

# **SINGAPORE UNLIMITED<sup>1</sup>: CONFIGURING SOCIAL IDENTITY IN THE REGIONALISATION PROCESS**

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## **Globalisation and deterritorialization of social identity**

It is a common belief that in the age of globalisation, powerful forces are at work restructuring the economic, technological, social and cultural domains of life so as to sweep aside all forms of localism. Global capitalism is effecting a structural shift: 'a transfer of power from multilateral economic institutions (controlled by powerful states) to transnational forces without familiar territorial links and therefore without accountability to any formal political authority' (Peterson, 1996:14). However, it has also become equally clear that, far from heralding the death of geographical location, global competition has only rendered relativities of place more, not less, important. Whilst modern transportation and communications technology has improved all places' accessibility - and therefore their potential for participation in the global economy - it has also improved the economic potential of selected foci in the new international networks which it has created far more than it has improved that same potential in the rest of the world (Jackson, Huang and Yeoh, forthcoming). It has not destroyed geography or eliminated differences; it has instead created new 'geographies with quite different breaks and borders from what went on before' (Thrift 1994: 368). As Brah (1991: 168) claims, 'all our fates are linked within this [global economic] system but our precise position in it depends on a multiplicity of factors such as our gender, class background, colour, ethnicity, caste, whether we live in a rich industrially advanced society or a poor country of the Third World.'

Much of the work on the new dialectic between the 'global and the 'local' has been applied to understanding the ways economic relations have been globalised

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<sup>1</sup> 'Singapore Unlimited', the Economic Development Board's concept to attract foreign investors, implies that while Singapore has limited physical resources, it is able to create more economic space and overcome

and the ways they have not (Hirst and Thompson, 1992; Thrift, 1994). A parallel vein of literature focuses on the implications that globalisation has had on the socio-political arena, particularly in terms of place identities, transborder identities, loyalties of migrant populations and notions of citizenship (Featherstone, 1990; 1993; King, 1990; Massey, 1993; Li and Findlay, 1996; Stasiulis and Bakan, 1997). The politics of identity has resurfaced inexorably in the globalising world as mobility and time-space compression exacerbates 'the contradictions between the notion of discrete territoriality in the discourse of nationalism and the transgressive fact of migration' (van der Veer, 1995:2). While each vein of literature -- the economic and the social -- has grown beyond the scope of any review, the rapprochement between the two -- how the economic bases of globalisation fuels a reworking of social identities and vice versa -- has yet to be fully unravelled. Indeed, while much of the discussion elaborating on the idea that social identity is no longer secured by moorings to specific places is *premised* on the growing economic interdependence of the world and increasing volume and forms of global movements including Appadurai's (1990) flows of people, media images, technology, monies and ideologies, less has been said about instances where a 'deterritorialised' sense of identity may actually also represent a *precondition* for lubricating the wheels of economic globalisation.

As Cohen (1997:157) points out, one of the crucial differences between the periods loosely known as 'modernity' and 'the age of globalization' is marked by the latter's challenge to the claims of 'hegemonizing nation-states' of making 'an exclusive citizenship a defining focus of allegiance and fidelity in favour of overlapping, permeable and multiple forms of identification.' Instead of a state-centric construction of political and social identity.

The scope for multiple affiliations and associations that has been opened up

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its constraints by linking up with the region.

outside and beyond the nation-state has also allowed a diasporic allegiance to become both more open and more acceptable. There is no longer any stability in the points of origin, no finality in the points of destination and no necessary coincidence between social and national identities' (Cohen 1997: 175).

Paradoxically, however, it has also been noted that globalisation does not necessarily erase, and in fact may exacerbate, forms of social exclusivity including nationalism and ethnicity, religious fundamentalism, racism, sexism and the 'sentimentalised recovering' of local heritages and other forms of localism (Massey, 1993:232; Featherstone, 1993; Cohen 1997:169). It is precisely where the bonds between people and place are tenuous – where nationalisms are recent, where there are heterogeneous people sharing one space, where a sense of shared history is lacking and where global (sometimes interpreted as western) forces threaten to overwhelm local tradition – that a reassertion of the local may emerge. These complex and sometimes contradictory dynamics resulting in what has been described as a 'fragmentation', 'hybridisation', 'syncretism', 'deterritorialisation' or 'diasporisation' of social identities (to draw on just some of the vocabulary which permeate postmodern understandings of identity), however, do not necessarily negate the power that inheres in exclusivist group identifications. In other words, the power and politics of identity have not been eliminated but transformed in the context of global dynamics and transnational forces. Indeed, precisely because identity is socially constructed rather than being essential and natural (Jackson and Penrose, 1993), albeit in ambivalent and liminal ways, and selectively draws on multiple narratives of 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1983), new forms of identification assumed by nation-states and individuals are forged in *strategic* ways to better position themselves in a globalising world. Global contextualisation not only highlights the fact that bounded identities are strategic resources but also provides

the background for the articulation of a politics of identity and difference (Peterson, 1996:13).

Much of the literature investigating the politics of identity in the context of globalisation has described the pulls of the nation-state and globalisation operating on individual's social identity in oppositional terms: while global restructuring erodes the nation-state's hold on its citizens, the nation-state, through a variety of institutions and strategies, 'articulates nationalist imagined geographies', both to instil a 'geographic common sense of belonging' among its citizens (Radcliffe, 1996:24) as well as to erect borders to exclude those it deems outsiders (Stasiulis and Bakan, 1997). We would like to suggest that the links between individuals, nation-states and global capitalism are more complex than such a binary opposition indicates, and that what Kotkin (1992) describes as a 'diaspora by design' provides a new understanding of the way identities may be strategically constructed to effect a different alignment of the individual, nation-state and global capital.

Kotkin (1992) argues that, in response to the challenges of globalisation, the flexibility and resources at the command of strong diasporic 'tribes' who combine international mobility, cosmopolitan perspectives and an unerring eye for opportunities in the global market on the one hand with a cohesive ethnic identity bound by influential *guanxi* (networks of kin, friends and associates) on the other allow them to hone the skills of ethnic entrepreneurship to navigate successfully in a globalising world. In Cohen's (1997:173) words, 'diasporas score by being able to interrogate the universal with the particular and by being able to use their cosmopolitanism to press the limits of the local.' To align the identity politics of being 'home' and 'away' and minimise the countervailing pressures of either pole, nation-states may actively encourage and *design* a diasporic imagination (in this positive sense and shorn of the negative connotations of trauma and exile associated with older uses of the term) among its citizens to bridge the gap between

the local and the global. Cultivating a diasporic identity hence becomes a strategic means to position oneself (the nation-state, the individual) in meeting the challenges of globalisation.

In the context of the above ideas, we would like to focus on one aspect of our current research on Singapore's regionalisation drive and Singaporeans in China in particular: the question of the way social identity among Singaporeans is framed and challenged as a result of globalisation, international migration and 'deterritorialisation' in a transcultural context. The aim is to look at the way state discourse has constructed the Singapore 'nation' in the context of the policies and the push to 'go-regional' as well as individual (re)negotiations of identity as a result of relocation in China, and to look at the interrelations as well as slippages between the two levels of discourse. We briefly suspend the discussion to include a note on the methodological route taken.

### **Brief methodological note**

The research which focused primarily on issues of gender relations, household strategies and negotiations of social identity as wrought in the process of Singapore's regionalisation drive was carried out in the summer of 1997. The fieldwork included in-depth face-to-face interviews, lasting about an hour on average, with 130 Singaporean men and women (in roughly even proportions) who occupy the following grid:

- (1) individuals who are, or have been, working in China, as entrepreneurs, managers, professionals, and support staff in private businesses, Government Linked Companies (GLCs) and Multinational companies (MNCs);
- (2) accompanying spouses, mainly women; as well as wives who stayed in Singapore while their husbands were posted to China;
- (3) 'commuters' who moved between Singapore and China following a weekly or

monthly cycle for business and work purposes; and

(4) individuals who worked for companies where foreign postings to China were a possibility but who did not make the move.

Interviews were conducted in Singapore as well as in Shanghai, Suzhou and Wuxi in the Yangtze Delta Region. The region was selected firstly because of the prominent role it played in the recent rapid growth relating to the opening up of the Chinese economy, Shanghai being represented as the 'dragon head', leading the way forward for the region, with the rest of the delta region acting as the body and tail of the dragon (Lien *et al*, Tan *et al.*, 1996); and secondly, because of the concentration of Singaporean investments, particularly large scale infrastructural projects in the area. To begin to understand the role of the state and the institutional framework within which these movements were made, we also interviewed human resource managers of major companies in Singapore about deployment overseas, as well as drew on published reports and brochures and interviews with officials from the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Community Development, the Economic Development Board, the Trade Development Board, and representatives of the Singapore International Foundation, an organisation set up in 1991 to 'further Singapore's efforts to go global' (according to its mission statement).

### **Economic imperatives and the 'go-regional' thrust**

Newly Industrialising Countries (NICs) such as Singapore form a vital link in the global restructuring process in their role as major recipients for the relocation and concentration of capital investments of expanding transnational corporations. Singapore's transformation into a global city, one plugged into international transport, communications and information networks and occupying specialised niches in world industries such as high-tech electronics, computers, oil refining and financial services,

has been largely state-engineered and multinational led.

The onset and severity of the 1985-86 recession, however, prompted the state to rethink its strategy of relying primarily on the state and multinational firms for sustained economic growth. Since 1986, and increasingly so in the 1990s, the state has been encouraging more local firms, both government-linked and private, to venture abroad as part of a strategy to diversify the sources of growth in Singapore economy. 'Going regional' is seen as a primary strategy to transcend Singapore's domestic constraints of land and labour as well as to capitalise on the rapid economic development and industrialisation of the Asia-Pacific region. According to Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew (quoted in *Economic Development Board*, 1993:1), 'all successful mature economies have this external dimension which broadens their domestic operations and helps them to upgrade their economy.' The building of an external wing which supplements the domestic economy is hence valorised not just as 'a major thrust in the next phase of Singapore's economic development' but also one step closer towards the 'national vision' of becoming a developed nation (*Economic Development Board*, 1993:1). By the mid-1990s, Singapore's external wing has spread far and wide, with significant foreign direct investment portfolios in a number of countries in the region, notably China, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Myanmar, Vietnam, Philippines and India. While the regionalisation programme is meant to be private-sector driven, the current phase of the regionalisation strategy appears led by government-linked companies. Strong government support and intervention is not only clearly discernible in the host of investment support and co-investment strategies, tax incentives and financing and training schemes to encourage Singapore-based companies to go regional, as well as the active role the Singapore government plays in establishing bilateral platforms of strategic collaboration with international and regional investment partners including negotiations at the highest political level, it is also visibly impressed on regional landscape in the form of 'flagship projects' (eight to date, two in China, four in Indonesia,

one in India and one in Vietnam), self-contained industrial parks to provide a supportive environment for the expansion of MNCs and Singapore companies (*Economic Development Board*, 1997). As well as infrastructure provision, the government endeavours to export the 'software' to manage the property according to Singapore administrative practices as a strategy to exploit its reputation for efficient, non-corrupt administration and to further facilitate the regional expansion of local ventures.

### **Singapore's regionalisation drive and state discourse on 'nation' and 'national identity'**

The construction of a singular national identity out of the disparate elements of a postcolonial immigrant society since its 'rude thrust into independence' in 1965 has been an important and complex state-led project for the last thirty-odd years (Hill and Lian, 1995). Indeed, according to a recent commentary, 'it is difficult to find any other nation-state more committed to the project of nation-building and building a national identity' (*The Straits Times*, 13 September 1997). The pressures of creating a nation of 'one people' belonging to 'one place', and associated manoeuvres to secure political legitimacy, build ideological consensus, discipline its industrial workforce and mould the consciousness of its new citizens has been an important imperative threaded into all major state policies -- housing, education, language, community development, national service, economic development -- governing various aspects of social and political life.

While the rhetoric of 'survival' and 'necessity' has been used to safeguard the nation's passage through the turbulent waters of the immediate post-independence years, economic success has more recently brought with it 'substantial injection of self-definition and national pride' (Chua and Kuo, 1990:6). The age of globalisation of the 1990s and beyond, and Singapore's bid to secure its place as a global city in the twenty-first century, however, has engendered new challenges to the nation's

sense of identity. These challenges have been recently framed in the terms of reference of a high level, Minister-led Singapore 21 Committee in the form of the challenge of, on the one hand, making Singapore a city with global reach – international, cosmopolitan and creative – and on the other hand, ‘the best home for Singaporeans’ (*The Straits Times*, 20 October 1997). Five more specific ‘dilemmas’ have been crystallised, headed by the critical issue of mediating between the contradictory pulls of ‘internationalisation/regionalisation vs Singapore as home’.<sup>2</sup> While a pro-active stance to plug into regional and international economic growth cannot be sacrificed and Singaporeans are continually exhorted to develop an entrepreneurial spirit and a global and regional outlook, it must not undermine the ‘heartware of Singapore’ (to use the Prime Minister’s words), that is, ‘our love for the country, our rootedness and our sense of community and nationhood’ (*The Straits Times*, 20 October 1997).

The solution then is a Janus-faced identity: on the one hand, the Singaporean must assume the identity of the street-savvy risk-taking cosmopolitan, not averse to operating in overseas entrepreneurial training grounds which may be ‘disorderly, sticky and unpredictable’ and able to draw on ‘*guanxi* capability’ as ethnic Chinese to manoeuvre in East Asia (Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew quoted in Balakrishnan, 1993:54); on the other hand, Singaporeans ‘who tear ourselves away from our families to go and work abroad’ must ‘remain rooted to Singapore’ (Lee Tsao Yuan, quoted in *The Straits Times*, 20 October 1997). As a Singaporean who is also an overseas Chinese, the slippage between ethnic and national identity can also be put to good advantage, and the difference preserved: Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew

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<sup>2</sup> The other ‘dilemmas’ are ‘less stressful life vs retaining drive’; ‘attracting talent vs looking after Singaporeans’; ‘needs of senior citizens vs aspirations of the young’; and ‘consultation and consensus vs decisiveness and quick action’. The framing of these dilemmas as irreconcilable dualisms is intended, in the words of the Prime Minister, ‘to drive home the point that many of these issues we face as a nation are really issues of choice.... We can’t have everything that we want. We have to choose.’ However, the Minister heading the committee is of the more optimistic view that these ‘may not necessarily be dilemmas, but there may well be solutions which can enable us to achieve both

(quoted in do Rosario, 1993:17), for example, stressed the need to exploit 'network capitalism' to its fullest as a means of capturing business opportunities in China, arguing that 'there is no need [for ethnic Chinese] to be apologetic about wanting to maximise benefits through each other's contacts and access to opportunities' since 'the Anglo-Saxons do it, the Jews do it, so do the Hindus and the Muslims.' At the same time, he also emphasised the need to re-affirm loyalties with the home: 'we are ethnic Chinese ... but at the end of the day, our fundamental loyalties are to our home, not to our ancestral countries. To think otherwise ... is unrealistic. It will lead to grief when our interests fail to coincide.'

Thus, the way forward in moulding the Singapore identity to fit the regionalisation bill as depicted in state discourse comes close to the diasporic formula proposed by Kotkin (1992). The Singapore vision of harnessing economic nationalism to the dynamics of globalisation is predicated on cultivating a diasporic identity as 'New Asians' (George Yeo's term, then Minister of Information and the Arts, quoted in Crovitz, 1993:18), combining flexibility and enterprise in responding to new opportunities, a strong ethnic component which can be harnessed for networking, and equally strong attachment to an imagined 'homeland' while being citizens constantly on the move. 'Diaspora by design' is thus a strategic tool in successful regionalisation *and* nation-building, intended to bridge the gap between global and local imaginations, between cosmopolitanism and localism, and allowing individuals to successfully remain and strategically navigate inside and outside of both home country and host society simultaneously. In aiming to build Singapore's second wing economy on the basis of mobilising 'ethnic advantage' to articulate 'business networks and economic arrangements within a larger global "diaspora economy" and by appropriating "spatial resources" in a transnational space', what has been called 'the other side of ethnic entrepreneurship' -- issues of racism, social

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objectives in some cases' (*The Straits Times*, 20 October 1997).

inequality, oppression of female labour and self-exploitation -- have been generally downplayed (Chan and Ong, 1995:526-527).

Apart from designing a diasporic imagination among its citizens, the state, through its various agencies, has also addressed the tensions between the global and the local as embedded in the regionalisation drive by transforming particular 'characteristics' of the Singapore psyche into 'globalising' strategies. As Benjamin (1988:12) has argued, 'international relations have been conducted as if they were *inter-personal* relations, to the extent that as much attention must now be paid to a country's supposed honour and shame as to its economic or political condition.' Aguilar (1996b:106) calls this the 'serialization of nations-as-persons' whereby human qualities are projected onto the nation 'such that the nation could be concomitantly fetishized as though it were like you and me.' The regionalisation programme thus involves a projection of the nation's reputation onto global space, approximating a testing ground not only for the nation's individual citizens but also for the nation-as-person.

First, by drawing on its historical roots as a crossing point between eastern and western trading routes originating in the colonial era; its geographical position at the nexus of several economic zones such as APEC and ASEAN; and its cultural advantages as a multiracial, multilingual society, Singapore asserts an edge as a critical 'value-adding partner' in penetrating the Asia Pacific market (Yeoh and Willis, 1997). It is claimed, for example, that Singaporeans 'have been able to integrate the strengths of diverse Asian cultures to evolve a strong identity of their own' and at the same time are familiar with 'the business environments and practices of the West', thus allowing Singapore to act effectively as a 'bridge' between east and west (Economic Development Board, 1995:6). National policies such as multiracialism (a social formula that assumes that the four major 'races' in Singapore -- Chinese, Malay, Indian and 'Other' -- are separate but equal) and bilingualism (the practice in schools of ensuring

that students maintain fluency in English and their 'mother tongue', interpreted accordingly as Mandarin, Malay and Tamil) are capitalised as key assets of national culture which stand the nation-state in good stead in helping international companies plug into the region for markets and resources. As part of 'Dragon's diaspora' (that is, overseas Chinese), Singaporeans can effectively draw on their ethnic and cultural identity to effect 'knowledge arbitrage' (that is, 'extracting from one [civilisation] in a way which allows [one] to assimilate the other') and thereby 'add[ing] value as a trader' (George Yeo, quoted in Crovitz, 1993:18). To quote George Yeo further,

Those who have knowledge of the culture and cultural nuances are able to lower business risks [for foreigners who find the risks unacceptable]. The Chinese overseas understand Chinese culture because they are ethnically Chinese themselves, but they also understand the world outside.... They are like modems. They modulate and demodulate and add value in the process.

Cultural identity is thus transformed into a major selling point for a 'global' market in strategic ways, by drawing on the imagined geographies of the Chinese diaspora connected across the oceans by an essentialised ethnicity and at the same time positioning the east and the west as culturally incommensurable and hence economically incompatible, thus opening up a space for diasporic Chinese to act as go-between. As Keith and Pile (1993:18) have argued, 'diaspora is an invocation of communal space which is simultaneously both inside and outside the West.'

Second, Singapore's 'go-regional' strategy offers an example of a case where national culture, that embodied in the nation-as-person, is subject to transnationalisation. State-engineered investments in large-scale infrastructural development projects such as the Wuxi-Singapore Industrial Park and the Suzhou-Singapore Industrial Park are viewed as the 'expansion of *Singapore* economic space beyond the nation's geographical boundaries', they represent opportunities to export the 'software' to manage the property according to Singapore administrative practices. Industrial parks

on foreign soil which bear the 'Singapore brand name' provide a means to exploit Singapore's national reputation for efficient, non-corrupt administration and a clean, secure and ordered physical environment. The 'Singapore business [and physical] environment' is seen as a national commodity which can be exported across international boundaries, resulting in the creation of industrial spaces and townships such as the Singapore-Suzhou Township modelled after Singapore's Jurong Industrial Estate and planned by Singapore government agencies. As noted by the Senior Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, the Singapore government was determined to make the Suzhou project a success because 'here, we will defend our quality ... here, our reputation is at stake' (*Suzhou Industrial Park Quarterly*, 1995). Two years later, when reflecting on the slow progress made in the park, the Senior Minister blamed part of the failure of the park to the lack of commitment on the part of the Suzhou local government to embracing a 'Singapore style' in competing against the external world (*The Straits Times*, 5 December 1997). In the business of planting flagship projects overseas, 'Singapore' signifies a commodified brand name which can be detached from its place-rooted identity and historical context, and transplanted elsewhere as a formula for success.

While the state manoeuvres to reconfigure Singaporean identity in strategic ways through interventions to shape the consciousness of its citizens as well as by projecting and positioning essentialist images of Singaporeanness abroad, it must be remembered that state discourse need not be hegemonic. Elsewhere, we have given attention to the 'social sustainability' of the regionalisation drive from the perspective of Singaporean men and women and in terms of the types of strategies households adopt in responding to the call to venture overseas. In this paper, we are concerned primarily with the (re)negotiations of social, in particular 'ethnic', identity among Singaporeans within the context of the regionalisation drive.

## Individual (re)negotiations of identity

Much has been written about the 'borderline nature' of migrant identity and its location 'not only between two or more cultures but at the shifting interface of power relationships whose boundaries may oscillate in time as well as space' (Li and Findlay, 1996:375). The fluidity and instability of the multiplicity of identities expressed by migrants provide a contested terrain to investigate migrants' positioning of their own identities in interstitial spaces *vis-à-vis* state constructions and preferred versions of diasporic identity.

First, we note that the rhetoric of 'going regional' as a means to securing economic progress into the next century and the need to cultivate a more entrepreneurial spirit given its lack is well accepted among Singaporeans. In this one respect, Singaporeans seemed to have imbibed the language supplied by state managers.

*I think Singapore is so small, it is really a wise move to go regional.*

*(Joo Yau)<sup>3</sup>*

*Singapore ultimately has no choice. It has to regionalise because the market is too small.... We are still going through a steep learning curve. In terms of entrepreneurial spirit, creativity, gung ho-ness and the willingness or ability to take risk, I think we are miles behind the Hong Kongers, Taiwanese, Japanese and Koreans, and in lots of ways, we lose out to the Caucasians. They say they can only win the battle, the alternative is to die. The Singaporean is still very much a rabbit in the hole. We stick our heads out and look. If things are not right, we'll retreat back. We don't have the kind of commitment to give up everything, spend lots of time (outside the country), get to know the system well before deciding to invest, and with the intention of not going back for a long time to come.*

*(Kian Min)*

Singaporeans have much greater difficulties defining themselves and playing the role as 'the new Asians' who are able to draw on their Chineseness to effect knowledge arbitrage. At the start, most came to China for the first time with an idealised image of the country being the fount of Chinese culture, a view of China as an ancestral homeland and subliminal ties. Venturing to China, even if it is mainly

for business and work purposes, is couched in terms of the privilege of 'return', a journey 'home', a re-connection to 'motherland', a means of rejuvenating 'lost' or 'suppressed' Chineseness, and a re-discovery of roots. Many framed their move to China in the language of 'return' even though the basic motivation of relocating in China had little to do with such rhetoric:

*I went to China with three objectives in mind. One, to share my expertise, so called, with the people there. Second is to see China. China was not a place I have toured before. And third, to learn to be more independent....See how well I can survive.... I've heard so much about China, the people, the culture, the language, they are my roots and I was curious.*

*(Priscilla)*

*It has been my interest all this while to come over to China and work here and experience what life in China is all about... It's family background. We have always been very traditional in a way. Since young, I have been inculcated with the love for motherland. I mean not so much that I wanted to be a communist, but it's the love for Chinese history, Chinese culture and all its practices. I was thinking that maybe one day I'll go back and do something great for my so called motherland. Of course it is not really my motherland, as I am Singaporean. But there is always this subliminal thinking all this while.*

*(Kian Min)*

*I'm Chinese educated from young, you know, Chinese educated all the way. In the past they would have called us bloody communist minded! Now of course we are not but still there is the little bit of feeling for China, a kind of interest. You always feel that you should go to China and have a look. After so many years of studying Chinese history, why not? Of course, with the background I stand a better position than others... In Singapore, I don't write as well as the English educated... every time it comes to writing reports I'll have to scratch my head, so you lose out quite a lot in terms of climbing the corporate ladder. So I was telling myself, if I come to China, nobody can beat me because my Chinese is strong enough, powerful enough.*

*(Joo Yau)*

*Although he [interviewee's father] feels that he's Singaporean and says he's Singaporean, I think deep down there is this emotional attachment to China. Maybe he thinks that by investing there he is giving some kind of help to the country. And of course the government is encouraging [companies to venture into China], and everybody thinks that China is cheaper in terms of labour costs and factory land costs.*

*(Ern Hui)*

However, the vision of China being the 'motherland' or 'heartland' of Chinese culture

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<sup>3</sup> Pseudonyms are used to ensure anonymity.

and values was very quickly discarded on encountering the reality of China today.

*I read lots of Chinese history – 5,000 years of history, and came prepared to learn... but it was totally the other way round. You come here to be disappointed. Things happen the other way round. They are rich in culture, but the behaviour of the people [leaves much to be desired].*

(Arnold)

*The impression I have about Chinese culture is from books. If you read their history, it says that they are a people who emphasize being courteous, being polite. But when I come here, their behaviour is actually quite different from what I understand from the books. They have gone backwards.*

(Kay Gan)

The rhetoric of return and the rediscovery of Chineseness soon give way to the politics of difference as the Singaporean identity is distanced from 'China Chineseness'. Instead, Chinese-Chinese is seen as disembowelled, devoid of cultural and moral values. It is the insanitary and degenerate 'other' which helps to define 'self' by positing and mirroring what could have been:

*The Singaporean Chinese is very different from the Chinese Chinese. We keep telling ourselves not to be deceived by skin colour.*

(Hui Boon)

*I don't like people to say that I'm China Chinese. I'm Chinese I know, but I'm also Singaporean. We are very very different, because of our mentality and behaviour, I would say.*

(Jacintha)

*I kept telling myself I'm so glad that Ah Kong [grandfather] took the trouble to migrate [out of China to Singapore]. It was not easy then, but we are so much more fortunate in Singapore, so much better off than them.*

(Joan)

*I definitely feel more Singaporean here because you compare yourself with them. In Singapore, you don't know why but you keep getting bashed. The government says you are kiasu, you are ungracious and things like that, but when you come here and look around you, hey, you are so much better than these people here! You will be definitely proud of being Singaporeans. Lucky that our ancestors left the place, or we'll be one of them!*

(Eleanor)

Here, constructing the identity of 'self' and 'other' is operating at a scale where the

distance between cultures is narrowed by many similarities of origin and history. The construction of difference uses a much finer mesh, hence requiring subtle navigation across the space of difference. As such, petty issues from unacceptable social and personal habits to the lack of 'modern' civilities are elevated to the position of cultural and moral markers to bring the difference between the Chinese and the Singaporean into sharp focus.

*And the culture shock at first was quite [tremendous] for we thought we were all Chinese, but their attitude towards life, their attitude towards hygiene, their mannerisms are all totally different from us as Chinese. I quote one example. I brought my son out for shopping in a complex somewhere they call their 'Orchard Road' [the name of Singapore's elite shopping thoroughfare]. I was pregnant, so my son held the door open for me. Instead of I easing my way out, the Chinese – young, old, middle age – they all just rush out through the door and squeezed pass me. They just carried on as if he [her son] wasn't there. And they didn't even look back or say thank you. My son told me, 'Mummy, I hate the Chinese'. I said, 'Don't say that, you are Chinese'. He said, 'No, I'm Singaporean. I can't stand them'.*

*(Pat)*

*It is different... the terminologies you use, the concepts that you bring across, to them it is alien. So is theirs to us. Why they emphasise a particular area... it is not important to us but they see it as their motto in life. They are very different. How they view family, religion, work. For example, the work may be piling up sky high and here I am giving them deadlines to give me the reports yesterday. They will say 'There always is a tomorrow', 'I have to go back at 5.30 pm to cook for my husband or feed my kid', 'Heck with deadlines'. Why can't the people understand (the need to meet deadlines) like in Singapore?*

*(Kian Min)*

While the more common manoeuvre in defining the Singaporean self is to dissociate from the Chinese by proclaiming that one is 'Singaporean' and not 'Chinese', another is to shift the 'true' site of Chinese tradition and culture offshore.

*Here they have no tradition. Do you know that if we talk about the hungry ghost [festival], they belittle us? They say, 'How do you know that they are hungry? They have to be hungry all these while!' and they laugh at us. They say, 'Oh, don't burn the [paper] money, give it to us'. They belittle us for following tradition. The locals.... They don't have tradition anymore. In 1949 they abolished it. You find that there are so many things they have forgotten....Even for weddings, these things, they have abolished. And Chinese New Year, not like us so, they celebrate, not like in Singapore [where] you must have everything [festive rituals and paraphernalia]. I think it is because of communism. It's a sad thing. And [yet] they are so proud.*

*I feel very Singaporean here.... I think one plus point about staying here is I have learnt to love my country. I'm so proud of my country. During our National Day dinner, when I sang my National Anthem, I had tears. I was so proud.... It makes you appreciate that I come from a country with freedom, and I'm so glad that though for many years we were colonised, we still maintained our traditions. Previously, I used to laugh at my mother for her traditions. Now I am very proud, I am going to maintain those traditions and see that it goes on in my next generation. It's a very sad thing to lose your roots. I told my husband it's good to come to China so that I can look at my roots without financial [cost], but I find that it is all a myth here. The people have changed, they are lazy, not like what they used to be.*

*(Jill)*

*When he [interviewee's father] talks about them, he says 'zong guo ren' [people from China]. I think he used to feel more Chinese himself but after this experience of setting up a factory and doing business there, he probably feels the difference.... They would promise, yes, yes, yes, we'll do this, and eventually it turns out that they can't [fulfil their promise]. And they will just change without feeling ashamed. You know if we are the ones to do the same thing we Chinese would feel very ashamed because we have said we could and eventually cannot honour our words. We feel that to them, they don't have this kind of values. They are quite different from us.*

*(Ern Hui)*

Shorn of its cultural and moral content, China has been adjectivised. Few see this degeneracy as endemic or innate (impossible, since the Singaporean Chinese also came from the same 'stock', but grafted on a different tree). Hence, unlike colonial discourses of dominance which drew on transhistorical, essentialised notions of difference between coloniser and the colonised, the genealogy of difference is traced back to the Cultural Revolution as the watershed and dividing line distinguishing the two kinds of Chinese:

*The Cultural Revolution has done much harm to the country. You can actually see it. Basically the country has lost its own character, lost its own culture, it doesn't have a soul. Many customs we keep so steadfastly in Southeast Asia are not practised here. Religion, folklore, for example. Over here, it's a society without a backbone.... For example, the sense of shame and the sense of loyalty formulated in Confucian thinking is not strongly rooted here. Everyone is very selfish. For example, Qu Yuan [Chinese hero] who we read about, seldom do you see people acting [in his mould]. You sense it more in Singapore – people have that sense of shame, you do something bad you lose face for the whole family clan. Over here, they get away with murder. Die, die, they don't care about face.... I feel it very strongly here because we observe [these traditions] so strictly in Singapore.*

*(Kian Min)*

The discourse of difference is also highly gendered: as the symbols and bearers of

Chinese virtues and values, Chinese women are expected to be 'traditional', feminine and modest. Their degeneracy is thus interpreted severely as an indictment of Chinese society and a betrayal of the whole of Chinese civilisation.

*I think we are very different from them... our thinking is very much different from them. They are very arrogant about themselves and their culture... they always say they have five thousand years of it. They are very proud of their language. They say that our Mandarin is so substandard. [But] the women are much too liberal... in terms of their dressing, their use of language, their behaviour.... Especially at the swimming pool ... they just walk around naked everywhere [in the changing rooms].... Overseas Singaporean men end up [drawn into sexual intrigues] with China girls mainly because the China girl doesn't mind whether you have a family or not. They don't bother. They don't care.... I think we [Singaporeans] are quite different.*

(Clara)

*The Chinese have degenerated since the Cultural Revolution. Look at the women. They have lost their moral values. Do you know that if there is a Chinese man of marriageable age honest and hardworking, the Chinese women wouldn't want him? Because he is so straight he'll always get cheated!*

(Eleanor)

## **Conclusion**

While the state has exhorted the value of configuring a Singaporean diasporic identity which facilitates cultural penetration of the Chinese nation through network capitalism and ethnic entrepreneurship and by projecting Singapore's brand name on foreign shores, the reality of negotiating transnational space is much more complex for individual citizens. A diasporic condition conducive to ethnic entrepreneurship is difficult to manufacture, let alone maintain. While not denying the fluidity, malleability and strategic use of identity in day to day survival, it appears that most Singaporeans would still prefer to retreat into the safety net of a fixed identity rather than a deterritorialised diasporic allegiance. Instead, what the era of transnational migration has shown is that 'identities based on such macrosocietal paradigms as nation, ethnicity, and/or race may become ambivalent, partial, multiple, hybrid, and contradictory, *but they may also be reinvented as primordial certainties*' (Aguilar,

1996a:6; emphasis added). Encounters with the more disordered, uncertain environment of the other has tended to lead to a retreat into an elevation of self and pride in national systems and the Singaporean way of doing things rather than a greater flexibility of mind and strategies of cultural hybridity. As van der Veer (1995:7) has argued, diaspora can breed nationalism not only among the 'established' whose sense of national 'self' is strengthened *vis-à-vis* the migrant 'other' who does not belong, 'the migratory experience [for those in diaspora] can [also] lead to more embracing identifications [with one's natal homeland] on the margins of host society.' Ironically, migrants 'can objectify the nation even as it becomes more subjectively felt ... carry[ing] in their minds powerful symbols and imageries of the nation as to make it an object of fond yearning' (Aguilar, 1996b:119). In the case of Singapore's regionalisation programme, it is clear that slippages between social constructions of identity at the state and individual levels have to be addressed if the programme is to proceed successfully.

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