CULTURAL FORCES AND COUNTER FORCES

IN CONTEMPORARY SINGAPORE

THAM SEONG CHEE

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FOREWORD

I am pleased to write this short foreword to introduce the Department's Seminar and Occasional Papers Series. The series provides the opportunity for staff members of the Department as well as scholars of Malay Studies in general to have their research findings on Malay subjects made known to a wider audience. It is also hoped that this initiative will provide the avenue for a beneficial exchange of ideas and viewpoints on Malay issues between town and gown.

The Department would like to thank Hotel Properties Pte Ltd for sponsoring the publication of the series.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the views expressed in the seminar and occasional papers series are those of the respective authors.

April 1996

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Head
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I. PROLOGUE

Seen, globally, the human prospect as observed seems to be shaped by two competing forces and both have a relevance to an adequate understanding of culture as perceived and practised in Singapore. One is the tendency toward cultural relativization in the sense that each culture is seen as being as legitimate as any other, in particular, cultures associated with a civilization. The logical outcome of this is the conscious demacration of cultural boundaries and with it a clearer delineation of collective identity. No doubt these developments reflect cultural as much as political concerns associated with the concept of a modern state. Yet, at the same time, there is a second countervailing force impacting on cultural development, namely that of globalization. Globalization as it is presently understood is dominated by economic logic: the concept that the world is a market (McLuhan's Global Village). The logical thrust of globalization is that of integration, interdependence and interpenetration of economies. How the process of globalization understood in this way affects cultural development on the one hand and inter-cultural relationships on the other is still inadequately understood. What can be surmized is that cultural penetration (understood as the amount of force/influence that a culture can exert on another to make it more like itself) has a direct as well as indirect correlation with the strength and potency of an economy. Still, what can be observed presently is the desire of each state to protect its cultural integrity whilst simultaneously pursue the benefits of global engagement. Obviously, such a development outlook has direct and indirect implications for culture and its development. If anything, it calls for a clear delineation between culture as identity and culture as a means of enhancing social, political and economic objectives. The former is based on intrinsic calculations and more often than not guided by religious and or political ideological motivations. In the case of the latter, its essential character is pragmatic being concerned with the use of culture as a tool for securing desirable outcomes in society. Still, it is worth reiterating that societies with a leading edge in human endeavour be it in material or intellectual pursuits will, as in

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the past, continue to impact on others desirous of progress, however one wishes to define it. What can be observed is that in the process of emulating the successful, societies less successful quite sensibly are selective taking in artifacts and mentifacts of an external genesis in their own terms according to their respective values and development priorities. The last, implies some degree of intelligent cultural management - a subject we shall return to later.

II.   CULTURE AND ITS MANAGEMENT IN SINGAPORE

Pragmatic politics guided by the imperatives of economic survival have been the hallmarks of Singapore's approach to cultural management. The parity of status granted to the main cultures of Singapore - Chinese, Malay, Indian and in recent years Eurasian is a commitment to multi-culturalism, multi-lingualism and multi-racialism as official policy.

To appreciate the thinking behind such a policy, one has to refer back to the political developments of the early post Second World War period when the major communities sought vigorously to obtain official recognition of their respective languages and cultures. To pre-empt conflict and concomitantly to preserve political stability the present policy was adopted notwithstanding the fact that Chinese culture was and continues to be the culture of the majority. This removed at a stroke, the countentious issue of language and culture.

Of special relevance to this discussion, is the government's cumulative intention to preserve the Asian roots of Singapore society. This implicitly means the preservation of values, institutions and cultural practices associated with Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian Singaporeans however they are conceived or defined. In this connection Western culture (alternatively English, American, Anglo-American or European) is marginalized ideologically, regarded not only as having no claim to cultural legitimacy but also of late as posing a threat to the moral-ethical integrity of Asian cultures, the

dominance of the English language and Western science notwithstanding.[1]

The strongest argument in support of the English language is its neutral status in multi-lingual Singapore. Its adoption as official language has been instrumental in realizing Singapore's developmental objectives. No doubt, as explained by Mr Lee Kuan Yew when he was PM of Singapore, English is promoted to access the scientific/technological know-how of the West. The cultural soft-ware (constituting values, attitudes and norms of behaviour) he stressed should however, be Asian in character and inspiration.

The differentiation between language and the acquisition of scientific knowledge on the one hand and language and cultural maintenance on the other represents an attempt to obtain the best mix from two traditions viz the Eastern and the Western. Whether this separation of linguistic roles can be adhered to in practice needs to be examined more closely. More on this later.[2]

Be that as it may, the government's initiative to achieve both objectives hinges on the Bi-lingual Policy - a policy that stresses the learning of English and the mother tongue (Mandarin, Malay and Tamil). Implicitly, mother-tongue learning presumes cultural learning. In this regard, the efforts of the school system since the inception of the Bi-lingual Policy have been to raise mother tongue competency. Students have to attain a minimal pass in the mother tongue at each level of education (primary, secondary, post-secondary). Entry into a local university is contigent on the attaining of a minimal pass in

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[1] English is of course, one of the official languages in Singapore. Fear of Western culture as posing a threat to Asian cultures is much influenced by the perceived `moral decay' of Western societies and concomitantly the regaining of cultural self-confidence among Asian societies.

[2] In making his views known Mr Lee also talked about imbibing the scientific spirit of theWest presumably through English. He was, of course, informed by its current scientific achievements. It is necessary, in this regard not to overlook the fact that cultures of the east were/are not averse to the scientific spirit.

the mother tongue at the AO level. Moreover, they can also if they so wish study the mother tongue at first or second language level.[3]

Seen in terms of Singapore's community structure, the Bi-lingual Policy has proven to be correct beyond initial political-cultural considerations. Recently, with Singapore's intention to go regional/global, the practical utility of the mother-tongues as perceived has become more clearly discernible. Proficiency in Mandarin Malay/Indonesian, and even Tamil as it is becoming evident, serves to also enhance further Singapore's economic and cultural ties in the Asia-Pacific region.[4] There is no doubt that emerging trends in the Asia-Pacific region are conducive to the expanding use of the mother tongues. Yet, its implications for cultural development in Singapore and concomitantly the perception of collective identity by each community need to be looked at carefully.[5]

III. THE RELIGIOUS FACTOR IN CULTURE

Another dimension that has cultural as well as political implications is that of religion. In keeping with Singapore's multi-cultural policy, all major religions in Singapore are free to propagate their teachings. They include: Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism, Hinduism and Islam.[6]

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[3] In practice only those who have shown good verbal ability are encouraged to learn the mother tongue at first language level. In the case of Mandarin, the Specially Assisted Programme (SAP) schools offer such a facility. Those studying Malay can also opt to do the same.

[4] It might be useful to mention in this regard that Singapore's outward looking policy is also exemplified in the teaching of other languages useful for enhancing economic pursuits, such as Japanese, German and French. In the National University of Singapore there is currently a Department of Japanese Studies, a European Studies Programme and a Southeast Asian Studies Programme each with a relevant language component. Chinese Studies and Malay Studies have been full-fledged departments for many decades.

[5] A recent speech by the Minister for Information and the Arts, BG Yeo clarifies this point. Officiating at the launching of the Chinese Heritage Centre in May this year, he stressed that links between Chinese Singaporeans and other Chinese should be cultural not political.

[6] The Singapore Population Census lists 7 categories in relation to religion viz. Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism, Hinduism, Islam, other religions and no religion. For a recent account of religions in Singapore vide: Eddie C.Y. Kuo & Tong Chee Keong, _Religion in Singapore_, Census of Population Monograph No: 2, Singapore.

Official view is that religion is not only sensitive but volatile and if misused for political purposes could lead to social upheaval. To pre-empt such a likelihood, it has set down clear boundaries in religious practice. For example, open and aggresive proselytization (especially among Muslims) is discouraged. To ensure that no attempts are made to demean or insult another religion and to prevent the use of religion for political and other purposes, Parliament in 1991 passed the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act which requires a person accused of inciting religious hatred to prove his innocence.

It should be mentioned however that the world building (Berger, 1967) potential of religion is recognized. For example, the government experimented with the teaching of religion as a school subject more than a decade ago in the hope that it would instil values conducive to moral ethical development.[7] However, the scheme was abandoned soon after because teaching became confused with proselytization, a situation that led in some cases to invidious comparisons being made between religions. Official concern is that the teachings exposed by a religion should not challenge or undermine the principles laid down for nation building.[8] This in fundamentals means the strict observance of the policy of multi-culturalism to achieve communal harmony on the one hand and the promotion of economic well-being based on meritocratic norms on the other. The former stresses equity grounded on political legitimacy whilst the latter stresses efficiency, the pre-requisite for economic success. Be that as it may, religion like politics (in particular in a multi-racial and multi-religious society) is seen as highly subject to extraneous effects and therefore, the need to remove ambiguities in its practice.

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[7] The religions included were: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. Confucianism as a moral-ethical system was also made available. In addition, a subject called Universal Religions was also included.

[8] There have been several instances where religiously inspired groups made attempts to undermine national stability. The first was a group of Muslim extremists who preached armed revolution. The second involved a Christian denomination who encouraged its followers to reject national service. Finally, and probably the most publicized was the purported involvement of certain clerics and members of the Catholic church in political agitation on behalf of its members inspired by liberation theology.

Yet, at the same time religion's role in cultural development cannot be ignored. If anything, it continues to provide its adherents (if not increasingly so) a sense of meaning and purpose in their daily existence. For many, religion remains a source of comfort and solace.

Nonetheless, despite the positive contributions that religion can make to strengthening social morality it cannot be the basis for the construction of a state system.[9] Hence, in both religious teaching and propagation certain mutually accepted boundaries apply in multi-racial and multi-religious Singapore. These boundaries have been adhered to by and large, in particular, by the main stream religious groups.

The strict secularism adhered to in the management of religious practice suggests that religion as a powerful surrogate of culture is `of the state' and yet simultaneously `not of the state'. It is the former because of its acknowledged value and importance to the enhancement of the overall moral-ethical tone of society not to mention the heightening of spirituality among its adherents. At the same time, as suggested by the latter description, the state reserves the right to curb what it regards as `excesses' in religious practice and interpretation, in particular those that threaten national stability or undermine nation-building objectives.

Given the fact that no religion can set the agenda for the construction of a state system in Singapore (whether in terms of political, moral-ethical, educational or economic concerns) it is then left to the government as the guardian of the state's interests to ensure that the boundaries of religious practice are adhered to and at the same time to set moral-ethical standards that are not only acceptable to all religions but at the same time supportive of Singapore's overall development policies and initiatives whether economic or non-economic. In this, the government has acted with sensitive deliberateness whenever the occasion calls for it, informed by the need to be firm without necessarily

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[9] In this connection, Max Weber has argued that religion with its stress on a `brotherly ethic' as against `unbrotherliness' in modern economies helps to moderate the harshness of profit seeking, impersonality, competition and individualism. Vide: Max Weber, _Essays on Sociology_, ed H.H. Gerth and C Wright Mills, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1948.

stifling initiative and creativity.[10] It should be mentioned, that the government is desirous of promoting creativity in earnest not the least in artistic and intellectual endeavours. Therefore, just as in the case of religion and its practice, there is a perceived governmental (to be interpreted as national) stake in culture and the arts though not necessarily coterminous in all respects with that of the artistic community.

IV   CULTURE AND THE ARTS

The stress on developing creativity in Singapore is as much intrinsic as it is pragmatic in motivation. Creativity in this regard is not confined merely to artistic activities but equally to intellectual/scholarly pursuits. In this, it is the government that is setting both the pace and direction and not the individual cultures (Chinese, Malay Indian) perse.[11] The individual or communal cultures are expected to provide the form and substance. Briefly the government's perceived stake in the arts is guided by two inter-related concerns viz. the potential of the creative arts (in all their variety of forms and expression) to make a difference in Singapore's effort at progressive economic up-grading(art in terms of its utilitarian value) and the creation of a distinctive artistic tradition anchored on the realities of Singapore society.[12]

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[10] To elaborate, a few important examples may suffice. The promulgation of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act in 1991 has been mentioned. Earlier, in 1988, a state ideology was proposed by the PM, Mr Goh Chok Tong. It was to be anchored on certain core values viz., concensus not confrontation as a basis for resolving issues; society above self; communitarianism; the family as the building block of society; and religious tolerance and harmony. In 1993, the National Advisory Council on the Family and the Aged also proposed a set of core values for the family viz. love, care and concern; mutual respect; filial responsibility; commitment and communication (vide: Singapore Family Values, Ministy of Community Development.) In artistic endeavours, the Government has clamped down on essentially crude and immoral exhibitionism passing off as art as exemplified in the arrest and fine of two young performers: one, for bearing his bottom and the other for drinking his own urine ostensibly in each instance to evoke audience participation. The Government has also banned Salman Rushdie's book Satanic Verses and the Indian film `Bombay' because they touch on religious sensitivities.

[11] This line of argument follows the Weberian interpretation of rationalization where beliefs, thoughts and ideas are given cultural significance and therefore decisively shape modern social life. vide: Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Allen & Unwin, London 1930.

[12] In this connection, it might be useful to mention the work and responsibilities of the Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA). Its Minister, BG Yeo has on various occasions spelt out the

Within the institutions of learning, creative learning assisted by computers is given the first priority.[13] Certainly, as intimated earlier, the stress on creativity whether it is in the arts or in scholarly pursuits is intimately related to the future economic security of Singapore, dependent as it is on the quality and talents of its work force.[14]

Artistic endeavours or scholarly pursuits as realizations of culture, as can be seen are in the first instance given practical rationalizations by the government. It is clear, that in its implicit perception art should serve an economic purpose though artists who indulge in art for art's sake are not obstructed in anyway that is, so long as they do not contravene the laid down parameters of artistic expression. Art and its expression as in the case of literary and scholarly pursuits must be socially constructive and in that sense not undermine the core values on which the survival or well-being of Singapore's multi-racial society rests. In this, as in the case of religious practice, freedom to pursue artistic activities is recognized and accepted. Yet at the same time, there should be a clear recognition of the limits of that freedom. Should art degenerate into pornography or if it affronts the cultural and religious sensitivities of the communities making up Singapore's multi-ethnic society, then a curb is called for. It is therefore, a case of boundary setting and the need for artists to harmonise both intrinsic and extrinsic demands in the pursuit of their artistic endeavours.

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parameters of governmental intervention in the arts. In terms of the pragmatics of artistic creativity for applied/utilitarian purposes, one could also mention the La Salle School of Creative Arts in Singapore. This rapidly expanding institution has over the years trained many to put their creative talents to good practical use in business. Not to be forgotten is the National Arts Council whose guiding precept is: Help nurture the arts and develop Singapore into a vibrant global city for the arts.

[13] Here again, one should mention the various initiatives of the government at promoting creativity, in particular, the Gifted Children's programme under the Ministry of Education; the establishment of the Independent School to nurture creative talents (among other concerns and objectives); and the institution of R & D facilities in businesses and industries.

[14] Elsewhere, I have discussed this aspect of Singapore's development as an exemplification of survival. Vide: Tham Seong Chee, _Values and Development in Singapore_. Paper presented at the 47th Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, Washington DC April 1995. Reproduced as Seminar Paper No. 19, Dept of Malay Studies, NUS.

To be sure, the government's management of culture and it practice whether language, religion, the arts or scholarly pursuits, is as much the consequence of political realities as perceived as it is to its acknowledged importance in promoting the public weal. These indeed are powerful reasons justifying its dominating role in the cultural process.

Given these facts and the inevitability of official intervention in the development of culture, what then is the status and role of the communal cultures (Chinese, Malay and Indian) in Singapore.[15]

V   STATE SPONSORED CULTURE VS COMMUNITY BASED CULTURES

A more recent enunciation of policy direction by the acting Minister of Community Development iterates the concept of partnership between the government and community self-help organizations (MENDAKI, CDAC, SINDA and AMP in particular) in national development. This in effect means allowing and indeed encouraging each community to have a direct role and say in the shaping of its future and in that way help to strengthen community resilience and identity. In a sense, such a policy direction is not new for it is in keeping with the overarching policy of multi-racialism and multi-culturalism.[16] Substantially, the contributions of community self-help organizations are confined to these major areas viz., educational upliftment, in particular for the under-achievers; social amelioration, in particular in addressing problems of drug abuse, broken families and delinquency; and cultural development: the last being of special relevance to this discussion.

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[15] In reply to a recent query about government censorship, the Minister of Information and the Arts, BG Yeo was reported to have said that Singapore continues to impose censorship on publications, films and television as a way of impressing upon its people the values that are held by Singapore society. Straits Times, 26 May, 1995. p.3.

[16] This paper will not go into the two opposing views regarding whether the said policy direction will strengthen communal/ethnic loyalties (as against national loyalty) or not. The government's view is that it would not, provided each community organization is aware of its national responsibilities and at the same time sensitive to the fears and expectations of others. In any case, it can he expected that the government will take measures to pre-empt such problems should they arise. Moreover, there is a belief that the communities are now mature enough politically to weigh issues in terms of their real and purported merits.

It can be seen that state sponsored cultural development and cultural development initiated by the various communities are not intrinsically opposed to each other. The primary task of the communal cultures seems to be to provide the needed sense of continuity with the past and at the same time to relate that past to the evolving life situation of their adherents grounded on the existential conditions of multi-racial Singapore. To be effective, there must be at least serendipity between he communal cultures and the culture sponsored by the government. Culture and its development in this sense is as much deliberate as it is sagaciously accidental.

Be that as it may the concept of serendipity is probably most meaningful if culture is understood as values. In this connection, it can be said that core values associated with the communal cultures on the one hand and those associated with the culture sponsored by the government on the other are not at variance, and in that respect re-inforce each other mutually.[17]

As articulated by the Minister for Information and the Arts (see footnote 17), the government's role in cultural development and practice is to achieve 'social consensus" (in terms of values, my interpretation) and "effective administration" (in terms of intelligent and sensitive co-ordination of cultural practice associated with the communal cultures, my interpretation.) Both declared aims imply strictly speaking, the involvement of the government in cultural formation, hence the use of the term 'government sponsored culture' in this presentation. In this connection, the most exemplary examples are found in the efforts of the government to structure a set of shared/core values for the state and for the family respectively.

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[17] In this connection, it is worth citing at length a statement made recently by the Minister of Information and the Arts at an international forum on culture. In his speech, the Minister was reported to have said that: "Singapore's urban culture had to be built both `bottom-up' and `top-down'. By bottom-up, I mean, whatever happens, keeping the family strong and not allowing it to be undermined by misguided social policies. By top-down, I am referring to urban government and politics, the way we achieve social concensus and effective administration" Straits Times, 26 May, 1995, p.3.

To be sure, the government's view is that its lead role in cultural formation is necessary (given the realities of Singapore society), indeed an exemplification of responsible government. In doing so, it has scrupulously avoided the use of religion (the main cultural component associated with the respective communal cultures) as an ideological support for values espoused, for fear that it might be misunderstood.[18] To provide the ideological under-pinning or alternatively religious/moral-ethical rationalization for the core values, recourse to the communal cultures is the obvious alternative.

The analytical principles that one could apply to an elucidation of the process of cultural structuration in Singapore involving as it does a state and a communal component respectively are several. Each communal culture should be seen as exhibiting salient features of its own, yet indelibly linked to the others. In this connection, the term serendipity has been proposed earlier to emphasize mutually beneficial outcomes arising from chance encounters between cultures. Cultures as it were, discover each other without force on coercion redounding in mutual benefit. At the same time, in normal circumstances, cultures in contact involves a period of interfacing (in dialectic relationships with each other) leading in the end to novel but beneficial outcomes.

IV   THE INTERNAL-EXTERNAL DYNAMICS OF CULTURAL PRACTICE

What is clear is the government's intention to influence and direct the cultural development process so as to achieve a unified and stable polity constituted of diverse ethnic communities, each culturally vibrant and economically successful, yet guided by high moral-ethical standards and a strong sense of loyalty to the state. This is reflected in the policies initiated thus far as well as in policy statements made from time to time. This

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[18] It might be useful to mention in this regard, the moral studies programme instituted by the Ministry of Education to inculcate moral-ethical values centred on the family and from there extending to the neighbourhood and society at large. Here too, the learning of values stresses objective situations rather than recourse to religious teachings.

concern is seen as having both intrinsic and extrinsic value: the latter seen in terms of how other nations view Singapore in particular as a place to conduct business in.[19]

The imprint of the government on the process of cultural structuration is observable in education, language development, support for the arts, religious practice and family values. To be sure, its engagement in the development of culture is not toward the replacement of communal cultures by a government sponsored culture. In this, it has consistently rejected the idea of creating a national culture under government auspices since this will most certainly lead to opposition and discord. In any case, for the purposes of achieving national unity (as it is proven up till now) it is probably quite unnecessary. On the contrary, cultural diversity is increasingly perceived as an asset in view of Singapore's integration with the economies of the Asia-Pacific in particular. To quote the Minister for Information and the Arts again: "Singapore's multi-cultural make-up gives Singaporeans cultural access to other parts of Asia and their knowledge of English allows them access to the West"[20]

One might accuse the government of utilitarian/pragmatic motivations in the manner certain aspects of culture are being promoted. Yet, there is no denying the fact that the initiatives taken to promote culture are guided by objective considerations concerning what is likely to work and be acceptable to the major ethnic communities on the one hand, and the real not imaginary needs of Singapore as a political-economic entity bereft of natural resources.

Yet, at the same time as the government is first to admit, "the multi-cultural character of Singapore also has its disadvantages because it means society is less cohesive

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[19] The BERI REPORT produced by the World Economic Forum on the relative attractiveness of countries in which to conduct business has consistently rated Singapore highly because of its political stability; well-educated and hardworking work force; infrastructural and communicational support; security of investment etc. Other similar independent organizations have also given the same rating.

[20] ibid. BG Yeo, p.3.

than for instance Japan's".[21]   The defense of the present cultural policy then (where all the communal cultures are accorded parity of esteem) contains within it, a structural weakness, and if exploited could lead to instability.

Be that as it may, Singapore cannot afford a single track cultural policy.   Its approach to cultural development has perforce to be multi-track in that the first charge is to preserve national unity or stability.   Stability in turn is tied up with economic development.   This, as mentioned earlier is achieved by the official acknowledgement of the equality of cultural status and the assurance of support for cultural preservation. Secondly, it must ensure (in order to maintain the internal equilibrium achieved by the various communal cultures) that forces within as well as without, whether cultural or otherwise, are prevented from adversely affecting that equilibrium.

Fears that the equilibrium could go awry are centred on the question of culture and political loyalty.   It is a subject of great complexity in itself mainly because of the many imponderables that need to be considered.   Still, in the context of Singapore's ethnic structure where perceptions of historical origins and received cultural traditions remain in consciousness (its intensity varying across the population and time), it is imperative that they are channelled toward constructive motives or at least not allowed to undermine national solidarity and purpose.   It can be seen that Singapore's multi-cultural policy in this regard, implicitly or indirectly encourages cross-national cultural (if not also ethnic/racial) identification.   In a sense, expectations of an Asian millennium has directly and indirectly brought this into question.   These developments do not necessarily in themselves undermine the stability of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural states like Singapore so long as they are subsumed by and subordinated to nation-wide shared political values.[22]   Moreover, national/political leaders as observed thus far, in obedience to

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[21] ibid. BG Yeo, p.3.

[22] In several studies done so far on ethnic relations in Singapore, it would appear that Singaporeans with rare exceptions identify themselves as Singaporeans first and only after thought as Chinese, Malays, Indians or Eurasians. Vide: Chiew Seen Kong, *National Identity, Ethnicity and National Issues* in Jon S T Quah (ed.) In Search of Singapore's National Values, Times Academic Press, Singapore. 1990. pp.68-81.

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national interests are unlikely to become entrapped by what are largely primordial and therefore dangerous sentiments.

Be that as it may, the potential threat to national stability remains given a situation where diverse cultures and ethnic groups make up the polity. To prevent it from occurring, the government has continued to be proactive in either re-iterating the correctness and inviolability of the policy of multi-culturalism or in reminding communal and cultural groups the need to separate cultural identity from political loyalty.[23]

The need to separate culture from politics is correct in principle given the concern to preserve national identity and communal harmony. In this regard, the government is reiterating an important parameter in cultural practice. In a sense, in setting the parameters of cultural practice, the government has somehow to effect a workable balance between two competing demands: one, in recognition of the fact that there are benefits to be derived by allowing the communal cultures of Singapore (Chinese, Malay and Indian) a pipeline to the cultures of Asia on the one hand, and two, the need to avoid adverse political consequences arising from it on the other.[24] The root question in this regard is whether the communal cultures and their proponents are fully cognizant of it and if so,

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[23] The latest in this effort is found in the speech by the Minister of Information and the Arts, BG Yeo who when officiating at the opening of the Chinese Heritage Centre reminded Chinese Singaporeans (and in the region) that "in celebrating their cultural connections, they must remember that their political loyalty goes for the country they belong to." Vide: Susan Sim, _The ties that do not bind_, Insight, Straits Times, 17 June 1995, p.32. In the same article, the Minister of Home Affairs, Mr Wong Kan Seng was quoted to have said the following on the subject of political loyalty viz, "If we give people the perception that we are a `third China', we cannot perform our role as an independent sovereign nation effectively. To be seen as a satellite state of another country is against our national interest". Certainly, in stating the foregoing position, the political leadership is also informed by the perceptions of neighbouring, primarily Malay speaking countries, in the region.

[24] The government's rationale for promoting English, Mandarin, Malay/Indonesian and even Tamil as languages that would enhance Singapore's economic drive has been mentioned earlier. As to culture, there are increasing evidence of exchanges involving Singapore and non-Singapore (specifically Asian countries) groups whether government initiated or otherwise. In this regard, the role of the Singapore Arts Council, a statutory board should not be ignored. Over the years it has been responsible for staging the Singapore Arts Festival incorporating both a local component and an overseas component (both Asian and European in particular).

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whether they would handle the two competing demands sensitively and intelligently to derive the optimum benefit.[25] To be sure the aforementioned enhances once again the government's role: its justification being the need to maintain an even-handed approach to cultural development in multi-racial, multi-cultural Singapore. How this would be managed would depend on the political and economic forces shaping up in the Asia-Pacific region. As of now, the designation Chinese culture, Malay culture and Indian culture are convenient labels for delineating the cultural universe of Singapore both in historical and contemporary terms. One could, of course, use the terms, Singapore Chinese culture, Singapore Malay culture or Singapore Indian culture. Whatever it is , it does not detract from the essential fact that all three are rooted in imagined prototypes dating back to historical times. Current global trends where societies all seem bent on projecting uniqueness of culture and traditions to bolster national identity would add to the complexity of the cultural situation. This will encourage directly and indirectly communities in multi-cultural societies to maintain their separate cultural identities. In this regard, it is politically correct to maintain the major communal cultures in Singapore since each has a powerful claim to legitimacy in its own right whether viewed internally or externally.[26]

VII CULTURE, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, AND GLOBALIZATION

In the preceding sections, it was argued that Singapore's approach to cultural development among other concerns is underguided by a powerful economic calculation. Its nation-building initiatives may be summed up in two statements: **(a)** the promotion of English to access Western science and technology and therefore in extension the

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[25] Elsewhere, I have argued that in the realm of values there are also evidence of competition and the need to equilibrate such competing values to achieve the optimum overall positive effect for Singapore society. ibid. Tham Seong Chee, *Values and Development in Singapore*.

[26] Malay culture in Singapore is indigenous to the region to which Singapore claims membership. Chinese culture in Singapore is the culture of the majority, hence politically significant. Indian culture in Singapore though a distinctly minority culture nonetheless, merits inclusion because of the community's distinctive contribution to the political and economic evolution of Malaysia-Singapore. As for the Arabs, they are satisfactorily subsumed under Malay/Islamic culture. This leaves the Christians who most of them can claim or relate their identity to the three main groups mentioned either on cultural or ethnic grounds while preserving their Christian beliefs.

enhancement of the economy and **(b)** the promotion of a set of core values that not only motivate economic achievement but equally keep in check what is perceived as deleterious values emanating from the West in particular. These points have been touched on earlier. It is now necessary to investigate them further.

For historical, political and economic reasons, English was made one of the <u>4</u> official languages of Singapore more than three decades ago. Since then it has effectively attain the statues of primus inter pares serving as the main medium for inter-ethnic relations in Singapore. The fact that it is the language of higher education and therefore also the language of the multi-ethnic professional elite gives it a very special advantage in cultural formation in Singapore. As of the moment, however, government cultural policy has tended to compartmentalize members of the elite leading them to identify with their respective cultural-ethnic communities rather than to form a distinctive cultural interest group. Indeed, as stated earlier in this discussion, official policy has been to separate language from culture in the case of English, partly because of political considerations (in the sense that Singapore is seen to be an Asian society) and partly because of the perceived moral-ethical decay in contemporary Western societies. Detractors may argue that the foregoing also represent an effort at providing ideological rationalization to support communal cultures thus strengthening the government's role as arbiter of cultural development.[27] This, however is too simplistic a view for it does not satisfactorily explain the hidden motives, if any, of the government to pursue such a cultural development strategy. In this connection, two essential facts need to be kept in mind viz., the economic imperative of survival (which among other things require a unity of perception regarding what needs to be done to secure it) and the evidence available of Western societies suggesting fault lines in their value system.[28]

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[27] In this respect see the paper by Chua Beng Huat, *Culture, Multi-racialism and National Identity in Singapore*. Dept of Sociology Working Paper No. 125, NUS.

[28] The evidence include rising rates of crime, divorce, single-parent families, drug abuse, child-abuse including as well the rise of cult movements and the legitimization of homosexuality.

In forming a balanced judgement, it is necessary not to regard the negativity as expressed of the West as an exemplification of an anti-Western stance. It is essentially not an ideological reaction but more so an informed judgement based on the trends as observed of Western societies in the post-modern period. In this connection, the apparent rise of neo-conservatism in Western societies of late is testimony to the fact.[29]

There are two ways of looking at the issue of culture and values in the E-W debate. First of all, the boundary setting as observed serves to give legitimation to the communal cultures in Singapore. Secondly, it also serves to delineate values which are considered desirable and necessary for nation-building in a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society like Singapore. In broad terms, the underlying concerns of nation-building are the preservation of the Asian character of Singapore society; the cumulative consolidation of the economy; the maintenance of communal harmony; and the creation of a moral-ethical society based on the rule of law.

It can be seen that official concern in cultural development is guided by three inter-related concerns viz., preservation of cultural identity; social cohesion; and economic resilience. Somehow, all efforts at cultural development, whether community inspired or government sponsored must contribute to their realization whether separately or in tandem. In this regard, the recent policy direction to involve community organizations as a partner in social (presumably cultural as well) development with the government should among other things, examine more closely how that partnership may be better positioned or stepped up, both to promote culture and strengthen desirable values. Community organizations in promoting cultural activities should instil a sense of attachment and belonging to the locality so that culture and life become one interwined

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[29] As in well-known, the critique on Western societies centres on what is perceived to be the excessive stress on individual rights as against social responsibility. What societies like Singapore would like to seek is a good balance between the two. Individualism has an inherent relationship with creativity and innovativeness and these qualities are desirable for obvious reasons. At the same time, in the context of nation-building and the construction of a social ethos to bind the members of a society in common endeavour, social responsibility or respect for the rights of others as a value is equally important, perhaps more so in a multi-ethnic society.

reality. This may be the single most lasting contribution that communal cultures can make, in particular in the context of cumulative globalization.[30]

Globalization as conceptualized contains two dimensions viz. that of universalization and that of relativization.[31] The former stresses the fact that cultures in some ways are becoming similar (not identical) in terms of values and existential concerns (a fact no doubt of growing interdependence between economics). The latter, however, stresses the struggle of each culture to maintain distinctiveness and autonomy - a motivation much influenced by cultural as much as it is by political considerations.

A sentient aspect of globalization (as explained is mainly economic driven) is the mobility of the elite across borders. What then are the implications for cultural development within and without national borders? How would globalization affect the status of the communal cultures given the fact that external linkages both economic and non-economic (cultural and religious exchange) can be expected to develop and expand? It is reasonable to expect in this regard a heightened cosmopolitanism in Singapore society, a condition encouraged as much by official development policy (Singapore as a global city) as it is due to the relative attractiveness of Singapore as a business location. If this is the case, it would be necessary to examine how the functions of distinctiveness and autonomy in cultural development may be pursued.

To sum up then, globalization as it impinges on Singapore has two potential effects for cultural development. It could re-awaken and perhaps even reinforce cultural

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[30] With Singapore's openness as a society and the outward orientedness of its many media services (both private and electronic including satellite/cable T.V.), there is an inherent danger in that the sense of intimacy and community may be eroded notwithstanding the importance of tapping into international systems in general. The ethos and consciousness of Singaporeans, as it were may lose a local anchor. A recent initiative to cope with the problem as perceived, is found in the proposal of the Minister for Information & the Arts that Singapore Cable Vision consider `localising ' some channels to strengthen community net-working . Straits Times, 24 June 1995, p.1.

[31] On the evolution of globalization as a heuristic device vide: Wallerstein I. (1974, 1980); Galtung J. (1980, 1985); Robertson R. (1985,1992); and Kavolis V. (1987, 1988).

sentiments across borders or it could lead to the emergence of a cosmopolitan elite culture centred on the use of English and subsuming the communal/ethnic cultures in the process. Such a cosmopolitan elite culture could serve to relate the communal/ethnic cultures to the external world. This may allow the communal/ethnic cultures to develop new boundaries of growth and development.

VIII CONCLUDING REMARKS

In multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies like Singapore a variety of forces impinge on culture and its development. Some of these forces are structural in nature whilst others are the consequence of discontinuities of modernity.[32] Both sets of forces, as this presentation has tried to show call for an expanded role by the government in cultural structuration or formation. The government's role, as it were, is to maintain an even-handedness in the management of the acknowledged or legitimate cultures and simultaneously to establish a set of core or shared values supported by the component cultures. The shared values in a sense, serve to set the boundaries of acceptability in action and behaviour. No less important is the role of the shared values as perceived in the realization of Singapore's development objectives viz. economic security, political stability and social morality. All these development objectives are seen as intertwined at different levels and in different ways.[33] Because culture represents a comprehensive system, encapsulating beliefs, meanings and emotions, it comes as no surprise that the state should stake a claim on its development. In this regard, it can be said that culture as practised in developing or evolving societies (more so in multi-cultural and multi ethnic settings) is subject to some degree of official influence. The fact that culture, quite often overlaps with ethnicity and religion to a significant extent would call for sensitive and intelligent handling or management of the cultural process.

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[32] Discontinuities are understood in terms of the sharp breaks occurring involving modern institutions and traditional social orders. The basic features as identified include: pace of change; scope of change; and the intrinsic nature of modern institutions, being as they are with no historical precedents. vide: Giddens, A *The Consequences of Modernity* Harford Univ. Press. California, 1990, pp. 5-8.

[33] For example, economic development requires a stable political climate. This, in turn requires a set of appropriate social values e.g. honesty, hardwork, co-operation and concensus, regard for knowledge and learning etc.

In managing the cultural development process, Singapore is faced with a number of apparent competing demands. On the one hand, the policy of multi-culturalism is deemed necessary both to give recognition and legitimacy to the component/communal cultures as well as to preserve internal stability. On the other hand, such an approach to culture, implicitly reinforces pre-existing cultural boundaries and thus create an internal rigidity difficult to bridge without an over-arching neutral authority acceptable to all. This role, the government has filled either out of necessity, or perception of responsibility, or both first, by instilling shared political values mainly through the schools; second, by delineating and propagating shared values among the different cultural groups making up Singapore's multi-ethnic society; and third, the recent government initiative to engage the community self-help organizations (which de facto also represent the respective communal cultures) in national development. In a sense, these are measured steps guided by the implicit demands of the multi-cultural policy and informed by the global trends currently unfolding (cultural as well as non-cultural).

Still on the same frame of reference is whether greater cultural convergence (not just hybridization) is desirable and if so, the most workable means to achieve it over time. If is a subject too complex to go into in this paper. Certainly, a significant degree of convergence is already achieved in basic values whether political or economic. However, it is in the realm of religious beliefs and practice that the problem seems intractable. Partly, perhaps mainly, this is due to the fact that religion is not merely theology but a distinct world-view. The maintenance of both is inherent to the integrity and uniqueness of a religious faith. Cultural development on a society-wide basis in this regard cannot move into the realm of religious practice. Moreover, over-zealous efforts to bring about cultural convergence could adversely affect the integrity of the component or communal cultures. The desirability of cultural convergence on the one hand and the need to maintain diversity on the other represent another set of competing demands bearing on the cultural development process. This in turn translates into a larger canvas viz., globalization (stressing convergence) and relativization (stressing cultural distinctiveness and autonomy).

would suggest that Singapore's multi-cultural policy remains relevant in substance for the future. In this regard, for Singapore at least (perhaps also in varying degrees with other countries in the region) the forces of cultural structuration are in fundamentals not at variance with those in pre-colonial Southeast Asia. There will continue to be a meeting of three traditions: the indigenous (Malay/Indonesian) the Indic and the Sinic. The Western tradition mediated through the English language will remain adding a fourth dimension to the on-going process of cultural structuration.

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