia, the blistering fight against pro-communist elements in the 1950s and 1960s left deep ideological scars and reinforced security concerns of the inevitable linkage between the local Chinese population and communism.<sup>15</sup> The hold of communist ideology on the Chinese-educated Chinese was pervasive in the late 1940s up to the late 1960s, leading Lee Kuan Yew to remark that:

... it was difficult to identify good Chinese-educated candidates who would remain loyal when the communists opened fire on us [PAP] ... we were fishing on the same pond as the communists, who exploited both Chinese nationalism and Marxist-Maoist ideas of egalitarianism ... Their mental terms of reference were Chinese history, Chinese parables and proverbs, the legendary success of the Chinese communist revolution as against their own frustrating life in Singapore.<sup>16</sup>

But the notion of a communist united front then and the supposed affinity of Chinese ethnicity for communism have been attributed to British "heightened official paranoia."<sup>17</sup> At the same time, a cultural gulf between the Chinese-educated and English-educated Chinese was a facet of Singapore politics in the lead-up to and aftermath of independence. The Chinese-educated alienation from mainstream political life in colonial Singapore was evident.<sup>18</sup> This cultural gulf and theme of alienation in various spheres of Singapore life persist today, albeit in new forms. In later years, Lee added:

13. Michael Leifer, *Singapore's Foreign Policy: Coping with Vulnerability* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 18.

14. On the Japanese occupation and the colonial impact on revolutionary mobilization in Malaya, see Jeff Goodwin, *No Other Way Out: States and Revolutionary Movements, 1945–1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 67–133.

15. Communism and Chinese nationalism were already of concern to the Special Branch, the colonial internal security apparatus, from as early as the 1920s. See Ban Kah Choon, *Absent History: The Untold Story of Special Branch Operations in Singapore 1915–1942* (Singapore: Raffles, 2001).

16. Lee, *The Singapore Story*, p. 280.

17. T. N. Harper, "Lim Chin Siong and the 'Singapore Story'," in Tan Jing Quee and Jomo K. S. (eds.), *Comet in Our Sky: Lim Chin Siong in History* (Kuala Lumpur: INSAN, 2001), pp. 13–15.

18. On Chinese politics in colonial Singapore, see Yong Ching Fatt, *Chinese Leadership and Power in Colonial Singapore* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1992).

A people steeped in Chinese values had more discipline, were more courteous, and respectful to elders. The result was a more orderly society. When these values were diluted by an English education, the result was less vigour and discipline and more casual behaviour. Worse, the English-educated generally lacked self-confidence because they were not speaking their own native language. The dramatic confrontations between the communist-led Chinese middle school students and my own government brought home these substantial differences in culture and ideals, represented in two different value systems.<sup>19</sup>

The official historiography on the merger with Malaya and the struggle for ascendancy after Singapore's independence portrays "a Herculean struggle between non-communists and communists" with Chinese education being heavily politicized and "woven into the master narrative as another 'sinister' communist attempt to feed on the dissatisfaction of the Chinese-educated so as to create agitation and tension for political mileage." A key element was "making one notion of 'Chinese-ness,' supposedly the communist one, criminal."<sup>20</sup> For Lee Kuan Yew, "the biggest single theme that galvanized the Chinese-speaking was Chinese culture, and the need to preserve Chinese traditions through the Chinese schools. It was not a proletarian issue; it was plain, simple chauvinism."<sup>21</sup> Labour issues became intertwined with race and ideology as the ethnic Chinese community was closely associated with the nationalist and communist influence in the development of labour relations in pre-independent Singapore.<sup>22</sup> This juxtaposition of ethnic and ideological identities, of which Chinese identity, culture and education were key dimensions, was firmly imprinted in the national psyche and this historical baggage formed the background to the differences between the Chinese-educated and English-educated Chinese in the subsequent years.

The bruising experience of the PAP's pioneer leaders with the pro-communist elements resulted in the deliberate development of new parapolitical and parastatal organizations such as the People's Association, Citizens' Consultative Committees and Community Centre Management Committees as alternative structures and institutions for political mobilization. They succeeded in marginalizing the hitherto dominant ethnic Chinese social mobilizers in the clan associations and powerful

19. Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story 1965–2000, Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings & Times Editions, 2000), pp. 546–47.

20. Sai and Huang, "The 'Chinese-educated' political vanguards," p. 144–46. A parallel narrative depicts the PAP English-educated, multiracial non-communists triumphing over the Chinese-educated communists and chauvinists.

21. Lee, *The Singapore Story*, pp. 185–86. Cf. Harper, "Lim Chin Siong and the 'Singapore Story'," p. 15: "However, recent writing has challenged the stereotypical notion – perpetuated in many accounts since – that the politics of the 'Chinese-educated' was driven by an innate ethnocentrism and a natural susceptibility to a 'secret society complex' and to Communism.... Student politics was fuelled by a wider sense of exclusion for the Chinese-educated with a colonial society in which fluency in English was the route to employment and advancement. It was underpinned by resentment of the privileges of the Anglophone Chinese. Yet within the Chinese community, graduates of Chinese middle schools were themselves something of an elite."

22. Carl A. Trocki, "Development of labour organisation in Singapore, 1800–1960," *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (2001), pp. 115–129.

Chinese businessmen, which had considerable resources and support to exert influence on local politics, especially on issues of culture and language.<sup>23</sup>

The government opted to alienate the powerful and influential Chinese business community through its co-option of multinational corporations and government-linked companies in the economic modernization programme.<sup>24</sup> This reduced the government's dependence on the Chinese business community and concomitantly reduced the latter's political influence. In recent years, however, the increasing need for a more broad-based economic development – including nurturing hitherto neglected small and medium enterprises as internal dynamos – has resulted in ethnic Chinese capital being increasingly re-integrated into the economic mainstream.<sup>25</sup> It is likely that they will develop into an important political constituency.<sup>26</sup>

The Speak Mandarin campaign was launched in 1979 and marked the beginning of the tentative higher profile for Chineseness in Singapore (phase two), in tandem with the government's "Asianization" policy. Emphasis was placed on the return to one's cultural roots and heritage, amidst the embedded and heightened concern that the ethnic Chinese were becoming deculturalized. The tentative opening of China under Deng Xiaoping heralded significant economic advantages for Singapore and became an undercurrent in the Speak Mandarin campaign. To benefit from business opportunities in China, the Chinese-Singaporeans had to be able to communicate effectively in Chinese and have an intimate understanding of the Chinese psyche. The Special Assistance Plan schools were also introduced in 1979 to preserve the best of the old Chinese schools and to encourage good academic performance in a rich Chinese environment. During this period, an ersatz Confucianism in Singapore's political governance was initiated. The high-water mark was attained when Confucian studies was made an approved subject under the compulsory religious knowledge programme in the mid-1980s.<sup>27</sup>

The concern with the loss of one's cultural heritage, especially among

23. Chan Kwok Bun and Ng Beoy Kui, "Singapore," in Edmund Terence Gomez and Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao (eds.), *Chinese Business in Southeast Asia: Contesting Cultural Explanations, Researching Entrepreneurship* (Surrey: Curzon, 2001), p. 41; Yong, *Chinese Leadership and Power in Colonial Singapore*, pp. 273–284.

24. W. G. Huff, *The Economic Growth of Singapore: Trade and Development in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 320, 355–57. On the early Chinese entrepreneurs contribution to the Singapore economy, see pp. 208–235.

25. Ian Chalmers, "Loosening state control in Singapore: the emergence of local capital as a political force," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (1992), pp. 57–84.

26. The broadening of collaboration between the government and SCCCI is enunciated in the Minister of Trade and Industry's speech at the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCCI) 95th Anniversary Celebrations and the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall Fund-Raising Dinner, 24 October 2001.

27. Ostensibly one would not regard Confucianism as a religion. See Eddie C. Y. Kuo, "Confucianism as political discourse in Singapore: the case of an incomplete revitalization movement," in Tu Wei-ming (ed.), *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity: Moral Education and Economic Culture in Japan and the Four Mini-Dragons* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 294–309.

the younger generation Chinese, ensured that the Asianization of Singapore continued under phase three (since 1990). The “East Asian miracle” phenomenon promulgated by the World Bank provided boisterous incentive for Singapore to be the self-declared “Asian values” spokesman. Economic success and increased security encouraged a more confident and extensive assertion of Chineseness in Singapore.<sup>28</sup> Although Confucianization apparently took a back seat, the essence of Asian values postulated a particularistic style of political governance premised on state-defined community interests having precedence over the individual. However, divisions within the ethnic Chinese community persisted with ideational and economic differentials becoming more evident with economic advancement.

### *Refreshing the Ethnic Chinese Intra-ethnic Divisions*

With a common education system in which English was the medium of instruction in all schools by the late 1970s, the Chinese-educated/English-educated distinction of the 1950s to 1970s evolved into a “Chinese-speaking/English-speaking Chinese” characterization in the 1980s and 1990s. This is now recast in the “heartlander–cosmopolitan” distinction. It continues to reflect differential adaptability and receptivity to globalization and the English language but emphasizes intrinsic value and assumed loyalty. This highlights the salient undercurrents despite almost four decades of nation-building and social engineering. In discussing whether Singapore would endure, Prime Minister Goh drew attention to the heartlander–cosmopolitan divide in Singapore society at the 1999 National Day Rally. For ease of reference, the Prime Minister’s typology of the cosmopolitan and heartlander differences is set out in Table 1.

Given Singapore’s racial and socio-economic make-up, the cosmopolitan is akin to the English-educated/English-speaking Chinese while the heartlander is the Chinese-educated /Chinese-speaking Chinese. The cosmopolitan–heartlander divide is not merely about language preferences and material differences; it is more starkly conceived in terms of value system and intrinsic loyalties. The heartlanders are characterized as providing the critical cultural and moral ballast needed by a disciplined society for its continued survival and prosperity. The cosmopolitans are economic dynamos enjoying “flexible citizenship,” whose loyalties are fluid and motivated by transient connections of mobile employment and commercial opportunities.<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, the heartlander–cosmopolitan distinction refreshes the characterization of the Chinese-educated/English-educated in a new, albeit more worrying, form. Although the substance of the differences is undiluted in any significant way, the

28. Confucianism and Chinese ethnicity, combined with increased regional economic integration, have produced some diasporic re-Sinification: Michael Pinches, “Cultural relations, class and the new rich of Asia,” in Michael Pinches (ed.), *Culture and Privilege in Capitalist Asia* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 1–55.

29. Ong Aihwa, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).



Table 1: **The Heartlander–Cosmopolitan Distinction**

	<i>Heartlanders</i>	<i>Cosmopolitans</i>
<b>Attributes</b>	“... make their living within the country. Their orientation and interests are local rather than international. Their skills are not marketable beyond Singapore. They speak Singlish. They include taxi-drivers, stallholders, provision shop owners, production workers and contractors ... If they emigrate to America, they will probably settle in a Chinatown, open a Chinese restaurant and call it an ‘eating house’.”	“... their outlook is international. They speak English but are bilingual. They have skills that command good incomes – banking, IT, engineering, science and technology. They produce goods and services for the global market. Many cosmopolitans use Singapore as a base to operate in the region. They can work and be comfortable anywhere in the world.”
<b>Utility to Singapore</b> (“Both heartlanders and cosmopolitans are important to Singapore’s well being.”)	“Heartlanders play a major role in maintaining our core values and our social stability. They are the core of our society. Without them, there will be no safe and stable Singapore, no Singapore system, no Singapore brand name.”	“Cosmopolitans, on the other hand, are indispensable in generating wealth for Singapore. They extend our economic reach. The world is their market. Without them, Singapore cannot run as an efficient, high performance society.”
<b>Challenge for Singapore</b> (“If cosmopolitans and heartlanders cease to identify with each other, our society will fall apart.”)	“... to get the heartlanders to understand what the cosmopolitans contribute to Singapore’s and their own well being ...”	“... to get the cosmopolitans to feel an obligation and sense of duty to the heartlanders.”

*Source:*

Prime Minister’s 1999 National Day Rally speech.

distinction is divisive and reifies the ideational–economic divide within the Chinese–Singaporean community in stark terms that shows no sign of being bridged.<sup>30</sup>

30. However, the heartlander–cosmopolitan distinction is seldom referred to publicly.

*The Putative Creation of Chinese Cultural Elites*<sup>31</sup>

The quiet emphasis and ascendancy of Chineseness requires a core of Chinese cultural elites to provide the intellectual and cultural capital. By 1997, although Mandarin was gaining popularity at the expense of Chinese dialects, the government expressed concern over the lack of a sufficient pool of cultural elites who have “deep knowledge of Chinese language, culture, history, literature and traditions.”<sup>32</sup> Language is regarded as the key that unlocks the wisdom, legacy and virtues of a 5,000-year-old civilization. The mother tongue policy, a critical component of the bilingual education framework, is deemed critical in maintaining social discipline and facilitating economic relevancy. Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong put it succinctly:

The Government’s long-standing policy on bilingualism and learning of mother tongues in schools remains unchanged. English is and will remain our common working language ... But the mother tongue gives us a crucial part of our values, roots and identity. It gives us direct access to our cultural heritage, and a world-view that complements the perspective of the English-speaking world. It provides us the ballast to face adversity and challenges with fortitude, and a sense of quiet confidence about our place in the world. Maintaining our distinctiveness and identity as an Asian society will help us to endure as a nation. This applies to all ethnic groups.

In 1999, the government announced changes to the teaching of Chinese language in schools. The revised Chinese language curriculum has the twin aims of “reproducing a core group of Singaporeans who are steeped in the Chinese cultural heritage, history, literature and the arts; we need them to be Chinese language teachers, writers, journalists, community leaders, MPs and Ministers; and secondly, setting realistic standards in CL [Chinese language] for all pupils, including those from English speaking homes.” On the production of a Chinese cultural elite, Lee Hsien Loong elaborated that:

The Chinese cultural elite are an important source of strength for our multi-racial, multi-religious society. Their group instincts, political and social values, and social cohesion complement the different spirit and outlook of English educated Singaporeans. Chinese High School and Raffles Institution are both outstanding schools, but the pupils they produce are sharply of different moulds. Singapore society would be poorer, and weaker, if it had only one of the two.

The government instinctively and quickly moderated the expectations of the Chinese-educated and speakers. Lee cautioned:

But we cannot aim to preserve our Chinese elite exactly in the form of the 1950s or 1960s. That was a product of the particular phase of our history: post-war colonial Singapore, in an anti-colonial struggle for independence. The Chinese elite played a major role, both on the Communist and non-Communist sides. Their support was again important later, in an anti-communal struggle after Singapore entered Malaysia. That period has passed. Even in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, the values and

31. Unless otherwise stated, quotations in this section are from Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s Ministerial Statement on Chinese Language in Schools in Parliament, 20 January 1999.

32. Prime Minister Goh’s National Day Rally speech in Mandarin, 24 August 1997.

culture have not remained static. They have evolved differently, in response to different political and social pressures. So the Chinese elite in Singapore must develop, and help Chinese culture to play its rightful role in shaping our cosmopolitan society and knowledge economy of the 21st century.

Supporters welcomed efforts to promote the Chinese language and knowledge of Chinese culture. This state of affairs assuaged to some extent, albeit unsatisfactorily, the concern of the Chinese-educated over the health of Chinese language, culture and heritage. However, for some, the changes are superficial and do not go far enough in arresting the decline in standards. Although Mandarin is the most popular language among the Chinese, the standards leave much to be desired. Indeed, Chinese-Singaporeans are said to speak “something like Chinese,” suggesting mediocre standards.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the long-term prognosis is not so optimistic with English being the language of choice among the younger generation of culturally ambivalent Chinese. With the impending retirement of the last cohorts of Nantah-educated Chinese language teachers over the next few years, these issues of cultural markers remain a continual source of concern ensuring their political saliency.<sup>34</sup> Not surprisingly, the emphasis on bilingualism and the mother tongue in schools has its detractors. The English-speaking Chinese are concerned that such a focus on the mother tongue (Chinese), as an important criterion for doing well in the education system, unduly punishes students who are weak in Chinese. In an attempt to arrive at a middle ground and to assure the English-educated Chinese, the government also introduced the less rigorous Chinese language B syllabus.<sup>35</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggest that the bilingualism and mother tongue policies have been among the reasons cited for the emigration of young Chinese families.

Government campaigns have been the main vehicle to promote Chineseness from a linguistic and cultural approach. Although the Speak Mandarin campaign has succeeded in phasing out Chinese dialects, the ethnic Chinese are not reading or writing sufficiently in Chinese. This means a declining readership of Chinese newspapers among the younger generation.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the campaign’s objective has been refined in recent years to promoting “Mandarin as the social language of the Chinese. The educated elite should use more Mandarin socially.”<sup>37</sup> The focus is on expanding the use of Mandarin to include the workplace and to get

33. See further “Will Chinese become a dumpling house language?” *The Straits Times* (ST), 31 March 2001, p. H16; “Arresting the Chinese language decline,” ST, 5 May 2002, p. 22.

34. Goh Yeng Seng, “A sociolinguistic profile of Chinese language teachers in Singapore,” in Jason Tan, S. Gopinathan and Ho Wan Kam (eds.), *Challenges Facing The Singapore Education System Today* (Singapore: Prentice Hall, 2001), pp. 227–245. The import of Chinese language teachers from Malaysia and China has been tried as a stopgap measure.

35. The offer was subsequently opened for the other races to have their own cultural elites. See Warren Fernandez, “S’pore still walks language tightrope” and Chua Lee Hoong, “These days, one language can highlight three divides,” ST, 23 January 1999, p. 59.

36. See Prime Minister Goh’s speech at the *Lianhe zaobao* 75th Anniversary Gala Dinner, 6 September 1998; “Fewer here reading and writing Chinese,” ST, 7 March 2001, p. H5.

37. Prime Minister Goh’s 1997 National Day Rally speech in Mandarin, 27 August 1997. On the evolution of the Speak Mandarin campaign, see Promote Mandarin Council,

Chinese Singaporeans to speak better Mandarin with the English-speaking Chinese as the target group. Complementing the Speak Mandarin campaign is the biennial Chinese Cultural Festival, which serves to highlight the “self-renewal and splendid spirit of Chinese culture ... and to promote the understanding of Chinese culture.”<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, the perennial concern over the decline of Chinese language, culture and identity among young Chinese-Singaporeans continues to be the clarion call for the Chinese-educated and Chinese-speakers. The recent debate surrounding the preferential adoption of Western names by Chinese-Singaporeans is an indicator of the recurrent saliency of Chinese identity issues.<sup>39</sup> Other concerns that are repeatedly flagged include the need for a full-fledged Chinese Language Department at NTU; the Nantah alumni’s grievance that their contributions have not been adequately recognized; the welfare of Chinese language teachers in schools; and the revitalizing of Chinese grassroots organizations such as clan associations.

### *The Electoral Politics of Chineseness*

Singapore’s Asianization policy belies the criticality of cultivating the Chinese-educated/Chinese-speaking constituency as a valuable vote-bank and a bastion of political and moral conservatism. Lending impetus is the political elites’ revisionist view that Chineseness – with its pragmatic and consensus-seeking culture – is necessary for the maintenance of continued political stability in Singapore’s “limited democracy.” The PAP government has always felt the acute need to be sensitive to the Chinese-educated given their numbers, especially when they continue to see themselves as being marginalized.<sup>40</sup> Although the number of Chinese-educated and lower income ethnic Chinese is declining, the need to woo them remains part of the electoral landscape. There is the constant fear of being outflanked or for others to be seen to be more Chinese than the PAP.

By the 1990s, the younger generation of Chinese-speakers replaced the older Chinese-educated as the core constituency. The 1997 general elections drew attention to the uneasy relationship between the Chinese-educated/Chinese-speaking and English-educated/English-speaking Chinese.<sup>41</sup> In 1992, the government-affiliated ethnic Chinese self-help group,

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*footnote continued*

*Mandarin: The Chinese Connection* (Singapore: Ministry of Information and the Arts, 2000). The campaign’s website is at <http://mandarin.org.sg/>.

38. Speech by Environment Minister Lim Swee Say at the 2002 festival opening, 1 March 2002.

39. See, for instance, “Chinese, but they prefer English names,” *ST*, 20 June 2001, p. H2.

40. Raj K. Vasil, *Governing Singapore: Democracy and National Development* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2000), pp. 185–89; Kwok, “Singapore,” p. 215.

41. Cherian George, *Singapore: The Air-conditioned Nation, Essays of the Politics of Comfort and Control 1990–2000* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 2000), pp. 108–113; Kwok, “Singapore,” p. 215; Vasil, *Governing Singapore*, pp. 196–97.

the Chinese Development and Assistance Council was established in response to the silent majority Chinese electoral backlash in the 1991 general elections, particularly among the less well-off, against the government's policies which were deemed to be disadvantageous to the dominant ethnic group.<sup>42</sup>

Beyond refining policies that emphasize Chinese language and culture, the PAP places the onus on itself to field a sufficient number of candidates who are deemed acceptable to the Chinese-educated or who have the necessary Chinese dialect proficiency. Chinese dialects demonstrate a resilience and popular resonance among older Chinese Singaporeans such that during the general elections even government ministers would campaign using Chinese dialects, especially in the heartlands. The government formed the Chinese community liaison group, which comprises mainly Chinese-educated MPs, to help it be "attuned to sentiments in the politically important Chinese-speaking community ... [and] to make sure this community does not feel marginalized in increasingly English-speaking Singapore."<sup>43</sup> In seeking to capture the ethnic Chinese vote, the challenge is to maintain an even keel since electoral expediency can undermine the multiracial policy by unwittingly encouraging ethnic outflanking. In the midst of creeping Chineseness, this can have negative knock-on effects on the canvassing by the other racial groups for their own cultural and political space.

#### *Attributes of Creeping Chineseness in Singapore's Political Discourse*

Beyond the national campaigns to promote Chinese language and culture, a subtler dimension of the expanding realm of Chineseness is in the sphere of political governance. Although appearing tangential to the issues of Chinese culture and identity, the Confucian ethos is dominant in Singapore's political governance. This provides a fertile terrain for Singapore's *junzi*-centred and community-first governance.

The landmark Goh Keng Swee education report and the Ong Teng Cheong moral education report set the stage for the promotion of Mandarin (and other mother tongues) and laid the groundwork for the propagation of "Asian values" in Singapore's political governance discourse.<sup>44</sup> The Asian values discourse gives a civilizational-cum-philosophical dimension and justification to Singapore's particularistic style of governance as being unique and superior to liberal democracy.<sup>45</sup> Trans-

42. *Ibid.* pp. 179–190, 213–16; Ho Khai Leong, *The Politics of Policy-Making in Singapore* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 123–28.

43. "MPs begin new round of visits to Chinese groups," *ST*, 16 February 2001, p. H8. A common theme is for the government to make a special effort to retain Chinese culture and traditions.

44. Education Study Team, *Report on the Ministry of Education 1978* (Singapore: Singapore National Printers, 1979); and Moral Education Committee, *Report on Moral Education 1979* (Singapore: Singapore National Printers, 1979).

45. At the 1999 Davos World Economic Forum, Lee Kuan Yew stated that he had all along referred to "Confucianist values" rather than "Asian values": see "'Asian values'? I didn't use this term, says SM," *ST*, 30 January 1999, p. 6; "Looking to the future," *Asiaweek*, 21

lated into practice, it sanctions a less universalistic stance in areas where adherence to international norms is less critical in the functioning of a modern economy. Particularistic socio-cultural values and principles of political governance are jealously guarded on the principle of cultural specificity and relativism. An emphasis on duties, rather than rights, and the priority of society's interests over the individual is commonly characterized as "communitarianism."<sup>46</sup> The element of the community, beginning with the family as the smallest unit and the state as the largest, is now enshrined in Singapore's Shared Values.<sup>47</sup> More importantly, Singapore-styled communitarianism blurs the distinctions between state, community and individual interests.

The political leadership espouses the Confucian precept that leaders have a moral duty to act in the collective interest; it is from this that they derive their moral authority to govern. As the government is presumed to be virtuous, it should not be subjected to the pervasive scrutiny that political leaders in liberal democracies are subjected to. To do so is to undermine the integrity of the political system imperiling the common good. The government's imprimatur of the Confucian notion of good government by good men is a cornerstone of Singapore's political governance philosophy.<sup>48</sup> The Shared Values White Paper affirmed its particularistic neo-Confucian core:

The concept of government by honourable men (*junzi*) who have a duty to do right for the people, and who have the trust and respect of the population, fits us better than the Western idea that a government should be given as limited powers as possible, and should always be treated with suspicion unless proven otherwise.<sup>49</sup>

Rigorous efforts were made, prior its the adoption in January 1993, to

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*footnote continued*

May 1999, p. 34. Michael Hill, "'Asian values' as reverse Orientalism: Singapore," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (2000), pp. 177–190 at 187 notes: "This value-transformation [to individualism] was regarded with concern by the government because it was seen to influence national competitiveness, prosperity, and even survival as a nation."

46. Chua Beng-Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995); Chua Beng-Huat, "'Asian values' discourse and the resurrection of the social," *positions: east asia cultural critique*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (1999), pp. 573–592; Daniel A. Bell, *East Meets West: Human Rights and Democracy in East Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Lucian Pye, "Civility, social capital, and civil society: three powerful concepts for explaining Asia," in Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), *Patterns of Social Capital: Stability and Change in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 375–394.

47. Promoted as safeguards against undesirable values permeating from developed countries, the Shared Values are: nation before community and society above self; family as the basic unit of society; community support and respect for the individual; consensus, not conflict, and racial and religious harmony. On the centrality of the family in Confucian thought, see Jeffrey F. Meyer, "Concord and conflict from a Confucian perspective: the paradigm of the family," in Joseph B. Gittler (ed.), *Ideas of Concord and Discord in Selected World Religions* (Stamford, CN: JAI Press, 2000), pp. 59–79.

48. Singapore's ministers and senior civil servants are also among the best paid public officials in the world.

49. Cmd. 1 of 1991, p. 8, para. 41. For the classical understanding of the Confucian *junzi*, see Wm. Theodore de Bary, *The Trouble with Confucianism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 24–45.

highlight the Shared Values' commonality with the cultural traditions and value systems of the minorities. However, Confucianism, even if modified to suit local needs, is still regarded as being of Chinese origin. Hence, given Singapore's multi-ethnic make-up, it is questionable whether such neo-Confucianist values would find resonance with the non-Chinese community. Ironically, Singapore-style communitarianism might result in a fragmented society. A neo-Confucianist approach might cohere with the majority Chinese but would certainly smack of ethnic domination for the minority races. Further, in emphasizing a civilizational discourse in the maintenance of a desired value system amid economic imperatives of globalization and liberalization, resort has been made to the separate ethnic, cultural and religious values and identities. If an overarching identity cannot be forged, centrifugal forces would be set in motion undermining nation-building efforts. It is this conflation of the needs of state-building with nation-building that has pushed aspects of Chineseness to the forefront of political discourse, creating unease among the minorities.

### *The Sun Yat-sen Connection in Singapore's Historiography?*

The modern nation-state tends to project its history back to a geographic and cultural entity with a long and distinguished past so as to derive some dimension of heritage, legitimacy and standing born of the *longue duree*.<sup>50</sup> This often requires the invention of traditions, myths and national heroes. Singapore's restless search for an inspiring national past has led to Chinese nationalism and civilizational discourse being tenuously intertwined with Singapore's historiography. This reflects the attempt to re-engage the Chinese core of Singapore society in the light of the rise of China. It portends a re-writing of Singapore's nationalist narrative as part of a longer and revolutionary movement in terms of time, ideas and race.

In this revised historiography, Singapore's nationalism is identified as having its inspirations from Dr Sun Yat-sen's 1911 Chinese revolution. The Chinese migrants in Singapore then are portrayed as having shaped and contributed to the genesis of diasporic and local nationalisms. The revival of interest in Sun – vividly manifested in the prominence accorded to the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall – is also a recent celebration of the cultural idea of being Chinese and Sun's catalytic transformation of the Chinese mind everywhere.<sup>51</sup> Sun's former villa

50. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London: Verso, 1991).

51. Sun had used the villa as his temporary headquarters in South-East Asia between 1900 and 1911. Lee Kuan Yew opened the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall on 12 November 2001 to mark Sun's birthday and the 90th anniversary of the Chinese revolution. See "Sun Yat Sen villa to recount his life," *ST*, 29 August 2001, p. H8; "Sun-kissed shrine," *ST*, 12 November 2001, p. L4. See also Huang Jianli, "Dissonant narratives of the past: positioning the Sun Yat Sen villa in Singapore," unpublished conference paper, June 2001, on the villa's shifting status in Singapore's history. More information on the villa can be found at its website, <http://wanqingyuan.com.sg>.

became a Singapore national monument in 1994 and is included as a national institution within the compulsory National Education programme.<sup>52</sup> Trade and Industry Minister George Yeo recently said that:

The 1911 revolution contributed to Singapore's anti-colonial movement and, later, independence. And the Chinese nationalism awakened by Dr Sun provided a lot of energy for Singapore's nationalism. The [Sun Yat-sen] villa is a testament to the historical contributions our forefathers made to that important revolution, not only with money but also with their blood and their lives. Singapore Chinese should take great pride in this.<sup>53</sup>

On another occasion, Yeo said that:

For a long time, we refused to gazette it [Sun Yat-sen villa] as a national monument because we thought it had nothing to do with independent Singapore. Now we approach it differently. Singaporeans played a significant role in the Chinese Revolution of 1911 which was not only a political revolution but also a cultural revolution which changed the way Chinese all over the world saw themselves.<sup>54</sup>

However, this re-written narrative of the origins of Singapore's nationalism is a historical rupture and a quantum leap of historical logic, whose resonance is uncertain and likely to be contested by the racial minorities. At the turn of the 20th century the Chinese immigrants in Singapore were sojourners and did not regard themselves as "Singaporeans."<sup>55</sup> Further, neither the Singapore nation-state, nor any notion of it, was existent then. The elevation of Sun, his ideas and supposed heritage for Singapore's nation-building process can be categorized as "non-consensual memory" that is hard-pressed for recognition even within the ethnic Chinese community, much less the other races. Sun's elevated status stands in stark contrast to two prominent Second World War figures – Major-General Lim Bo Seng and Lieutenant Adnan Saidi. Both fought against Singapore's aggressors during the war and can claim closer affinity to Singapore nationalism than Sun's inchoate diasporic nationalism. Yet they are deemed unsuitable for elevation as national heroes as they were "defending Singapore for the British, not independent Singapore."<sup>56</sup>

52. "Students throng Sun Yat Sen Memorial," *ST*, 15 May 2002, p. H10. The National Education (NE) programme aims to "develop national cohesion, the instinct for survival and confidence in the future"; see the NE website at <http://www1.moe.edu.sg/ne/>.

53. Quoted in "Historical villa's very slow face-lift," *The Sunday Times*, 26 March 2000, p. 36 and "Sun shone at this old villa," *The Sunday Times*, 2 April 2000, pp. 52–53.

54. From the SGH Lecture entitled, "Between north and south, between east and west," 29 April 2001.

55. Adam McKeown notes the nature of Chinese identity at the turn of the 20th century: "To be Chinese, anywhere in the world, was to be a representative of the motherland, to have a stake in the future of China, and to recognize the claims of China and Chinese culture over one's loyalty": see his *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago and Hawaii, 1900–1936* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 94. See also Prasenjit Duara, "Nationalists among transnationals: overseas Chinese and the idea of China, 1900–1911," in Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini (eds.), *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 39–60.

56. Prime Minister's Forum, Nanyang Technological University, 11 May 1999. On the reinsertion of Second World War memory into Singapore's national narrative of survival and national identity, see Diana Wong, "Memory suppression and memory production: the Japanese occupation of Singapore," in T. Fujitani *et al.* (eds.), *Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s)* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 218–238. There is also a growing Chinese language literature on Force 136, Lim's covert unit.



Sun's tenuous links with Singapore makes it doubtful that the selective adoption of aspects of Chinese national history as part of Singapore's national past could be truly accepted and internalized by its multiracial polity. Singapore's independence had and continues to have broad-based multiracial support. To segment the origins of this collective memory and elevate the role of a sojourner, whose appeal to the Chinese then living here was as Chinese and not as Singaporeans, is to deviate from a national discourse that patently needs to be more multiracial and cross-cutting in its appeal and resonance. Instead, it may unwittingly over-emphasize the role of the ethnic Chinese over the other races in Singapore's path to nationhood.<sup>57</sup> The potential to marginalize the non-Chinese racial groups is significant if indigenous Singaporean nationalism is ignored or not given due credit alongside Sun's.

### *Reassertion of Chineseness – Multifaceted Dimensions*

The reassertion of Chineseness is, in part, motivated by the multifaceted interactions with China. The economic sphere has been aggressively cultivated as a platform for the reassertion of Chineseness in Singapore, outside the realm of education. It has been argued that Singapore's strength lies in its straddling East and West as well as its cultural affinity with China. In contemporary Singaporean political discourse, China is simultaneously portrayed as an opportunity of challenges and a natural worry to Singapore's and South-East Asia's well-being. Singapore is alive to the need to manage the "Chinese juggernaut" which has shifted economic gravity away from South-East Asia, resulting in significantly lower foreign direct investments in the region since 1997.<sup>58</sup> Singapore's economic approach vis-à-vis China is to "jump on to the Chinese bandwagon" by co-opting the opportunities and ameliorating the threats.<sup>59</sup> This necessitates that Singapore remains relevant to China's economic agenda by rigorously tapping on cultural affinity and ties as well as good political relations.

Thus, Singapore actively positions itself as a "brand state," utilizing its economic and cultural positioning, for transnational influence and knowledge arbitrage with China and the Chinese overseas communities.<sup>60</sup> This leverage on the strategic equity of a brand niche is an instance of

57. As Gillis reminds us: "Identities and memories are not things we think *about*, but things we think *with*": John R. Gillis (ed.), *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 5 (original emphasis).

58. Kenichi Ohmae, "Profits and perils in China, Inc.," *Strategy + Business* (online edition), Issue 26 (2002). Moreover, closer cross-straits economic relations culminating in the China-Taiwan economies integrating fully could have adverse effects on Singapore's economy: see, "Convergence of cross-straits economic interests and implications for Singapore" (Singapore: Ministry of Trade and Industry, August 2001).

59. The theme of China's economic rise is a constant refrain in the numerous ministerial speeches since early 2001 in a conscious attempt to prime Singapore society.

60. Peter van Ham, "The rise of the brand state: the postmodern politics of image and reputation," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 5 (2001), pp. 2-6. A "brand state" is one with "geographical and political settings that seem trivial compared to their emotional resonance among an increasingly global audience of consumers ... The brand state's use of its history, geography, and ethnic motifs to construct its own distinct image is a benign campaign that lacks deep-rooted and often antagonistic sense of national identity and uniqueness that can accompany nationalism."

Singapore riding with, rather than going against, the Chinese juggernaut. In an age of mobile capital and the expected ascendancy of China, Singapore has sought to transform its role from mere trader and middleman to international arbitrageur with an inside track to business opportunities in China. Singapore has strategically positioned itself as a knowledge arbitrage hub in China's economic matters; a gateway for foreign investors intending to break into the China market. This command of cross-cultural accommodation has been capitalized to emphasize Singapore's utility as a valuable joint venture partner for foreign multinationals seeking to do business in China.<sup>61</sup> Singapore's re-branding itself vis-à-vis China is now embodied in its official declaration that China is part of its economic hinterland.<sup>62</sup>

Sino-Singapore economic relations are expanding rapidly. Singapore is eyeing China's World Trade Organization membership and its hosting of the 2008 Olympic Games as opportunities for bilateral economic ties to develop further. Between 1990 and 2000, bilateral trade between Singapore and China increased robustly at 15 per cent per annum, tripling from 23 billion *renminbi* (S\$5.2 billion) in 1990 to 96 billion *renminbi* (S\$21.6 billion) in 2000. In 2000, Sino-Singapore trade expanded by 32 per cent. Forty per cent of Singapore's bilateral trade is accounted for by Guangdong province alone.<sup>63</sup> China is Singapore's top foreign investment destination (since 1997) and its fifth largest trading partner. Singapore's cumulative investment in China amounts to US\$37.7 billion with US\$830 million invested in the first quarter of 2002.<sup>64</sup> Likewise, Singapore seeks to be a gateway to South-East Asia for increasing Chinese economic activity in the region and is China's second favourite destination for its investments in South-East Asia.<sup>65</sup> The abiding belief in the advantage that

61. Knowledge arbitrage – the knowledge and ability to take advantage of market differences in labour costs and product markets – facilitates companies in sourcing for the best production sites based on the determinants of manufacturing cost, access to markets and distribution channels: see John Kao, "The world wide web of Chinese business," *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 71, No. 2 (1993), pp. 24–36.

62. Michael Porter's influential cluster theory, as a driver of prosperity in the international political economy, highlights the need to integrate a city-region with other economic units: see, for example, his "Locations, clusters, and company strategy," in Gordon L. Clark *et al.* (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Economic Geography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 253–274; and "Regions and the new economics of competition," in Allen J. Scott (ed.), *Global City-Regions: Trends, Theory, Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 139–157.

63. Statistics compiled from "Singapore and China economic relations" (Singapore: Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2001) and International Enterprise Singapore (formerly, the Trade Development Board) press statement, "Singapore to vie for a stake in the Beijing Olympics 2008," 9 January 2002. For an analysis of the Chinese provinces' foreign economic relations, especially with Chinese overseas communities, see Peter T. Y. Cheung and James T. H. Tang, "The external relations of China's provinces," in David M. Lampton (ed.), *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform, 1978–2000* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 91–122. On China's strategies of courting Chinese overseas, see Mette Thunø, "Reaching out and incorporating Chinese overseas: the trans-territorial scope of the PRC by the end of the 20th century," *The China Quarterly*, No. 168 (2001), pp. 910–929.

64. "S'poreans pump more into China," *ST*, 30 May 2002, p. 1.

65. "S'pore draws more Chinese investments," *ST*, 1 March 2002, p. S12. On China's investments in South-East Asia, see "Buying into Southeast Asia," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 28 March 2002, pp. 30–33. South-East Asia accounted for only 6.1% of China's FDI in 1999.

co-ethnics have in cross-border transactions has also seen Singapore seeking to partake in the booming Sino-Indian trade.<sup>66</sup>

Not content with the coastal regions, Singapore seeks to tap the first offerings of China's strategic "look west" policy with the initial focus being on business opportunities in the relatively uncharted inner provinces of Xinjiang and Shaanxi.<sup>67</sup> Other initiatives to develop Singapore's niche in the Chinese economy include having government scholars spend a year in China to work with their counterparts and acquire intimate knowledge of China;<sup>68</sup> the Ministry of Trade and Industry's (MTI) newly launched Asia Business Fellowship Programme, which aims to develop a core of future business leaders who have deep knowledge and strong links to the region, especially China and India;<sup>69</sup> the creation of an international business division within MTI with a focus on China; and the resource and network information platforms such as "Network China."<sup>70</sup> The network of Singapore's International Enterprise offices in China is likely to be expanded to cover Sichuan, Shaanxi, Yunnan and Shandong provinces, and the Chongqing municipality. A new Singapore Chamber of Commerce and Industry in China was established in August 2002.

These multi-faceted efforts, emphasizing both the hardware of business information and intelligence and the software of cultural affinity, seek to emplace Singapore as a key player in the China market. In 1991, the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCCI) initiated the inaugural World Chinese Entrepreneurs Convention (WCEC) in Singapore.<sup>71</sup> The Singapore-based convention secretariat manages the on-line World Chinese Business Network.<sup>72</sup> The government has also encouraged the clan associations to reconceptualize their role in the cultural and economic life of the 21st century in order to attract younger members and to reap potential economic benefits from kinship ties.<sup>73</sup>

Beyond the economic sphere, Singapore has initiated several endeavours on research and public education on the Chinese overseas, seeking to carve "a role in the development of Chinese culture and its evolving civilization."<sup>74</sup> These include: the establishment of the Chinese Heritage

66. "S'pore as partner in the Sino-Indian trade story," *Business Times* (Singapore), 15 April 2002.

67. "BG Yeo in Xinjiang next week," *ST*, 18 August 2001, p. 4.

68. "Govt to find ways to enter China market," *ST*, 26 July 2001, p. 3.

69. The Singapore government will sponsor up to 100 students annually for MBA and business-related postgraduate studies in the best universities in China, India and other Asian countries. After graduation, these Asia Business Fellows will be required to serve Singapore-based enterprises in their internationalisation drive.

70. Network China's website can be accessed via <http://www.ventureabroad.org.sg>.

71. The WCEC has held six biennial meetings since 1991; the most recent in September 2001 in Nanjing. Singapore's delegation to the Nanjing WCEC was the largest business mission in SCCCI's history: "200 from S'pore to attend Chinese entrepreneurs meet," *ST*, 14 September 2001, p. A2.

72. At <http://wcbn.zaobao.com/>.

73. Liu Hong, "Old linkages, new networks: the globalization of overseas Chinese voluntary associations and its implications," *The China Quarterly*, No. 155 (1998), pp. 582-609.

74. Speech by George Yeo, Minister for Trade and Industry, at the launch of Huayinet, 11 February 2000.

Centre in 1995, under the auspices of the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, which “can help Singapore develop into an important centre of Sinic studies in the Pacific Rim”; and the establishment of the National Chinese Internet Programme to develop Singapore into a cyber-hub for the Chinese language internet. The National Library Board is working jointly with local and foreign organizations and experts in the development of Huayinet, a virtual resource centre on overseas ethnic Chinese communities.<sup>75</sup> Such initiatives seek to promote the Chinese Singaporean cultural broadband facility.

Over the past decade, increasing economic, political and military contacts have complemented cultural affinity. Sino-Singapore ties have grown from strength to strength and high-level exchanges are regular and frequent.<sup>76</sup> The closeness of bilateral ties is reflected in the increasing government-to-government and people-to-people contacts, which are seemingly more significant than Singapore’s exchanges with its immediate neighbours.<sup>77</sup> As an indicator of deepening bilateral relations, Singapore and China have also agreed to set up a high-level joint council to examine concrete areas for increased co-operation.<sup>78</sup> In the early to mid-1990s, Singapore’s development experience and model of soft authoritarianism were contemplated as a point of reference and possible blueprint for China.<sup>79</sup> China has studied Singapore’s political and social control of info-communications technology.<sup>80</sup> After Deng Xiaoping’s southern tour in 1992, a constant stream of delegations from various parts of China have visited to study Singapore development’s experience of promoting rapid economic development while maintaining social discipline. The Chinese Mayors’ Study Visit programme, inaugurated in 1997, has been extended to 2007.<sup>81</sup> Of late, however, there appears to be some

75. Huayinet is at <http://www.huayinet.org>.

76. The intricacies of Sino-Singapore political relations are beyond the scope of this article. Excellent discussion can be found in Leifer, *Singapore’s Foreign Policy*, especially pp. 108–112, and Khong Yuen Foong, “Singapore: a time for economic and political engagement,” in Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross (eds.), *Engaging China: The Management of an Emerging Power* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 109–128.

77. Tourist arrivals from China continue to grow by double digits. In view of its receding ideological threat and to promote tourist arrivals from China, visa applications have been simplified and expedited: “Chinese tourists to Singapore will get their visas faster,” *ST*, 28 September 2001, p. A5; “Follow the flags to save tourism,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 7 March 2002, pp. 22–25. See also “Direct contacts with China vital, says President,” *ST*, 15 September 2001, p. A3. Likewise, China-bound tours from Singapore are also gaining popularity.

78. “China, S’pore to set up high-level council,” *ST*, 27 April 2002, p. 1. The establishment of this mechanism was agreed upon during then Vice-President Hu Jintao’s visit to Singapore en route to the US in April 2002.

79. Rosemary Foot, *Rights Beyond Borders: The Global Community and the Struggle Over Human Rights in China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 153–57; Paul J. Bolt, *China and Southeast Asia’s Ethnic Chinese: State and Diaspora in Contemporary Asia* (Westport, CN: Praeger, 2000), pp. 143–49. See also Long Hua, “China favours Singapore as political model,” *ST*, 6 July 2001, p. 21 (first published in *Hong Kong Economic Journal*).

80. Daniel C. Lynch, *After The Propaganda State: Media, Politics, and “Thought Work” in Reformed China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 211.

81. About 200 of China’s mayors and vice-mayors have participated in the programme to study Singapore’s development experience: “Mayors’ study visits here to continue,” *ST*, 27 April 2002, p. H3.

degree of introspection and re-evaluation of the suitability of Singapore's model among some China's liberal intellectuals and lower government officials.<sup>82</sup> In the military sphere, Singapore's defence ties with China are "progressing on a step-by-step basis" and defence attaches have been exchanged.<sup>83</sup> China has reportedly offered Singapore military training facilities on Hainan island.<sup>84</sup> Given the multi-faceted dimension of China–Singapore relations and the subtext of Sinophobia in South-East Asia, this cosy state of affairs can be potentially troubling if China seeks to assert dominance in the region.<sup>85</sup>

Yet, there appears to be limitations to the efficacy of cultural affinity between co-ethnics. Industrial parks overseas have been touted as instances of Singapore exporting its development model of rapid economic development with social order.<sup>86</sup> However, Singapore's investments in the Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP) project and the Wuxi-Singapore Industrial Park have also shown the limitations of the co-ethnics' supposed cultural familiarity, *guanxi* and ease of communication. In both instances, Singapore has since divested its majority stake and transferred the majority shareholding and management to Chinese parties. For the SIP project, the transfer took place in 2001, after only seven years and despite

82. "China rethinks the Singapore model," *Lianhe zaobao* (online), 1 December 2001. Indeed, not all of Lee's political views are acceptable to the Chinese leadership. Six chapters of the second volume of Lee's memoirs for release in China, ranging from Deng's China to the Tianamen Incident and the Malayan Communist Party, were deleted, leaving the memoirs "devoid of practically all of Mr Lee's account of his encounters with China and Chinese leaders": "SM's memoirs on sale with cuts," *ST*, 8 September 2001, p. 6; "Chinese censors cut parts of Lee Kuan Yew memoirs," *International Herald Tribune*, 7 August 2001, p. 4.

83. Robert Karniol, Interview with Dr Tony Tan Keng Yam, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence of Singapore, *Jane's Defence Weekly*, Vol. 35, No. 26 (27 June 2001), p. 32. On a state visit to China, Singapore President S R Nathan said that, "Our defence people have exchanges with you ... To what extent it can develop depends on the complementarity between our defence philosophy and yours [China's]": "Natural to worry over China: President Nathan," *ST*, 13 September 2001, p. A3. Singapore subscribes to the triangular balance of power equilibrium between China, Japan and the United States in maintaining peace and stability in East Asia.

84. "Taiwan, China and S'pore," *Today* (Singapore), 23 April 2002, p. 3; "Wu sneaks into Singapore," *Taipei Times* (online edition), 12 January 2001. Two Chinese navy warships made their first-ever port call to Singapore in May 2002. This should herald more visits by the Chinese navy: "China warships' first visit to S'pore," *ST*, 18 May 2002, p. A2. On Sino-Singapore military ties, see Tim Huxley, *Defending the Lion City: The Armed Forces of Singapore* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2000), pp. 33–37.

85. "China will insist on a political role commensurate with its growing economic power": Henry Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?: Toward a Diplomacy for the 21st Century* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), p. 114. On the myths, which can be accentuated to threats, surrounding relations between China, South-East Asia and the Chinese overseas, see Wang Gungwu, *China and Southeast Asia: Myths, Threats and Culture* (Singapore: World Scientific & Singapore University Press, 1999); Wang Gungwu, *The Chinese Overseas: From Earthbound China to the Quest for Autonomy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); David S. G. Goodman, "Are Asia's 'ethnic Chinese' a regional-security threat?" *Survival*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (1997–98), pp. 140–155; and Zha Daojiong, "China and the May 1998 riots of Indonesia: exploring the issues," *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (2000), pp. 557–575.

86. Janerik Gidlund, "Illiberal and successful? In search of sustainable regional growth in authoritarian states," in David E. Andersson and Jessie P.H. Poon (eds.), *Asia Pacific Transitions* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 239–254; Lee Lai To, "The lion and the dragon: a view on Singapore–China Relations," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 10, No. 28 (2001), pp. 415–425.

interventions at the highest political levels. The difficulties have been attributed to different mindsets in “the way we think, our way of life, our working habits and styles.”<sup>87</sup> Domestic political sensitivity and the need to preserve bilateral Sino-Singapore ties have dictated the portrayal of the SIP project as a laudable example of the close co-operation between China and Singapore.<sup>88</sup>

Indeed, a government report concedes that Chinese-Singaporean businesses do not fare as well as their Hong Kong and Taiwanese counterparts.<sup>89</sup> The younger Chinese-Singaporeans appear to be condescending towards the potential “hollowing out” of Singapore’s economy by a resurgent China.<sup>90</sup> The mainland Chinese population living, working and studying in Singapore has also seen noticeable increases.<sup>91</sup> However, the local Chinese ambivalence and antipathy towards these new co-ethnic migrants tellingly demonstrates that the government’s imperatives towards China and Chineseness has a variegated response from Chinese-Singaporeans.

### Conclusion

Although not reaching the state of re-sinicization, the domestic political and cultural indicators point to a trend of creeping Chineseness within Singapore society. Closer and more wide-ranging Sino-Singapore political and economic relations have bolstered this development. Over the last three-and-a-half decades, one can discern the confident assertion and promotion of Chinese identity, in tandem with the growing international political and economic stature of China. The Chinese community’s “new sense of powerfulness” and its “decisive influence in government policy” have rendered Chinese-speaking leaders “no longer feel[ing] a sense of marginalization and powerlessness.”<sup>92</sup> There is also the unspoken Chi-

87. “Singaporeans face different Chinese mindset,” *ST*, 11 December 2000, p. A3.

88. See Singapore Software Project Office, *In Unison: Bilateral Collaboration on the Suzhou Industrial Park* (Singapore: Times Editions, 2001). “Suzhou’s success a boon to bilateral relations,” *ST*, 29 May 2002, p. 6.

89. “Performance and success factors of Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan investors in China” (Singapore: Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2001). On the influence of government policies on Singapore’s national culture and its impact on business behaviour, see Ji Li and Leonard Karakowsky, “Cultural malleability in an East Asian context: an illustration of the relationship between government policy, national culture and firm behaviour,” *Administration & Society*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2002), pp. 176–201.

90. Prime Minister Goh expressed his concern over this blasé attitude towards China in his 2001 National Day Rally. See also “A wake-up call from China,” *The Sunday Times*, 22 July 2001, p. P4 and the letters in response, which drew the Prime Minister’s attention.

91. In March 2001, the Hua Yuan Association was formed and helps the new arrivals from China to settle in: see “Chinese immigrants form new association,” *ST*, 2 May 2001, p. H1; “A home away from home for Chinese nationals,” *ST*, 13 January 2002, p. 27. The association’s website is at [www.myhuayuan.org](http://www.myhuayuan.org). The Singapore government does not release figures on the number of Chinese nationals in Singapore. Their numbers are evident in Singapore’s educational institutions.

92. Vasil, *Governing Singapore*, p. 213. Michael D. Barr’s *Lee Kuan Yew: The Beliefs Behind the Man* (Surrey: Curzon, 2000), at pp. 137–184, documents Lee’s growing awareness of his Chinese heritage in tandem with the reassertion of Chineseness in Singapore. See also

nese-Singaporean desire to secure more recognition as the dominant majority and its invaluable contribution to Singapore's prosperity.<sup>93</sup>

Chineseness was initially seen as an obstacle to Singapore's survival and nationalism; it is now seen as an asset in Singapore's overall development. Beyond the goal of nation-building, one cannot ignore the subtle influence of the ideology of pragmatism in the management of Chineseness in Singapore. The hues of Confucian-inspired political governance, economic imperatives linked with China's burgeoning market, the influence and potential threat China poses, and the ever-present need to ensure electoral support have led to policies and directives that edge towards a reconceptualization of Chinese identity, inclining towards a creeping reassertion of Chinese language and culture. This conflation of nation-building with state-building has led to aspects of Chineseness enjoying a disproportionate public presence over the last 20 years. Such a move has, of course, caused unspoken unease among Singapore's minority races and immediate geopolitical locale.<sup>94</sup> If unchecked, it would gradually weaken the multiracial ethos as it touches a raw nerve among the minorities who have the latent fear of being overwhelmed and being "left out of an increasingly Chinese Singapore."<sup>95</sup> Prime Minister Goh's reminder is timely:

... the outlook of the Chinese community in Singapore has been attuned to its geo-political environment. The Singaporean Chinese recognise and accept that Chinese culture and Mandarin must be advanced within the multiracial context of Singapore and the political and social milieu of Southeast Asia. They know that the destiny of Singapore is in Southeast Asia. They preserve their heritage but subsume its display under the broader complexion of Singapore nationalism. They leave Singaporeans of all races in no doubt that their political standpoint is solidly based on the national interest of an independent Singapore in Southeast Asia.<sup>96</sup>

Singapore's policy of multiracialism is likened to "four overlapping circles" in which the different communities maintain their cultural identity and heritage. The overlapping area must continue to enlarge. Ultimately, the Chinese-Singaporean community, as the dominant majority, needs to be sensitive to the feelings of the racial minorities at a time when the ethnic Chinese in the region are more confident in asserting their cultural heritage and identity. In the midst of creeping Chineseness in

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*footnote continued*

Loy Teck Juan *et al.* (eds.), *Lee Kuan Yew on the Chinese Community in Singapore* (Singapore: SCCI and Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, 1991).

93. Vasil, *Governing Singapore*, pp. 211–13, 248.

94. Cf. William K. M. Lee, "Ethnicity and ageing in Singapore," *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2001), pp. 163–176, who argues that the political leaders attribute Singapore's success to Chinese cultural influence which "promotes a notion that the Chinese are a different species and culturally superior to other ethnic groups." See also Lily Zubaidah Rahim's controversial *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1998) for the elites' supposed belief in the ideology of Malay cultural deficit.

95. George, *Singapore: The Air-conditioned Nation*, p. 162. This is not to suggest that discrimination on racial grounds has increased in the last two decades.

96. Speech at the launch of *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*, 26 October 1998.

Singapore's society, the challenge is to ensure that the Chinese Singaporean is not blind to the multiracial composition of Singapore.<sup>97</sup> Neither should Chinese identity be coterminous with Singapore's national identity. For if it comes to pass, such racial hegemony will surely tear Singapore's delicate social fabric.

97. See David Brown, *Contemporary Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 89–106, for an incisive discussion of the weaving of the civic and ethnocultural nationalisms in Singapore in the context of the state's imperative of ideological and economic management. At p. 103, Brown notes "the anxiety, fear and insecurity which permeate modern Singapore society."