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# SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE PROBLEM OF SOCIAL COHERENCE: CHINESE SINGAPOREANS AT CENTURY'S END

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## Prologue

Consider a few pages from Singapore's past. In 1900 an anonymous voice in *The Straits Chinese Magazine* declared the ascendancy of "the party of progress," which had advocated changes in dress, the discarding of the *tow-chang* or queue ("the Manchu badge of slavery") and education for girls in spite of resistance from the "fossilised section" of the community, "old men" who epitomized the "inertia of Chinese conservatism." The so-called "Straits Chinese reform movement" was viewed as following in "the path of European advancement" and the Straits-born Chinese were exhorted to "identify themselves fully with the British cause" and to be "true Britishers heart and soul" (*Straits Chinese Magazine* 1900:86).

In February 1900 Kang Youwei, fleeing from the Manchu regime, took refuge in Singapore for a few months; he received police protection from the British authorities, which had learnt that there were imperial offers of a reward for his capture or assassination. In July the police, acting on information from Kang, arrested two Japanese, who turned out to be friends of Sun Yat-sen sent to seek an alliance with the reformer. Within days Sun arrived — his first of eight visits to the colony between 1900 and 1911 — but he, together with the two suspects, was deported upon orders by Governor J. A. Swettenham, who concluded that his visit would create unrest amongst the local Chinese population (Lee L.T. 1987:36-38). This was an intriguing train of developments, but both Kang and Sun were to have their followers in Singapore, and the influence of their ideas, finding expression in the establishment of Chinese cultural societies, newspapers and modern schools, was a sign of things to come (Lee T.H. 1987:60-62). For more than the next half-century, political developments in China continued to influence Chinese education and intellectual life in Singapore.

At the turn of the century, however, the extent of the influence from China could not have been anticipated by the Straits Chinese who, having settled in Singapore, sought to identify with the British. In 1901 the Duke and Duchess of York visited the colony. In a loyal address, the Chinese community paid respect to the Duke's father (King Edward VII) and attributed the colony's prosperity to "the very liberal and benevolent policy of Her late Majesty the Great Queen Victoria of Blessed and Glorious

memory." The newly formed Straits Chinese British Association welcomed the Royal party with the spectacle of "a Chinese pagoda surmounted by a figure of Britannia holding a torch in her uplifted hand — an emblem of the Chinese social fabric illumined by the light of science and Western progress" (Song 1984:323-34).

Let us keep that happy emblem in mind because it says something fundamental — and ambivalent — about the Chinese in Singapore as they moved into the twentieth-century world, marked by the end of Victoria's reign in England and the throes of the reform movement in China; they had to locate themselves at the historical intersection of the axes of two empires, a colonial power in its heyday and an ancestral land struggling to reform and revolutionize its decaying age-old institutions. The emblem signified an ambition to achieve the best of both worlds, on the one hand, the traditional Chinese lifeworld and, on the other, the project of Western modernity. But its mixed symbolism, presented without any apparent hint of awkwardness, also concealed the tensions and ambiguities inherent in fulfilling such an ambition. In what follows, I shall provide an interpretive narrative of the ways in which the Chinese in Singapore have located themselves culturally in the ensuing decades of the twentieth century, constituting a historical legacy — whose implications I attempt to suggest — as they move into the new century.

#### SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION AND CHINESE IDENTITY IN SINGAPORE

To be sure, it is a worthwhile endeavor for scholars to reflect on the challenges facing Chinese societies at the present historic moment, the end of a fateful century and, indeed, the dawn of the third millennium. The case of the Chinese in Singapore, however, merits a few preliminary qualifications. In the first place, Singapore cannot be called a "Chinese society" in the manner that the term commonly applies to China, Taiwan and Hong Kong in spite of their historical and political differences. According to the 1990 census of population, the Chinese make up 77.7 per cent, the Malays 14.1 per cent and the Indians 7.1 per cent of a total resident population of 2,705,100 persons (Lau 1992:5). The Chinese in Singapore number about 2.1 million, constituting the dominant ethnic group in a plural society. Even if the Chinese were to overwhelm the rest of the population in greater numbers, Singapore would still not become a "Chinese society" as such. It is not just that in terms of geopolitics — the fact that Singapore is situated at the heart of the Malay Archipelago — it would be unwise for the nation-state to identify itself as a Chinese society,

especially with the rise of Islamic movements and economic competition in the region. Rather, the historical experience of living in a multiethnic society in Southeast Asia, as a British colony for 140 years and as a fully independent nation-state since 1965, has indelibly shaped the socio-cultural life of the Chinese in Singapore in ways which are not readily comparable with the situations of their counterparts in Chinese societies (cf. Tu 1991:12-16).

Indeed, there was no semblance of a settled Chinese community in the days before the founding of Singapore as a British commercial base in 1819. Chinese traders and cultivators had been attracted to the region for a nearly a millennium, but it was only with the establishment of Singapore as a strategically located free port and with the successive waves of Chinese immigration from the region and from China that the nascent makings of a local Chinese community took root. The first census of population taken in 1824 counted 3,317 Chinese, comprising 31 per cent of a total population of 10,683. By 1911, however, the Chinese numbered 219,577, making up 72 per cent of the population (Song 1984:22-23).

Throughout the nineteenth century, the majority of immigrants did not make Singapore their permanent home but returned to China or remigrated to other parts of Southeast Asia. The continued expansion of economic opportunities in Singapore, however, resulted in many Chinese from neighboring lands and from China settling in the island, working within the framework of colonial rule in order to advance both British and Chinese commercial interests. The history of Chinese settlement in Singapore has been periodized in this manner, involving three main groups: 1) From 1819 to the close of the century, the *huashang* or Chinese merchants, especially those who were familiar with the region and who were economically successful; 2) From the mid-nineteenth century on, the *huagong* or Chinese coolies, unskilled laborers, a number of whom were either able to transform themselves into traders or to marry locally — a group which increased substantially in the first half of the twentieth century due to favorable British immigration policies and unconducive conditions in China; 3) From the end of the nineteenth century to the 1950s, the *huaqiao* or Chinese sojourners ("overseas Chinese" in popular English translation). Although the final period saw large numbers of Chinese settling in Singapore, the notion of settlement itself was put into question with the use of the rubric *huaqiao* by the mainland government and political organizations to classify all persons of Chinese descent living abroad, regardless of whether or how long they and their families have settled in the new lands. The term carried strong connotations of Chinese patriotism



and identification with the mainland, thus diluting and making ambivalent the local sentiments that immigrants in Singapore and other parts of Nanyang, the South Seas, had developed in the previous century (Wang 1991:174-78).

Given this historical background, it may be expected that the very term "Chinese" begs definition in the case of Singapore. Indeed, qualifiers have been added to the term, changing its meanings and connotations over time and for different groups. There has been no single, ahistorical definition of "Chineseness" in the course of the social transformation of the Chinese community in Singapore. The vicissitudes of some of the key qualifying terms used by members of the community, I suggest, offer one way of exploring the historical problem of Chinese identity in Singapore.

### *1. Straits Chinese and Baba Identity*

At the close of the nineteenth century, the terms "Straits Chinese," "Straits-born Chinese," and "Babas," used synonymously, referred to the Chinese whose families had made their home in the Straits Settlements (Singapore, Malacca, and Penang) over a few generations. These terms were used interchangeably and applied generically to the local-born Chinese, regardless of their linguistic (and so-called "dialect") background (Rudolph 1993b: 9-10). In surveying the history of the Chinese in the Malay Archipelago, Lim Boon Keng, a figure about whom we will have more to say, described the Chinese *peranakans*, the Malay term for the local-born in both the British and Dutch territories and in the Riau islands, as "a new race ... created by the fusion of Chinese and Malay blood," owing to some degree of intermarriage in earlier generations; they have "lost touch with China in every respect, except that they continued to uphold Chinese customs, and to practise, in variously modified forms, the social and religious practices of their forefathers." In spite of their retention of Chinese ways of life, their particular social and ethnic qualities led Lim, who also noted their use of a patois of Hokkien and Malay, to consider them "a class of their own" (Lim, quoted in Song 1984:4-5).

Thus there was a series of overlapping terms to describe the local-born Chinese in the Straits Settlements. Of these, the term *peranakans*, shared with their counterparts in the Dutch East Indies, connoted explicit and specific markers of identification, especially the use of Malay and "modified" Chinese customs. Strictly speaking, there were Straits-born Chinese or Babas who were not *peranakans* as such, although the term "Baba," used fluidly, was also associated with local cultural markers such

as the use of Baba Malay (cf. Wu 1991:172). But all the terms distinguished the native-born from the "China-born" or new immigrants, known locally as *sinkeh*s (new-comers), implying a mutually perceived cultural and social distance between the two groups. Up to the 1930s, the Straits-born comprised a numerical minority in the total Chinese population (Rudolph 1993b:11). In 1911, for example, they made up nearly 20 per cent of the 219,577 Chinese counted in the census (Song 1984:24). However, by virtue of their permanent settlement on the island — and the wealth and education, especially English education, that they had acquired over generations — they regarded themselves and were regarded by the British and others as the dominant group. Up till the Japanese Occupation, the more established Straits-born families identified themselves politically as British subjects and culturally as Babas, emphasizing their education, customs and "refined" way of life. But the post-war economic demise of the Babas as a group and the new era of decolonization diminished the strength and pervasiveness of Baba identity; the "golden age" of the Babas was over (Rudolf 1993b:9-12, 16).

## *2. The Newer Straits-born and the Rise of Chinese Education*

The decline of Baba identity, however, was presaged by the process of differentiation within the Chinese community in the early decades of the twentieth century. A cumulative increase in the numbers of "Straits-born" Chinese in the population resulted from earlier successive cohorts of China-born immigrants settling in the colony, especially during the *huagong* phase and the more recent *huaqiao* phase. The sociological profile of these newer Straits-borns, however, contrasted with the older Straits-borns; they were less educated, less English- and Malay-speaking, less economically successful — and less localized. The first half-century also witnessed the rise of Chinese nationalism and its impact on the Chinese population in Singapore, especially among the newer Straits-borns and the China-borns. The impact was clearly seen in the intense development of Chinese education in the colony.

During the nineteenth century, Chinese immigrants had set up private "writing schools," using classical texts, traditional methods and the various Chinese dialects for instruction (Yen 1986: 297-98; Ang 1994:315). Modern Chinese education came into existence with the advent of the parallel reform movements in China and Singapore at the turn of the century. In 1899, for example, Straits Chinese intellectuals such as Song Ong Siang (1871-1941), Lim Boon Keng (1869-1957), and Khoo Seok

Wan (1874-1941) set up the Singapore Chinese Girls' School, professing to "demonstrate the feasibility of reforming Chinese conducting the education of their children on improved and modern systems, distinctively in consonance with Chinese principles as laid down in the classical works of Confucius: but entirely at variance with existing methods" (Song 1984:305). The schools established by followers of Kang Youwei and Sun Yat-sen contended with each other and with those influenced by the Manchu regime, which emphasized classical learning and loyalty to the Emperor; in the latter, for example, ceremonies marked the deaths of the Empress Dowager and Emperor Guangxu in 1908 and the birthday of Confucius in 1909 (Lee T.H. 1987:58). In the midst of these overlapping lines of influence on Chinese schools, the "Confucian revival movement" had reached its peak, principally led by Lim Boon Keng and Khoo Seok Wan, the former advocating his interpretations of Confucianism and his reform ideas in *The Straits Chinese Magazine* (Hong 1975; Yen 1976; Lee T.H. 1988; Leung 1988; Lee G.K. 1990).

With the establishment of the Chinese Republic, Mandarin replaced Chinese dialects as the medium of instruction in the schools, but teachers and textbooks continued to be imported from the mainland. In the wake of the May Fourth movement of 1919, textbooks in colloquial Chinese were adopted and Chinese education in the colony was influenced by the antitraditionalistic ideas of the time. Although some local content in textbooks was introduced from the 1930s onward, it was minimal and did not lessen the dominant orientation toward the developments in mainland China (Ang 1994:316; Borthwick 1988:40-41). Through the decades, most of the Chinese schools flourished with the support of the dialect-based *bangs* (e.g., Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, Hakka) and the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, the umbrella organization founded in 1906. Most of the leaders of the Chamber, *huaqiao* merchants with little education and yet swept by the currents of Chinese nationalism, promoted Chinese education as founders or patrons of schools. The orientation toward the national struggles in China, best exemplified in the career of Tan Kah Kee (1874-1961), was also seen in fund-raising efforts for disaster relief (between 1911 and 1931) and for the anti-Japanese campaigns in the 1930s in the mainland; and it contrasted with the British-oriented loyalty of the Straits-born leadership in the Straits Chinese British Association (Yong 1992: 49, 67-70; Yong 1987).

The continued growth of Chinese schools in the 1940s, especially after the war, entrenched the bifurcation between the "Chinese-educated" (*huaxiaosheng*) and the "English-educated" (*yingxiaosheng*), and these

qualifiers of Chinese identity entered into the everyday vocabulary of the Chinese in Singapore. In a sense, the gulf between the two groups reenacted that between the China-born *sinkeh*s and the Straits-borns of an earlier generation in terms of language use, cultural orientation, political affiliation, and social status. This new stage, however, should not be understood as a clash between traditional Chinese and modern Western worldviews. The "May Fourth heritage," as Sally Borthwick puts it, "was the unique possession of the Chinese-educated — its literature had formed their language studies, its thinkers set the parameters for attitudes towards the Chinese past and the international present"; from the viewpoint of the English-educated, the "May Fourth response to modernity had been paralleled, duplicated and supplanted by the more accessible experience of Western adaptation" which they had imbibed; "the battle against feudalism, long over for the West, need not be refought on Singaporean soil" (Borthwick 1988:37). In addition, this cultural and ideological divide was reinforced by the disparity between the two groups in terms of socio-economic status, given a colonial occupational structure which favored the English-educated and the English-speaking, especially in the civil service.

At the same time, the way in which the Chinese-educated identified themselves vis-a-vis the English-educated hardly meant that there was deep solidarity amongst them. With the protracted civil war in the mainland, the *huaqiao* community was plagued by internal polarization between supporters of the Chinese Communist Party and, by extension, the Malayan Communist Party and those of the Kuomintang (Yong 1992:274). The end of the civil war in 1949, however, presented an opportunity for uniting the divided community under the banner of promoting Chinese education and Chinese culture. The idea of establishing a local Chinese university, initiated by Tan Lark Sye (1897-1972) and supported by the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and other Chinese associations, gained momentum as a communal project. Funds were quickly raised from all sectors of the Chinese population, ranging from the wealthy philanthropists to the working-class masses, the oft-cited illustration being the contribution of a day's earnings from the island's 1,577 trishaw drivers. On a 500-acre piece of land purchased and donated by the Hokkien Huay Kuan, Nanyang University (or Nan Da in abbreviation), the first Chinese university in Southeast Asia, was formally inaugurated in March 1956 with an initial cohort of 330 students (Borthwick 1988:45-46; Drysdale 1984:63-64; Yong 1992:281-82; Chui 1994:278-80). But the university was born at a time when activism in the Chinese middle schools was at its height, the students clashing with the police in a series of



protests which turned out to be violent: first against conscription in 1954 (the "May Thirteenth Incident"), second a year later on the anniversary of the incident (the "Hock Lee riots"), and third against government dissolution of the newly formed island-wide students' union in October 1956 (Drysedale 1984:73-76, 105-109, 155-57; Bloodworth 1986:62-65, 116-120, 142-147).

In the light of the communal support for the establishment of Nan Da and the incidence of student unrest, it is tempting to speak of Chinese education in the 1950s as a vehicle of either cultural chauvinism or political radicalism. Set within the context of the rise of the People's Republic of China and the politics of decolonization in Singapore, however, Chinese education and Chinese identity — and the two could not be separated — were tied to a complex of ideas, sentiments and impulses, combining elements of nationalism, ethnic self-respect, and social upliftment. There can be no simple way to untangle the criss-crossing threads that constituted the fabric of Chinese social and intellectual life during that tumultuous period. Nationalism meant an orientation to political events — and different political groups — in both China and in multiethnic Malaya and Singapore, where local nationalism stirred the hearts and minds of many Chinese, regardless of their social and educational background; ethnic self-respect involved identification with both an ancestral culture and its radical modern transformation; social upliftment entailed both economic survival and political confrontation.

### 3. *Chinese Singaporeans*

The advent of Malayan nationalism and the subsequent creation of the Singapore nation-state was a watershed of immense significance because local nationalism shifted the focus of political affiliation away from China. By 1953, there were about 380,000 China-born *huaqiao* who were considered "alien" in that they did not qualify for British nationality under the Act of 1948, which required knowledge of English as a condition of eligibility. But the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce campaigned actively against the language requirement, which was removed in the 1957 Singapore Citizenship Ordinance. In addition, the Ordinance stipulated a residential requirement of only eight years, making it possible for the vast majority of the China-born population to gain citizenship (Drysedale 1984:67; Yong 1992:279). Those who saw their lives tied to the destiny of the People's Republic of China made their way back — or were deported — to their country of birth or their ideological homeland. With Singapore's



independence in 1965, following the failure of merger with Malaysia, in Wang Gungwu's analysis, "a completely new kind of future was put before the Chinese there. For the first time in the history of the Chinese in Southeast Asia, there was every reason for one group of Chinese to settle":

These Chinese settlers, unlike most of their ancestors who came to Singapore in earlier times, are determined to change the image of the Chinese as opportunistic transients. It is still too soon to determine whether they will succeed. It will not be easy to convince their suspicious neighbours that they have fully escaped from their history and that, whatever economic and geopolitical problems the region may have to face in the future, they are in Singapore to stay. What is more, they will also have to prove that they stay as "Singaporeans". For them, as the majority people of Singapore, ancestral cultural values will remain useful for social intercourse and business purposes. For them, whatever links remain between Singapore and China would have to be on the same basis as those between Singapore and any other country. (Wang 1991:178)

#### THE NATION-STATE AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY

This then is the historical specificity or exceptionalism of the case of the Chinese in Singapore. But what does it mean for them to "escape from their history"? What does it mean for them to become "Singaporeans"? The regional and demographic context of the nation makes it imperative that the Chinese do not owe — or are not perceived as owing — either political or cultural allegiance to China. But it is now the sovereign state that becomes the pivotal actor in redefining the collective memory — and shaping the identity — of the Chinese in Singapore. The People's Action Party (PAP), which was founded in 1954 and emerged as the dominant political party since self-government in 1959, was led by a core group of English-educated intellectuals who were committed to the policy of "multiracialism" and "multilingualism," according equal citizenship for all and giving English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil the status of official languages. Since independence, the PAP government has sought to maintain the basic outlines of this policy. Citizenship becomes a new category of identity and the new nation, by definition, has to develop a national identity that is distinctively "Singaporean"; the "Malayan" consciousness of the immediate post-war period had to die away with the failure of merger. The terms "Straits Chinese" or "Straits-born Chinese" had long become obsolescent, but ethnicity or "race" now qualifies the idea of citizenship; hence the terms "Chinese Singaporeans," "Indian

Singaporeans," and "Malay Singaporeans," which are common in political discourse in the country.

Multiracialism, coupled with the ideology of meritocracy, gives political recognition to the "equal" place of every race. By maintaining a neutral stance, the state effects a formal separation between the "rational" sphere of politics and economics and the sphere of culture or "primordial sentiments." This in turn allows the state to legitimately inculcate the universalistic values associated with industrial and economic development as a realm apart from particularistic considerations of ethnicity and religion (cf. Chua and Kuo 1992:4).

The policy of multilingualism also carries the same thrust. English is the "de facto dominant working language" in Singapore, a consequence of having inherited the legal and administrative framework of the state from the British (Kuo 1985:184). The status of English is justified by its usefulness as the language of science and technology and as a "neutral" language for interethnic communication — neutral in the formal sense that it is not supposedly the cultural property of any single ethnic group. English is commonly used among younger and more educated Singaporeans in interaction across ethnic groups, replacing Malay — Bazaar Malay — which was widely used before independence. In the public setting, Malay serves as a ceremonial official language, the language of the national anthem and military commands. Malay, Chinese (Mandarin), and Tamil, however, are officially deemed as the "mother tongues" of the respective races, and as such they are seen as languages for transmitting "traditional" values.

Thus there has been a functional dichotomy in the roles ascribed to the official languages: English for "practical use" and the so-called mother tongues for "cultural ballast." Multilingualism, understood in this manner, has the effect of separating, on the one hand, the public and modern sphere of science, technology and administration, the world of work and schooling, and on the other hand, the private and traditional sphere of ethnic culture lived out in community and family life (Pendley 1983:51-52).

### *1. The Evolution of Bilingual Education*

The idea of multiracialism and multilingualism was the basis for the development of a national system of education as recommended in the 1956 All-Party Report on Chinese Education, which pledged parity of treatment for each of the language streams but also proposed bilingual education and

the standardization of curricula in all schools under the jurisdiction and control of the Ministry of Education (Borthwick 1988:49-50; Gopinathan 1994:66-67). When the PAP came into power in 1959, the bilingual policy took shape; English was made a second language in the Chinese-stream schools and Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil were second languages in English-stream schools. By the early 1970s, the second language was not only taught as a subject but also used as a medium of instruction; mathematics and science were taught in English and social studies subjects in the "mother-tongue" languages. In effect, many of the Chinese-stream schools were to increase the exposure time in favor of English in a proportion higher than the increase in exposure to ethnic languages in English-stream schools. More significantly, however, the enrollment for Chinese-stream primary schools had been steadily falling; between 1959 and 1978, its proportion of total primary school enrollment fell from 45.9 per cent to 11.2 per cent (Goh et al. 1979:1.1). In a word, Chinese-stream schools faced the prospect of near extinction by the late 1970s as parents increasingly sent their children to English-medium schools in view of the better economic opportunities for their graduates — again, a legacy of colonial rule carried into the post-independence era.

Given the falling enrollment in Chinese-stream schools and the poorer job prospects for the Chinese-educated, Nanyang University adopted English as a medium of instruction in 1976. In particular, Nan Da was also responding to the fact that the University of Singapore, the long-standing English-medium university, had increased its enrollment of Chinese-stream applicants. Lowering the standards for admission to Nan Da would have widened the disparity in the "market value" of its graduates. The adoption of English was quickly followed by more decisive steps. In 1978, first-year Nanyang University undergraduates studied with their counterparts at the University of Singapore with all subjects (except Chinese Studies) taught in English. For the state, this "initiative taken to revitalise Nanyang" was regarded as "a bold move even though it did no more than to recognise realities" (Goh et al. 1979:1.2). In 1980, both universities merged to form the National University of Singapore — which, in the words of an observer, "effectively closed down a distinct achievement of the Chinese-educated and a powerful symbol of Chinese oppositional power" (Gopinathan 1994:88). The Nan Da campus became the site for a proposed Nanyang Technological Institute, which was reorganized in 1990 as the Nanyang Technological University, the nation's second English-medium university; the retention of the name "Nanyang," however, bore no substantive historical relationship to the former university.

The political leadership had made its calculations as to the timing of the changes in Chinese education. In 1979 Lee Kuan Yew, the Prime Minister, recalled Singapore's "most massive demonstration of emotional commitment to Chinese culture and education" at the opening of Nanyang University. Other events of the 1950s and 1960s were invoked: "... the periodic arrests and detentions of communist school teachers and students. Students suspected of being government informers were assassinated." But the establishment of state authority had changed the social environment. Lee said: "It is foolish to believe that we can ever completely divorce language, culture, and education from the passions with which people jealously guard their personal identities. It has taken 20 years to convince all that no one is being asked to surrender his personal identity. The present political and emotional climate allows for frank and calm discussions on policies which will decide the kind of men and women our children will grow up to be" (Goh et al. 1979:iv). Indeed, there was no public outcry among the Chinese-educated over the fate of Nan Da. But this did not mean that the decline of Chinese-medium education during the post-independence decades elicited little response from the Chinese-educated intelligentsia or that their sense of personal and collective identity remained untouched (Gopinathan 1994:88-89).

Indeed, the social and psychological struggles — the inner lives and angst — of the Chinese-educated in the context of the post-independence educational changes are subtly reflected in short stories and novels (e.g. Tan 1980; Zhang 1990; Yeng 1993). This underlying theme has yet to receive extensive study. In an analysis of the non-fiction writings — mainly in Chinese newspapers — of intellectuals between the years 1959 and 1987, during which Chinese education and the teaching of the Chinese language were gradually attenuated, Lee Guan Kin (1992) uncovers three types of responses to what was perceived as a painful crisis. In the initial phase, the sentiments expressed in editorials, articles, letters to the press, speeches, and seminar discussions tended to be idealistic and forceful, appealing for the resuscitation of Chinese education and stressing its moral and cultural value. With the continued decline of Chinese school enrollment, down to only two per cent in 1982, a sense of helplessness and pessimism became evident; the pieces were written more in sorrow than in anger, their tone more cynical than condemnatory. Finally, as the direction of change was seen as inevitable, with English becoming the first language and main language of instruction in all schools by 1987, the feelings of grief and loss gave way to a sense of withdrawal and passivity; the debates then focused on matters such as the maintenance of standards in the



teaching of Chinese as a compulsory subject. The analysis highlights the generally compromising approach of Chinese-educated intellectuals, attributing this to a combination of possible factors: the political sensitivity and fear surrounding issues of language, culture and education in Singapore (in part created by the turmoil of earlier left-wing politics), the weakened position of intellectuals vis-a-vis the state, and the influence of the traditional notion of shouldering burden in the face of disdain (*ren ru fu zhong*).

In line with the ideology of multiracialism, however, the political leadership remained committed to "preserving" the value of Chinese education and Chinese culture for the community. The development of an open economy and the extension of English-medium education brought about constantly articulated fears of "westernization" and "deculturalization" (Gopinathan 1994:67). The characteristic official solution to this dilemma has been to appeal to traditional "Asian" values as a moral counterweight against the intrusion of undesirable "Western" influences. Thus, in spite of — and because of — the overwhelming emphasis on the utilitarian value of English, the state continues to ensure that the "mother tongues" have a definite place in the school curriculum because of their cultural function. In 1978, the Ministry of Education initiated a move to preserve the best nine Chinese-stream schools under a "special assistance plan," which would help them attract the top students from both English and Chinese streams and raise the standard of English teaching in the schools, in effect to reorganize them into bilingual schools while maintaining their "traditional" Chinese school environment. The policy-makers concluded that through this "Singapore would retain the best in Chinese education which the tide of events threatened to eliminate" (Goh et al. 1979:1.3).

## 2. *The Speak Mandarin Campaign*

In 1979, the political leadership launched the "Speak Mandarin" Campaign. The campaign, which has become an annual event, was motivated by the Prime Minister's fear that if the Chinese continued to use dialects, "then English will become the common language between Chinese of different groups," thus echoing the political concerns about westernization (Kuo 1985:189-90). Another reason for the campaign stemmed from the recognition that about 85 per cent of pupils came from dialect-speaking homes and that the policy of bilingualism meant that they were in fact learning two new school languages, English and Mandarin,



although the latter continued to be regarded erroneously as the "mother tongue" of the Chinese (Goh et al. 1979:4.4; cf. Benjamin 1976:125). The promotion of the use of Mandarin, therefore, was justified by its usefulness for the learning of Chinese in the schools. As a measure of the effectiveness of the campaign after a decade, statistics from the Ministry of Education show that dialect as the most frequently spoken language at home for first-year primary school students fell from 64 per cent in 1980 to seven per cent in 1989; the use of Mandarin increased from 26 per cent to 69 per cent, and that of English from nine per cent to 23 per cent in the same period (*Straits Times* 4 October 1989). Given the rise in the use of both Mandarin and English, the campaign in recent years has focused on the English-educated Chinese, rather than on dialect-speakers, as a target group (Gopinathan 1994:73).

### *3. The Confucian Ethics Project*

The 1980s saw a significant development in the process of the shaping of Chinese identity in Singapore: "Confucianism" entered into the lexicon of political discourse in a vigorous and sustained manner. In the late 1970s, the speeches and writings of political leaders touched on the subject sporadically. For example, Lee Kuan Yew's idea of the importance of the "mother tongue" in the case of the Chinese was expressed thus: "The greatest value in the teaching and learning of Chinese is in the transmission of the norms of social or moral behavior. This means principally Confucianist beliefs and ideas, of man, society and the state" (Goh et al. 1979:v). At that time, moral education in the school curriculum received critical attention by the policy-makers in view of "the dangers of secular education in a foreign tongue," especially "the risk of losing the traditional values of one's own people and the acquisition of the more spurious fashions of the west." It was stressed that a "people of recent migrant origin need to know more of their cultural roots" (Goh et al. 1979:1.5). This line of thinking led to the introduction of "Religious Knowledge" as a compulsory moral education subject in secondary schools. When the idea was first announced in 1982, Confucianism was not on the list, which included Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam. The Prime Minister, however, suggested that Confucianism be made available as one of the subjects; he hypothesized that most Chinese parents would prefer their children to study Confucianism rather than Buddhism, although this did not turn out to be the case in the actual implementation of the program (Kuo 1992: 17, 23).

At any rate, the introduction of "Confucian Ethics" in the school curriculum, backed up by state resources — including the invitation of "Confucian scholars" based in the United States, notably Tu Wei-ming of Harvard — generated media attention and public discourse on the virtues and relevance of Confucianism, especially through the work of the Institute of East Asian Philosophies which was founded in 1983. The political leadership had to assure the citizenry, especially the English-educated Chinese — who did not have to fight and refight the cultural battles of the Chinese-educated — and the other ethnic groups in the country that the annual "Speak Mandarin" campaigns and the constant invocation of Confucianist rhetoric were not tantamount to an officially sanctioned chauvinism or to a new legitimization for authoritarianism (Kuo 1992:14-15; Gopinathan 1994:87-88). These criticisms continued to be aired even after the announcement by the Ministry of Education in 1989 that the Religious Knowledge program was to be discontinued because the political leadership had grown increasingly wary of the trends toward "religious revivalism" in Singapore, especially in the rise of Christian charismatic renewal movements (Kuo et al. 1988). Confucian Ethics as one subject in the program also had to be phased out, despite appeals from Chinese-educated educationists (Kuo 1992:18-19).

Confucianist ideas persisted in public discourse for a few more years. In the 1980s some western social scientists had attempted to establish the relationship between "Confucian culture" and the economic success of the "four dragons" (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore). This culturalist argument was officially welcomed in Singapore, where it served as a confirmation that "traditional values" not only countered the undesirable aspects of westernization but also supported economic modernization. In 1990, for example, an economist, the new director of the Institute of East Asian Philosophies, advanced the thesis that the "Confucian values of strong government leadership, harmony and trust were demonstrated in Singapore's fight against the 1985 recession" (*Straits Times* 13 January 1990). Not surprisingly, with the demise of the Confucian Ethics project, the Institute began to focus its work on the political economy of East Asian development (*Straits Times* 22 November 1989).

#### *4. Confucianism and "Shared Values"*

In the late 1980s the political leadership, especially in the person of Goh Chok Tong (who became the new Prime Minister in 1990), shifted its

attention to the problem of defining a "national ideology" — a cultural ethos for the citizenry. This effort resulted in a White Paper on "Shared Values" which was presented to, and passed by, Parliament in early 1991. The issues surrounding the White Paper have been analyzed elsewhere (Clammer 1993); suffice it to note that in the document the government sought to allay fears about the imposition of Confucianism on the minority races. This reiterated previous statements which clarified that the discourse on Confucianism was applicable and internal to the Chinese community in particular. The proposed "Shared Values" were not meant to be "Confucianism by another name." The Paper was even critical of some aspects of Confucianism which were linked to nepotism and "strictly hierarchical" family relationships and argued that "[p]recepts and practices which evolved in a rural, agricultural society have to be revised to fit an urban, industrial society." At the same time, however, it affirmed that "[m]any Confucian ideals are relevant to Singapore" and singled out one example: "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" (White Paper, paras 39-44). This official interpretation of Confucianism was revealing; it illustrated the potential for the use of ideas from the tradition for the purpose of contemporary political legitimation, even as the White Paper disavowed imposing them on the multiethnic population.

To date, there has been no in-depth empirical study of the responses of different sectors of the Chinese community to the state-initiated public discourse on Confucianism. A sociologist has suggested that the promotion of Confucianism amounted to "an incomplete revitalization movement," in which "the Chinese-educated, including a small number of latent chauvinists, could safely jump on the bandwagon to promote Chinese culture" because the official endorsement from the political leadership neutralized the dominant perception of the 1950s and 1960s that being "pro-Chinese culture and education" was equivalent to being "pro-China and hence pro-Communist." Thus it is even suggested that whether the bandwagon was Confucianism or not might have been unimportant because the fundamental concern was that it served "to promote Chinese culture, Chinese education and hence Chinese identity." Even the many who had been influenced by the anti-Confucianism of the May Fourth tradition "were never quite vocal in their criticism and ... generally shifted to supporting the movement as a campaign to boost the status of Chinese

culture and Chinese language in Singapore" (Kuo 1992: 11-13). There is a grain of truth in this line of analysis, and it demonstrates the extent to which Chinese-educated intellectuals themselves felt the inner need to reassert a collective identity — but in the manner of a return of the repressed, this time with Chinese culture delivered in an unadulterated and serviceable form.

#### INTO THE NEW CENTURY: THE PROBLEM OF SOCIAL COHERENCE

The wheel had come full circle. In the early 1990s, the inherent contradictions of multiracialism became apparent. The multiracial nation had to receive legitimation on the basis of an overarching ideology shared by all groups. But multiracialism had carried with it the paradoxical tendency of increasing ethnic consciousness and boundary maintenance amongst the racial groupings, each with its distinctive "traditional" culture, understood ahistorically (Benjamin 1976:119). In the earlier post-independence decades, the ideology of national survival provided the legitimation for the political leadership to effectively mobilize the population toward developmental goals. Politics and economics constituted a rational and autonomous sphere, which was kept separated from the sphere of culture — the sphere of personal and collective identities. With political stability and economic development, which also entailed the continuous rationalization of the sphere of culture, the potency of the ideology of survival was diminished and the search for a new basis of legitimation had to be found in the sphere of culture. Having exorcized the ghosts — the irrationalities — of cultural chauvinism and political radicalism, the state was in a position to promote Chinese identity in the form of Confucianism. But Confucianism could not be justified as the basis for a national ideology. And the so-called "revitalization" of Chinese identity was short-lived; in the end, it was a Confucianism that was consonant with the political economy of the state, without taking root as a cultural project with its own intellectual dynamic and internal coherence.

And here we arrive at a plausible way of making sense of the historical problem of Chinese identity in Singapore. At bottom, the problem of identity constitutes what Max Weber considered as the problem of meaning: "the demand ... that the world order in its totality is, could, and should somehow be a meaningful 'cosmos.'" This "quest" for meaning has historically "been borne precisely by strata of intellectuals." More specifically, Weber was concerned with the problem of meaning under conditions of modernity, in which the continuous rationalization and



differentiation of the various spheres of social life cannot allow for the sustenance of a meaningful and consistent worldview that is derived from religious and ethical sources, without that worldview itself being rationalized, its directions pushed by the interplay of ideal and material interests (Weber 1958:280-81). Ernest Gellner offers a compatible perspective when he argues that "it is the complex and cognitively 'progressive' societies, within whose internal intellectual economy has become fairly well separated from other activities and criteria, which possess a high level of *logical* coherence. All 'facts' can be cross-related and fitted into a single logical space. They all use a common conceptual currency; putative explanation can link or cover any facts, however distant and however enregistered." By the same token, however, these societies "generally lack social coherence; their moral and cognitive orders simply do not constitute any unity" (Gellner 1988: 60-61).

In such a situation, the intellectual quest for social coherence stands in tension with the societal movement toward increasing logical coherence. This, I submit, has been in part the story of the historical vicissitudes of Chinese identity in Singapore. During the first century of its existence as a colony, Singapore quickly became a modern and complex society under the aegis of British rule. For most of the century, it might be said, there was no problem of social coherence because there were no strata of Chinese intellectuals who felt and articulated the widening disjuncture between the rationalized world of colonial administration, and with it the advanced modernity of the West, and the traditional world that the immigrants — mainly traders and cultivators — brought with them. As the new Straits-born Chinese generations emerged, that traditional world was gradually localized, even fusing with local ways of life while maintaining identifiable features of Chinese life, especially family and ritual life, which was the case for the Babas and the *peranakan* Chinese. At the same time, however, many of the young Straits Chinese were sent to the newly established English schools. At the turn of the century, a stratum of young Straits Chinese intellectuals had developed. Some had imbibed the best of English education and were exposed to English institutions and systems of knowledge in the sciences, in law, and in the humanities in a manner and to a degree that their forebears never experienced. The timing of this achievement, however, coincided with the rudimentary struggles toward modernity in China — and the problem of social coherence emerged.

Among the leading members of the new generation of intellectuals were men such as Song Ong Siang and Lim Boon Keng, both returned Queen's Scholars — one trained in law at Cambridge and the other in



medicine at Edinburgh — and Khoo Seok Wan, who received his higher education in China. As much as these three Straits Chinese joined hands in promoting reform in Chinese social life in the colony, they were different in their cultural perspectives. Song identified unproblematically with the British and his intellectual career was not oriented toward developments in China. In contrast, Khoo was profoundly influenced by the political and intellectual currents in the mainland. Of the three, Lim was perhaps the most complex in terms of his own search for social coherence. Like Song he was thoroughly schooled in the English language and showed his loyalty to the British. And like Khoo he paid close attention to the reform movement in China; Kang Youwei's ideas made a mark on them as they led the overlapping Straits Chinese reform movement and the Confucian revival movement (Hong 1975:22-25; Lee T.H. 1987:60-61). As a British-educated Chinese who learnt Chinese in his adult life, Lim sought to work out the compatibilities and contradictions between Western and Chinese culture (Lee G.K. 1990). In the process, his quest was full of inner tensions and inconsistencies. It may suffice to give a single major example. In *The Chinese Crisis From Within*, a compilation of his newspaper articles on the reform movement in China (written in English under the thinly-disguised pseudonym "Wen Ching"), Lim discussed the clash between Christian beliefs and Chinese folk practices (such as *fengshui* and ancestor worship) in a manner that showed his native understanding of traditional Chinese ritual life:

The life of a Chinese is made up of a continuous train of ceremonies from his very birth to the moment of his death, and, indeed, for sometime thereafter. It is no doubt a great blessing that the Chinese should be taught to give these up. Without them life surely might be happier, at least much more economical. However, the facts remain. As soon as a man becomes a Christian he really ceases to be a Chinaman from the native point of view. He literally becomes an outcast of his own choice ... ". (Wen Ching 1901:325)

In his writings on Confucianism and reform, however, Lim criticized the poverty of moral education in the Straits Chinese home, which showed "a total lack of religious life — save the meaningless practice of idolatry and the performance of sacrifices to the dead"; he called for the "religious reformation of the Straits Chinese," which involved "the total abolition of idolatrous practices, and the discontinuance of rites such as are founded on superstitions" (*Straits Chinese Magazine* 1899: 104, 166; cf. 1900: 26, 49-56). The thrust of this rational critique is repeated in his essays on filial piety and funeral rites, betraying a modern — indeed, Protestant —

paradigm which he had earlier imbibed in his English education (cf. Leung 1897: 87). In lieu of a more detailed study of the "dialectics" in Lim's thought, I would suggest that they can be understood in the context of him having one foot in the Straits Chinese community and the other in the cultural empire of China. In the former, where Western modernity had already penetrated deeply from without, he sought to reform and rationalize traditional ritual life, but in the latter, where the Chinese were awakening to radical cultural change from within, he sought to remind them of their inheritance; hence Lim Boon Keng the neo-traditionalist and Lu Xun the iconoclast could find no common ground when they were at Xiamen University in 1926-27 (Wang 1991:158-159). In both lines of his intellectual project — and they blurred into each other — Lim's appropriation of Confucianism and Chinese culture was that of a pure and purified Great Tradition, yet one that was properly reformed by a Western-inspired rationalism. Thus we see the paradoxical quality in his quest, which resulted in a traditionalism that was cosmopolitan and, turning inside out, a cosmopolitanism that aspired to be traditionally rooted.

Lim's project was manifested not only in the Confucian revival movement and the reform movement but also in the effort to encourage the Babas to learn and speak Mandarin (Rudolph 1993a). Now we can see that the "Speak Mandarin" campaign, the Confucian discourse, and the steps to "preserve" Chinese culture and education in the post-independence era have had their historical precedents, the crucial difference being that these efforts are now initiated and implemented by the state, which characteristically does not have — and is not to be impeded by — a deep historical memory. A comparison between Lim Boon Keng and Lee Kuan Yew would make fascinating study, not least in terms of the relationship between biography and history and of their relation to Chinese identity. When Lim died he was respectfully regarded as "the sage of Singapore" (*Straits Times* 22 October 1948). Lee has been called "a great and moral man" and "a modern Confucius" by his successor Goh Chok Tong (*Straits Times* 24 April 1990). But in the course of the two overlapping generations of Singapore-born Chinese that they represent, the landscape of modernity in the world and in Singapore has fundamentally changed. In the case of Chinese modernity, there was a massive transformation in the meaning of Chineseness. Chinese identity was traditionally rooted in a symbolic cosmos, a ritual life that was standardized by the imperial state and localized everywhere that the Chinese found themselves — even, I would argue, in Singapore. But the early twentieth century saw the forces of modern rationalism and scientism penetrating throughout the non-Western

world; in time the traditional symbolic universe became more and more implausible. At the same time, there developed a new definition of Chineseness grounded in nationalism, severing its rootedness in the traditional cultural or religious system (Cohen 1991).

Wang Gungwu has observed that "modern Southeast Asian Chinese, like most peoples today, do not have a single identity but tend to assume multiple identities"; there is "the simultaneous presence of many kinds of identity, e.g., ethnic, national (local), cultural and class identities" (Wang 1991:199, 217). Indeed, it could be argued that this was already the case in Lim Boon Keng's own time and, as a man for all seasons, he lived within a whole range of identities, finding his own ground in his definition of Chinese identity. The world of the turn-of-the-century Straits Chinese was, in a sense, a nascent "postmodern" world in which identity was unstable, fluid, fragmentary, and shifting. And Lim grappled with this in his own way, bequeathing a legacy of cultural contradictions, which were reenacted in the post-independence decades, without the historical actors being fully conscious of that legacy. But the entire scenario had become more complex; for the Chinese-educated, there was the additional legacy of the May Fourth movement and up till the time of the Cultural Revolution, the iconoclastic and leftist tendencies in China continued to influence intellectuals in Singapore (Kuo P.K. 1993). In the interplay of politics and cultural identity in independent Singapore, the former has dominated the latter through state action. The result is what might be called the "mandarinization" of Chinese culture, the emphasis on the high culture or great tradition that all Chinese Singaporeans putatively shared with their ancestors and their counterparts in the Chinese diaspora — bypassing its internal contradictions in modern Chinese life and the processes of the localization of the community in Singapore life (Kwok 1993).

With the economic rise of China by the early 1990s, the Singapore state, true to its bent for strategic planning, has been quick to seize the newly opened business opportunities, encouraging quasi-governmental and private companies to undertake joint ventures and investment projects in the People's Republic. But such economic activities are not officially understood as replaying the role of the *huaqiao* in the pre-independence era (*Straits Times*, 16 August, 1993). Nevertheless, a new boost has been given to the state's "Speak Mandarin" campaign, which has increasingly emphasized the economic value of the language (*Straits Times* 14 April and 24 April 1994); this again illustrates the dominance of economics in the sphere of culture as in the case of the earlier emphasis on the practical value of English under the policy of multilingualism. The instrumental

learning of the Chinese language and the promotion of a rationalized and mandarinized Chinese culture now become part of a cosmopolitan identity which can claim to be both traditionally rooted and economically useful.

Myron Cohen has observed: "[F]or much of China's population being Chinese is culturally much easier today than it ever was in the past, for this identification no longer involves commonly accepted cultural standards. Existentially, however, being Chinese is far more problematic, for now it is as much a quest as it is a condition" (Cohen 1991:133). In contemporary Singapore, the quest is framed by the politics of the nation-state and by the economics of the world system, and the apparent ease with which Chinese identity can now be invoked brings us back to the pagoda-and-Britannia emblem of the Straits Chinese that I recalled in the opening of this essay. Today the edifice of traditional Chinese religious life has long been crumbling, but its fragmented ruins still exist; the glorious days of Britannia are long past, but Americanization is everywhere — "Americanization" as an idiom for the increasing degree of logical coherence in the global rationalization of social life, not simply the spread of the popular culture of jeans, fast-food restaurants, and Disney cartoons. Within the contemporary framework of politics and economics, a shortcut to Chinese identity can be easily achieved in a world of multiple and disconnected identities. Yet it is not clear whether this would satisfy the quest for social coherence. For culturally sensitive Singapore intellectuals, that quest is as much a challenge as it is a problem (Kuo P.K 1990, 1993). And it can only be meaningfully attempted not by escaping from their history but by finding their place in a unique history, with its own multi-layered and interlocking narratives — and engaging its contradictions and possibilities.

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