Patriotism and the Limits of Globalization: Renegotiating Citizenship in Singapore

As a nation, Singapore has existed only since 1965, when it was forced out of the newly formed Republic of Malaysia, a result of a fear by Malay of Singapore’s dominant Chinese ethnic group as well as a strategy to keep communism at arm’s length. Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore’s prime minister at the time, was committed to a union with Malaysia, and thus deeply discouraged at being forced to the periphery on the Malay Peninsula. However, Lee and the other leaders turned their attention to forging a nation out of a small island, with a population of less than 2 million, no natural resources, a very limited land mass, and only the faintest of noncolonial histories.

To compensate for the lack of land and natural resources, the nation has had to define its role in the world from a defensive posture. Thus, Singapore embarked on a process of globalizing its economy, its population, and its culture to make the nation relevant to the needs of the rest of the world. This approach is drawn very much from Singapore’s historical past as a fishing village and geographical entrepot, positioned as a natural point of trade between the East and West. However, contemporary globalizing strategies have become more than just responsive policy options but proactive initiatives to define the

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values of the nation. For example, the challenges the nation faced at its founding, including a confrontation with its formidable neighbor Indonesia, created a focused mindset of survival, with this value remaining prominent in public discourse today (Mauzy and Milne 2002).

As a result, a series of globalizing strategies were put in place long before globalization became a buzzword. Such strategies include establishing English as the language of politics, business, and education; building the economy through close cooperation with multinational corporations; importing popular culture from around the world, including the United States, Britain, Australia, India, Japan, Taiwan, and Korea; sending large numbers of Singaporeans to study abroad; and encouraging the immigration of large numbers of “foreign talent” to complement its only natural resource—its people. These strategies have largely paid off in terms of economic development and political stability. In fact, by any account, Singapore is one of the most globalized of nations. The inaugural AT Kearney/Foreign Policy globalization index acknowledged Singapore’s nature by pronouncing it the most globalized nation in 2001, and it has since remained in the top four (Measuring Globalization 2003). However, the globalization of Singapore’s economy has created another set of problems by weakening the already tenuous emotional ties Singaporeans have for their nation. This problem is demonstrated by a series of phenomena, including a weakening of social cohesion and a pragmatic attitude toward the collective good and self-sacrifice. In addition, a number of highly talented Singaporeans choose to live abroad, thus depriving the nation of much needed education, business skills, and finances.

The Singapore government has grown increasingly alarmed by these trends, thus issues of national identity have taken a central role in political discourse in recent years. The government has presented a strategy to create and maintain a stronger sense of national identity and patriotism to counter crises, imagined and real, which have become the defining vocabulary of Singapore’s short history. This strategy is designed in many ways to address the excesses of earlier policies, including reemphasizing Asian languages and values, appealing to overseas Singaporeans to return home, and attempting to build local corporations and institutions that would appeal to national pride.

These issues have salience far beyond Singapore’s own needs. This globalized island state illustrates the challenges of the future for a number of nations. As the processes of globalization tie economies together, transnational migration weakens the sense of place that has traditionally defined citizenship, media and communication technologies blur the boundaries between cultures, and the imperatives of security weaken the abilities of states to chart independent courses, the salience and definitions of national identity and patriotism will continue to be renegotiated. Thus, Singapore’s strategy of redefining national identity and patriotism within an assumed globalism illustrate the dangerous
course between the Scylla of McWorld and the Charybdis of Jihad (Barber 1995). Based on these concerns, this article seeks to answer two questions: In what ways has globalization threatened the sense of national identity, forged by Singapore’s leaders since Independence? and How have the government and citizens of Singapore renegotiated the costs and benefits of citizenship within the global-local dynamic?

This article consists of four parts. First, we provide the theoretical discussion on globalization, localization, imagined community, and the process of myth-making, which helps to inform and frame Singapore’s renegotiation of citizenship. Second, the article outlines our methodological approach, which uses Klver and Powers’s (1999) notion of civic discourse, or the self-conversation within a society that “serves as the defining rubric of national identity.” Third, we examine the ways in which Singapore has negotiated a national identity, particularly the use of globalizing strategies, as well as how these strategies have undermined a sense of national identity and hence patriotism. Fourth, the article draws out the key aspects from the discussion and makes some tentative conclusions regarding the way Singapore is imagined in a globalized world through constructed and renegotiated notions of patriotism.

Globalization, Imagined Communities, and the Process of Myth-Making

Globalization is called on to explain a range of interconnected phenomena linked around communication technologies, social and cultural integration, and global trade. A number of scholars have argued that there is an inevitable trajectory and irresistibility of a global society. Berger (2002), while conceding globalization has become “somewhat a cliché,” suggests there is some factual validity surrounding such a phenomenon. However, globalization is very much a contested construct that impinges upon and is in turn impinged upon by individual actors and social groups (Giddens 1999). This means that globalization, in its many and varied forms, is accompanied by vast social, political, and cultural implications surrounding this dynamic and negotiated transformation.

Hannerz (1996, 24) suggests that for “a great many people ‘globalization’ means . . . global homogenization in which particular ideas and practices spread throughout the world, mostly from the centers of the West, pushing other alternatives out of existence.” Berger (2002, 9) argues that in fact, globalization has multiple outcomes, although it is clear that there is an “emerging global culture” that is characterized first and foremost by “individuation,” or an enhancement of the individual over tradition and collectivity, although even this dynamic process is appropriated and contested at the local level.

In spite of the rapid modernization of Asian countries through linking into global economic growth, digital economies, and relatively stable political and
social order, there remain political concerns over issues of cultural autonomy. Instead of embracing the global televisual (read, Western) culture, Asian countries such as China and Malaysia have attempted to halt the flow of foreign cultural products (Weber 2003), while others, like Singapore, have taken a less stringent approach to Western cultural imports, although resisting wholesale adoption. As Long (1996) suggests, this balancing act, whereby cultures simultaneously globalize and deglobalize within localities, is reconciled primarily through localized sets of meanings and practices. Thus, the negotiation of ideologically generated symbols (i.e., global and local), transmitted through communication media, is central to contemporary cultural repertoires. Cultural technologies, like film and television, enable global and local cultural messages, images, and symbols to be transmitted to audiences widely dispersed in time and space.

If these assumptions about globalization are true, then it would necessarily begin to undermine the imagined foundation of national identity and patriotism because such messages, images, and symbols create and reinforce social relations, which link individuals to what Anderson (2001) refers to as “imagined communities” or Appadurai’s (1996) notion of “imagined worlds” (Long 1996, 43). For Anderson (2001), the exploration of imagined communities is bound up in defining the origin and spread of nationalism. In this context, he defines nation as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both limited and sovereign.” Long (1996) argues that these imagined worlds are forged through the process of media-related images and symbols to create a powerfully historical construction of nation and identity that is continually contested and negotiated within the global-local framework. Kong (1999, 220) argues that within globalization, even this imagining becomes increasingly complicated:

The passage from an unproblematic conception of identity as the shared possession of “norms” to the socially constructed, contested multiplicities of identity is closely bound up with the forces of globalization. As increasing acknowledgement is given to the intersection of global capital and cultural flows on the one hand, and the local responses to and (re-)constitution of such flows, on the other, it becomes increasingly clear that identity—who one is, where one belongs, what one’s place in the world is—cannot be understood as stable and static elements but as constantly balancing global patterns and local conditions.

A central point to these discussions over the relationship between identity, global-local, and imagined communities is in the way certain images and symbols are negotiated to reinterpreted national identity, through the national myth, or the space “between reality and man, between description and explanation, between object and knowledge” (Barthes 1972, 159). A number of key authors (Balibar and Wallestein 1992; Anderson 2001; Smith 1991) deal with
the notion of complexity in national identity. This complexity is reflected in Smith’s (1991) assessment of national identity and the nation, as composed of constructs of interrelated components—ethnic, cultural, territorial, economic, and legal-political. As suggested, the interrelated components “signify bonds of solidarity among members of communities united by shared memories, myths and traditions that may or may not find expression in states of their own but are entirely different from purely legal and bureaucratic ties of the state” (Smith 1991, 15).

We would argue that one of the most concise ways to encapsulate the imagined community is in the national myth, or the stories that serve to articulate the values of the citizenry, and thus help to shore up individual commitment to the nation (Kluver 1997). Because the national myth is the symbolic manifestation of the imagined community, the relative sparseness of Singapore’s national myth becomes clear. Whereas Barthes (1972) can illustrate his contentions as to the power of mythologies by demonstrating the primal power of France, Singapore’s rulers have a far shorter historical trajectory to draw on to generate a strong mythology around which to establish a cohesive social framework. Thus, the historical narratives that are rearticulated and renegotiated in Singapore are constructed around just a few signifiers, such as crises, thus justifying the political order and social stability. This is true not just of Singapore; however, as Anderson (2001, 225) suggests, such imaginings are limited because “even the largest of them have finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations” and a globalized world. Thus, as communities intermingle between the local and global the constructed validity of myths of nation, citizenship, patriotism, and loyalty are continually contested and therefore in question, particularly among the younger generation exposed to wider circles of influence and cultural capital. As a result, the constructed myths of imagined communities or worlds are also continually in flux as they are renegotiated and reframed in ways to reemphasize a sense of national identity that will be compelling to younger generations.

Analytical Framework

Our analytical approach is to examine the symbolic heart of national identity through imaginary efforts to create, maintain, or renegotiate this within the bounds of Singapore’s semiauthoritarian society. The primary framework we use to explore Singapore’s construction of identity is that of civic discourse, or the self-conversation within a society that “serves as the defining rubric of national identity” and is exemplified through a variety of media, all interacting together to provide a common core of identity (Kluver and Powers 1999). According to this framework, governments and citizens alike have meaningful input into the meaning and values of the society. The role of civic discourse is
not merely expressive but also constitutive, as it is through this form of discourse that “the society articulates its expectations, assumptions, and norms,” and ideally is transformed into this articulated ideal (Kluver and Powers 1999, 11-12).

Given Singapore’s small size and the very local nature of national discourse (the nation of almost 4 million people rests on an island of 680 km², smaller than many American cities), controlled media outlets, limited history, and limited political expression, this self-reflexive process becomes much easier to identify, and thus to clearly examine the role of civic discourse on national identity. This civic discourse occurs in multiple frameworks, including speeches, newspapers, popular culture, and other elements of self-reflection that are accessible to the larger public and which have mechanisms for feedback and participation. Thus, although Singapore has limited opportunities for overt political argument, the population does have a means of negotiating with the government through the mechanisms of surveys, letters to the editor, and other institutions of consultative democracy.

Given this framework, our analysis is grounded on the most prominent public documents and national debates that have helped to shape Singapore’s national myth. The two volumes of Lee Kuan Yew’s memoirs are the more prominent of the first, but we also include other speeches by top governmental leaders when they address these issues, such as National Day addresses. As an example of the second, we rely on citizen participation in national debates such as the recent discussions of the duties of citizens (e.g., dying for Singapore and foreign talent and immigration). We have chosen these as exemplars of civic discourse, as they are the most prominent images and symbolic representations of Singaporean national identity.

Lee’s memoirs, for example, are clearly designed to inform and influence the popular understanding of what Singapore has become and, more important, reflect the thinking of the one individual most responsible for what the nation is becoming. Public response to the memoirs represents an example of indirect renegotiation of that meaning. The volumes were bestsellers in the country, and the Straits Times, Singapore’s largest and most influential newspaper, dedicated an entire web site to the book, with excerpts, no less than 16 separate reviews, and the transcript and videos of Lee’s online chats with Singaporeans at the launch of the book. Thus, as a transcript of a nation’s self-conversation about national identity, the book, associated media reports, and public reaction provide an invaluable understanding of and insight into the cultivation of a sense of national identity. These key documents are supported by Parliamentary debates, prominent speeches by Lee, his son Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, newspaper reports and editorials, and examples of relevant forms of popular culture (i.e., television and movies), which form a compelling framework in which to
access the ways in which political discourse continually renegotiates notions of imagined community, national identity, and patriotism.

Understanding the connection between the Singapore government and the nation’s media in imagining the nation of Singapore is central to this study. As Bokhorst-Heng (2002, 559-60) suggests, the centrality of the national agenda and nation building to the role of the media in Singapore “is unambiguous in the many speeches government leaders have given on the topic. It is made clear both by framing the role of the media against what it is not and by defining what it is.” As the then Trade and Industry Minister Lee suggested in an address to the Singapore Press Club, the primary purpose of Singapore’s media is to “contribute to national building” (Lee 1988).

Creating a Singaporean Identity

National identity in Singapore has been constructed nearly wholly from the experiences of the past three and a half decades, and arises entirely from the rhetorical creation of the first generation of leaders, particularly Lee Kuan Yew. There are three critical contextual issues that have complicated the creation of a compelling national myth, including an unwilling expulsion from Malaysia, a population of diverse ethnic, linguistic, and cultural elements, and finally, tensions with its immediate neighbors. Chua (1995, 69) argues that “Singapore as an independent nation-state was first and foremost a political reality foisted on a population under conditions beyond their control. Once this was a fait accompli, a ‘nation’ had to be constructed.” In his memoirs, Lee Kuan Yew (2000, 19) began his reflections with, “There are books to teach you how to build a house, how to repair engines, how to write a book. But I have not seen a book on how to build a nation out of a disparate collection of immigrants from China, British India and the Dutch East Indies.” Thus, Lee’s own memoirs become an instruction book, as it recounts how the government of Singapore believed that they had “inherited the island without its hinterland, a heart without a body.”

Although Singapore had been an established British trading post, the nation was not altogether in a different situation from many other postcolonial, newly independent nations in terms of economic development of administrative infrastructure. In fact, during the decades of the 1960s and 1970s, communism had a singular attraction for some ethnic Chinese Singaporeans because it seemed to promise economic development free from the shackles of the power of the West. Lee decided, however, that one of the primary policy thrusts of the new nation would be to become a “First world oasis in a Third world region.” This vision meant focusing on rapidly increasing economic development, to develop world-class institutions, and to be a hub for entrepreneurs, engineers, managers, and other professionals (Lee 2000, 76). This “first world oasis,”
then, became Singapore’s dominant goal, and hence, the symbol for collective struggle and sacrifice; in short, the definition of what Singapore means. In fact, the title of the second volume of Lee’s memoirs illustrates his understanding of what Singapore’s national myth is: *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story, 1965-2000* (Lee 2000). In other words, the story of Singapore is of transition from local to global, “from third world to first.”

Singapore’s national myth, then, is its rapid economic development, rather than a religious-mythical narrative that undergirds the unity and political cohesion of its Asian neighbors, such as Japan, Thailand, and Cambodia (Keyes, Kendall, and Hardacre 1994; Pye 1985). The national myth of Singapore is the story of struggle against economic and political odds to achieve a first world standard of living. It is not surprising, then, that a national identity, forged on economic progress, would have little emotional or motivational hold on the populace. Indeed, as will be demonstrated later, this very economic progress, and the values of pragmatism, entrepreneurship, and opportunism that it demands, has also contributed to the undermining of national identity.

Complicating the construction of national identity was the multiethnic mix of the nation, which precluded the establishment of any sort of political identity based on language, religion, or culture. In fact, this multiethnic mix had been one of the factors that hindered the union with Malaysia, where the first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, insisted on a nation founded on Malay racial favoritism and the dominance of the Malay language (Lee 2000). Singapore, which had a larger percentage of its population of Chinese ancestry, was a distinct challenge to Malaysia, where the Malays dominated the racial mix.

The tensions that exist in the relationship between cultural identity, language, and ethnicity are crucial to understanding the complexity of Singapore’s multiracial society. Contemporary classification of the Singapore population by the categories of Chinese, Malay, Indians, and Others (CMIO) shares essentialist attributes ascribed by its previous colonial rulers but which remain nevertheless. At the time of independence in 1965, the population consisted of four primary ethnic groups, including Chinese (approximately 76%), Malay (approximately 15%), Tamil (approximately 7%), with the rest of mixed or European ancestry (Singapore 2003). Even within these groups, however, there was often considerable diversity, as even among the dominant Chinese, the community was divided by at least twelve separate dialects, including Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka, and Hokkien. Moreover, there has historically been a “deep cleavage” between the English-educated and the Chinese-educated Chinese, which contributed to intense division in cultural and political orientation (Mauzy and Milne 2002, 99). Racial riots in the 1950s and again in 1964 provided significant impediments to a harmonious and united nation-building process.
The racial unrest convinced Lee and the People’s Action Party (PAP), who had been working toward “gradual integration and the blurring of the racial divide” for years, that racial unrest and ethnic distrust, later termed *communalism*, was a potent and irrational force that must be systematically dismantled. After Independence, the government argued that the country was a plural society prior to self-government in 1959 and therefore required gradual introduction of policies to break down the barriers separating ethnic communities and forge a Singapore identity. Chiew (1983) highlights the government’s use of integrated schools, bilingual education, public housing, and the promotion of a national identity (a cultural institution) as bridging institutions to assist in the implementation of multiracial policies. The equal treatment of the four streams of education—Malay, Chinese, English, and Tamil—laid the foundation of Singapore’s multiracial policy development and the subsequent implementation of the bilingual education system. In so doing, the government’s focus on economic development, establishment of integrated schools with a common curriculum, and the emphasis on English language were responsible for minimizing the language schism, preventing conflict based in ethnic difference, and maximizing Singapore’s global financial and technological presence (Lian and Rajah 2002, 230). As Lee (2000, 173, 181) reminisced in his memoirs,

The nub of the problem was that in our multiracial and multilingual society, English was the only acceptable neutral language, besides being the language that would make us relevant to the world. But it did seem to deculturalise our students and make them apathetic . . . if we were monolingual in our mother tongues, we would not make a living. Becoming monolingual in English would have been a setback. We would have lost our cultural identity, that quiet confidence about ourselves and our place in the world . . . Hence, in spite of the criticism from many quarters that our people have mastered neither language, it is our best way forward. English as our working language has prevented conflicts arising between our different races and given us a competitive advantage because it is the international language of business and diplomacy, of science and technology. Without it, we would not have many of the world’s multinationals and over 200 of the world’s top banks in Singapore.

Lee’s comments reveal another important aspect of the forging of national identity in Singapore, which is the imperative to not only create an identity that can overcome ethnic division but also makes the nation relevant to the international community. These dual goals, however, often come into conflict, as illustrated by current discussions on the use of “Singlish.” Although English is the official language of the nation, many Singaporeans in daily life use Singlish, in which English, Malay, and Hokkien words are organized according to Hokkien grammatical structure. Although it is clearly a dialect of affin-
ity to many Singaporeans, the government actively discourages its use, arguing that it marks Singaporeans as uneducated and incapable in a global economy. Thus, the one distinguishing feature that many Singaporeans use to mark their identity is rejected by a large number of the elites as unworthy of preservation. In early 2003, this same contention was illustrated on an international stage. A reality television show filmed a segment in Singapore, in which the contestants met with a character from a local television show, a crude, undereducated worker best known for his use of Singlish. The show’s use of Singlish some years earlier had led to direct criticisms from the Prime Minister, further illustrating the divide between Singapore’s elites and the so-called “heartlanders.” Letters to the *Straits Times* forum page argued the merits of portraying such a character to an international audience, with some arguing that it would only encourage misperceptions of Singaporeans, while others argued that what felt comfortable is what should be shown.

Finally, relations with Malaysia and Indonesia complicated the formation of a Singaporean consciousness. In one case, Lee had spent the early part of his political career and a significant amount of political capital attempting to create among Singaporeans a “Malaysian” identity, but this was crushed by the expulsion. Now, he had to deliberately distinguish Singapore from Malaysia and other Southeast Asian neighbors, thus putting the new republic in direct economic conflict with these nations, all of whom had considerably greater resources. In the second case, the nation came to independence during Indonesia’s policy of *konfrontasi* (confrontation) with Singapore and Malaysia, as Indonesia saw the formation of these independent states as a British attempt to maintain its former influence. These regional relations and rivalries are significant to the formation of Singapore’s national myth, not only as they set the context for the story of Singapore but because of the significance of these two states to Singaporeans’ sense of identity.

Discussion and Analysis: Limitations of Globalization

We have argued so far that Singapore’s leaders, to create national unity and survive as a nation, attempted to build a national myth of forging economic progress and success out of crises, relying primarily on globalizing strategies, such as mandating the use of English, focusing on economic growth through international trade and multinational corporations, and stressing a global orientation rather than a local identity. Although these strategies indeed helped Singapore to achieve political stability and economic growth, they have led to a weakening of social bonds, which are critical for patriotism.
What Does It Mean to Be Singaporean?
Identity, Popular Culture, and Youth

In recent years, the lack of patriotism among Singaporeans has become an important political issue in the nation, as the government has recognized a social and political apathy among its younger generation, the most globalized of Singapore’s population. Lee Kuan Yew (2000, 11) wrote that he offered up his memoirs so that the younger generation of Singaporeans would “know how difficult it was for a small country to survive in the midst of larger, newly independent nations all pursuing nationalistic policies.” By relating Singapore’s past to the future generation, Lee hoped to counter the social and political legacies of embracing globalization as the answer to Singapore’s inherent geographical and historical weaknesses.

Yet the allure of the global has proven a formidable adversary to Lee’s vision for Singapore’s second-generation citizens. Given Singapore’s need to balance the global with the local, it has experienced the less attractive aspects of what Berger (2002) refers to as “an emerging global culture” characterized by “individuation.” In Singapore, this “individuation” means the ability of youth to draw from a wider circular of cultural capital for the formation of a stronger sense of “self” over the collective and traditional, and hence, a weakening of loyalty to the nation. Since the opportunities for direct criticism of government policy are constrained, the renegotiation of patriotism by Singaporeans is manifested in a variety of social trends, including the appropriation of foreign cultural forms, immigration and emigration, and a general apathy toward social and political concerns, expressed most succinctly as an attitude of complacency toward defending the nation. For example, a survey of Singaporean youth in 2001 illustrates Long’s (1996) point on how individual and group identities are constructed around imagined peoples and places when individuals compare and contrast themselves and their situations with those others. In response to the question, “What does it mean to be Singaporean?” one twenty-five-year-old undergraduate student answered,


These trends are not only consequences of globalization, but the discourse surrounding these issues also becomes part of a vibrant strategy of renegotiation as they are actively contested by the Singapore government at the local
level. Authorities have attempted to address the issues of identity and loyalty by implementing strategies within its education system to reinforce collectivist cultural values that promote social harmony, but at the same time exposing Singaporeans to an array of foreign popular culture to improve English language and Western cultural competencies. For example, Singapore imports drama, soap opera, music, and movies from the United States, Australia, and Britain, but delivers it via its islandwide cable network (instead of satellite) as a way of maintaining control of content. Meanwhile, government and consumer support for local, indigenous production of popular culture, which reinforces cultural identification with Singapore’s constructed values, has begun to emerge as popular alternatives to imported culture. For example, the films “Money No Enough” and “I Not Stupid” were two local film productions depicting the negative aspects of life in the city-state, including an incredibly competitive educational system and the overreliance on academic excellence as indicators of social worth (Neo 2002). These films achieved significant popular success in Singapore, primarily because they dealt with issues that lie at the heart of belonging to the nation. In “I Not Stupid,” for example, the paternelistic assumptions of the government, the emphasis on meritocracy, and the tensions over having to learn Chinese and English are all called into question. Its significance as a form of civic discourse was illustrated by the fact that Prime Minister Goh mentioned in a National Day address that his wife had seen the film three times. At its heart, the film focuses attention on the interconnections between those in Singapore who benefit from globalization (the elites and traders) and those who struggle to survive in that world (the heartlanders and hawker stall workers). As such, the films expose the relationship between the government’s globalizing policies and the social realities that confront Singaporeans as they negotiate a highly competitive culture, which valorizes global and local values.

Foreign Talent, Quitters, and Stayers: Issues of Emigration and Immigration

A second key indicator of the renegotiation of national identity is in the area of emigration and immigration. Singapore has always seen itself as bereft of not only natural resources but also human resources. Thus, one of the critical strategies the nation has engaged has been to send Singaporeans abroad for higher education and professional training, as well as inducing foreign talent to emigrate to Singapore to help bolster the nation’s human resources. Although these strategies have been successful, there are two implications for building national identity and patriotism. In the first case, overseas sojourners often find more opportunities abroad, and thus do not return to Singapore. In the second, new immigrants often have greater attachment to their home coun-
tries than Singapore, and are received by locals as outsiders. In both instances, the globalization of Singapore undermines a deep attachment to the nation. In a reflection on the meaning of citizenship in Singapore, a senior political writer for the Straits Times argued that “globalization and falling birth rates have forced Singapore into the competition of creaming off the best from other countries, to the tune of 6500 migrants a year” (Tan 2002, H18). One consequence of this practice, however, is to create antagonism among locals, who see foreign talent as getting more money, better positions, and often with no talent; as the film “I Not Stupid” depicts a foreigner stealing local ideas and having no real abilities on his own. Another consequence is that talented Singaporeans often feel they will have more professional opportunities if they go out of the country to become foreign talent elsewhere.

In 1997, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong attempted to shore up commitment to the nation, while still justifying the globalizing policies. Goh clearly recognized the double-edged sword of globalization, with the emigration of talented Singaporeans to other competing centers around the world:

In a way, we have encouraged this dispersal of Singaporeans by asking you to go regional and create Singapore’s external wing. But dispersal carries a danger—if Singaporeans are not deeply rooted to Singapore through strong bonds of family, friends, community and nation, the core of our nation will unravel. Abiding bonds to family and friends and deep loyalties to Singapore are crucial in this new situation. We must never forget that Singaporeans owe one another an obligation, and the more able ones, in whom Singapore has invested the most, have a special obligation to society. We must all join hands to keep Singapore together.

In 2000, Deputy Prime Minister Lee reminded a group of scholarship recipients of their duty to Singapore. Acknowledging that they were likely to be offered lucrative jobs outside of Singapore, Lee told the group to “never forget at the end of the day, your duties and priorities lay in Singapore” (Students told 2000). Singapore’s response to the challenges is to continue gathering foreign talent to complement Singaporean strengths, maintaining a cosmopolitan focus to the city-state, maintaining and reinforcing Asian heritage and values, and involving all Singaporeans in “building our best home.” Success from these strategies required tapping Singapore’s patriotism to “become one people, one Singapore” (Goh 1997).

This notion of becoming “one Singapore” is central to imagining the nation. Bokhorst-Heng (2002, 560) illustrates this point through a planetary analogy to illustrate the “pull” and “alignment” a highly centralized and planned society like Singapore generates:

Similar to an orbiting planetary system, nation building (the anchor “sun”) pulls all planets (social institutions such as education, mass media, urban planning
and national defence) in orbit around itself, directing their paths, defining their relationship to it and to each other, and mandating their agendas. The “planets”’ orbiting paths, as institutions of discourse, give visibility and definition to the path and agenda of the nation as an imagined community. And the centripetal forces of the orbiting planets ensure their cohesion with each other and with the “sun.” Any one member failing to participate or to follow its orbiting path puts the very existence of the nation at risk.

This analogy illustrates the foundation by which the Singapore government attempts to draw individuals together under the formidable banner of national identity, supported by the myth of triumph over adversity. As Barthes (1972) and Kluver (1997) suggest, the content of the myth is secondary to the intent as a way of shoring up individual support. By articulating the core values and reasons for collective social action when the nation faces crises, the government justifies and legitimizes the ceremony of an “imagined” notion of “one Singapore.” For example, in the midst of the economic downturn of 2002, the issue became salient again in the “Quitter or Stayer Debate,” which began when Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong criticized fair-weather Singaporeans who enjoyed the good economic times but quit the country during the economic downturns. The critique raised considerable public debate within the Singapore community as the country attempts to act globally while maintaining its unique local identity around its multicultural heritage. To illustrate, a front page editorial in the Today newspaper argued that one of the critical issues facing the government was a “public relations” battle for the hearts of a “crowd that is able to pack their bags and get a job and house outside Singapore if it is unhappy with what this country has to offer. In short, a crowd that has plenty of options in a world hungry for talent” (Back to the Future 2003). Likewise, a front page report of a press conference was entitled “PM Asks Young Singaporeans: Will You Help?” It reported the prime minister to have expressed concern about “a small group of well-educated, fleet-footed young Singaporeans who have become self-centred and refuse to give a helping hand when the country faces severe challenges” (PM Asks Young Singaporeans 2002, 1). However, the issues raised within the quitter-stayer debate are not as simple as one of loyalty to the nation that has nurtured their talent. As a meritocracy, Singapore has strategically linked talent to success (and reward) to propel its economic foray into the global economy through its main asset of human resources. Yet the very system that rewards merit based on global citizenship (as a nation) also nurtures less loyalty to that nation from the individual by creating a situation where Singapore’s talent will go where the opportunities exist.
To Die or Not to Die for the Nation? A Question of Commitment

A final and related consequence to Singapore’s globalization strategies has been an undermining of commitment to Singapore’s social and political well-being, and particularly a sense among many leaders that the younger generation is unwilling to sacrifice for the nation. This aspect found its fullest expression in April 2002, when a government minister told Parliament of a question his eleven-year-old son had asked him: “If we go to war, why should we fight for Singapore?” The Straits Times reported the speech, and this generated a considerable amount of popular reaction, as Singaporeans debated the emotionally charged area of patriotism. Immediately, members of Parliament and the public offered a variety of responses, from unqualified willingness to fight and die for the nation to a number of individuals arguing that they would only die for a country willing to give them more political openness. For example, one letter in the Straits Times forum page read, “Before we ask the question whether Singaporeans would die for their country, what do we have in Singapore that are worth dying for?” The conclusion was that since the only thing Singapore really offered was economic gain, which could be obtained elsewhere, “there is nothing that compels them to stay here, let alone die for their country!” (Ho 2002). Ultimately, the myth of economic progress undermined loyalty to the nation.

As Anderson (2001, 225) suggests, the imaginings of a nation are limited to the extent of finite, elastic boundaries. For Singapore, the elasticity of its “call to arms” under the banner of “one Singapore” is limited by the just as compelling call of “individuation.” As such, the contested notion of national identity is played out within a malleable framework of renegotiation in which the government seeks to access values of social responsibility and thus increase patriotism and loyalty. For example, one month after the fight for Singapore debate, Deputy Prime Minister Tony Tan weighed in signaling that in fact the issue of patriotism was one that needed renegotiation, and that the government was happy to see Singaporeans discuss the issue. He argued, “This is not a trivial question. Neither is it a question that should not be asked. Every generation must confront this question. Every generation must decide for themselves why they should be prepared to fight and possibly die for their country” (Tan 2002). Tan, in his role as government spokesman, argued that Singapore was worth fighting for, primarily because of the values of the nation, including meritocracy and fair play, equal opportunities, clean government, and racial and religious tolerance. He then referred his audience back to the “Singapore story,” arguing that it was these values which enabled Singapore to gain international respect “as a nation that may be small by physical standards but we are a nation that stands by its principles and beliefs. Singapore is a nation that has often been cited as a model for other countries to emulate” (Tan 2002). By referring
back to the past struggles and crises and linking it with the values that Singaporeans should be willing to fight and die for, Tan’s intent was to revive the national myth of modernization, economic progress, and triumph of adversity, but with limited success.

Conclusions

This analysis of the renegotiation of patriotism within Singapore raises several conclusions that have relevance not just to Singaporeans but all nations undergoing processes of globalization. As Singapore’s government has made globalization a critical means not just of economic growth but its very survival, the outcomes are instructive in understanding the interface between the processes of economic and cultural globalization, national identity, and patriotism.

Together, the provided examples illustrate how globalization places increasing pressure on Singapore’s ongoing struggle to establish a cogent link between the nation and citizenry through identity construction and a call to patriotism. The very strategies of globalization that provided for Singapore’s economic rise have undermined a consciousness of a shared identity and shared opportunities. This illustrates the difficulty in attempting to minimize the impact of negative impressions of globalization (immigration and foreign talent) while maximizing the importance of localization (language, ethnicity, education, and popular culture) in developing patriotism, identity, and citizenship.

More than anything else, though, the example of Singapore demonstrates the difficulty of imagining a national identity. Although all Singaporeans acknowledge the very real difficulties facing the nation in its early days, as well as the future challenges in the form of regional competition, this knowledge in and of itself does not engender loyalty. Singapore’s national myth of overcoming crises to create an economic success story, generating a respected nation out of the most marginal of resources, and going from third world to first world does little to build either a sense of social cohesion or loyalty. In this sense, and in spite of its greater economic and political clout, Singapore suffers a severe disadvantage to its neighbors in that it has been unable to generate a self-sustaining national mythology that would tie its citizens to its shores.

Notes

2. Takuya Kimura is a Japanese actor and pop idol.
References


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