

# Stand Up for Singapore: Music and National Identity in a Cosmopolitan City-State

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Modern-day Singapore prides itself as a ‘global city’ with a commendable level of economic stability as a result of its sustained cosmopolitanism. Having rapidly developed over a time when the differences between nations are increasingly valued, the city-state’s cosmopolitan disposition has led many to question the existence of a nation-specific identity. The government’s—more specifically, the People’s Action Party (PAP) that has led a supermajority government since Singapore’s independence—forceful hand in crafting the nation’s ‘global city’ identity has led many to perceive said identity to be artificial if not ill-defined. In this article, I delineate the steps undertaken by the PAP (concerning race and language) that lead to the existing global impression of Singapore before examining the approaches taken by state institutions to musically portray the cosmopolis.

## Race in the ‘Global City’

Singapore’s experience of numerous periods of economic and cultural reinvention precedes the proclamation of its statehood on August 9, 1965. These reinventions were mandated by its obsession ‘to become and remain a successful city-state and global city.’<sup>1</sup> Singapore today continues to be described as a ‘Global City’ or ‘International City’. In fact, the terms were ‘used regularly throughout the development plans of the State of Singapore, and in numerous planning documents produced for it.’<sup>2</sup> Singapore’s association with the ‘global’ and ‘international’ leaves many to ponder about what is to be considered its ‘local’ or ‘national’.

Due to its central location in Southeast Asia, Singapore has served perennially as a hub for trade and commerce; it thrived as a cosmopolitan seaport that facilitated trade between Europe and East Asia as a British colony and is today a common midpoint for travel between Europe or Africa to Asia-Pacific as evidenced by its international passenger traffic. The settlement in Singapore of international travellers over time has engendered a multicultural and multiracial population on the island. This multiculturalism—and the determination to maintain it—has proven to be advantageous in ensuring Singapore’s economic success and plays a significant role in the genesis of Singapore’s cultural identity.

It is important to note that Singapore’s ‘state creation preceded the process of nation building’ as a result of its unanticipated separation from Malaysia.<sup>3</sup> Contrasting with the common narrative of state independence succeeding an intensifying nationalist sentiment amongst its people, Singapore’s independence was not founded on such convictions. There was therefore an absence of a well-defined national identity at the onset of statehood. As a small island that lacks a resource-rich hinterland, Singapore’s state-creation process fixated on discovering the ways in which the state could generate and assure itself of an economic capital. The concern for its economy was characteristic of the inhabitants of the island, whom Sir Stamford Raffles—a British statesman often regarded as the founder of modern Singapore—described as having embodied a “spirit of enterprise and freedom” which distinguished it from the rest of Asia.<sup>4</sup> Singapore’s state-creation process was prioritised over nation-building, thus delaying the creation of a cultural capital. That

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1 Derek Heng, ‘Chapter 3—Casting Singapore’s History in the Longue Durée’ in Karl Hack and Jean-Louis Margolin, with Karine Delaye (eds), *Singapore from Temasek to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Reinventing the Global City* (NUS Press 2010) 76.

2 Nathalie Fau, ‘Chapter 4—Singapore’s Strategy of Regionalisation’ in Hack and Margolin (n 1) 55.

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3 Quoted in Eve Hoon, ‘The (In)Significant Foreign Other: A case study on the limits and conditions of Singapore-style cosmopolitanism’ (BA Archaeology and Anthropology diss., University College London 2014) 6.

4 Christina Skott, ‘Chapter 7—Imagined Centrality: Sir Stamford Raffles and the Birth of Modern Singapore’ in Hack and Margolin (n 1) 161–62.

is not to say, however, that the developments of the two capitals are distinct from one another. In recent years, the conception of Singapore's cultural products has reflected a consideration for economic gains (as we shall see below).

Apart from its people's enterprising spirit, more pertinent to this study of identity is Singaporeans' seemingly intrinsic belief in multiracialism. Raffles argued that the people of Singapore were 'characterised by [their] diversity, but also the absence of prejudice'.<sup>5</sup> This statement highlights the past people's cosmopolitan outlook of Singapore. Prior to its independence, Singapore was part of the Straits Settlements, themselves a part of the wider British Malaya. In a bid to maintain their rule over British Malaya, the British instigated a form of colonial nationalism in the region that raised the status of Malay culture, recognising the significance of the Malay population and providing them with a slight sense of autonomy.<sup>6</sup> Schools that instructed in the Malay language were favoured and received more support and funding from the British government than schools that instructed in other languages (such as English or Mandarin Chinese). This privileging of the Malay language and culture—according to the Malay population with a sense of superiority over those of other races—displeased the Chinese-majority population in Singapore.<sup>7</sup> The resultant racial tension persisted within the region even after Malaysia gained its independence from the British in 1963, eventually triggering the race riots of 1964 in Singapore. Singapore's intolerance of the existing cultural and racial hierarchy and Malaysia's fear that a 'merger with Singapore would lead to an overall Chinese majority that would threaten the privileges of indigenous Malays' led to Singapore's secession from Malaysia in 1965.<sup>8</sup>

Negotiating Singapore's multicultural and multiracial population proved to be a matter of great importance upon the nascency of the State as then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew 'asked rhetorically, "How were we to create a nation out of a polyglot collection of migrants from China, India, Indonesia, and several other parts of Asia?"'.<sup>9</sup> To establish social connections between such disparate communities that was crucial to citizenship (and the forming of a coherent nation) was the primary concern of Lee and his government (led by the PAP). They dealt first with the fundamental issue of the nation's lingua franca (or 'working language') by seeking a linguistic middle ground between its various racial communities. Its previous disputes with Malaysia had dismissed the Malay language as a contender, and while the Chinese now formed the racial majority in Singapore, their native language was not favoured as Lee had also aimed to 'disassociate Singapore's largely ethnic Chinese population from communist China'.<sup>10</sup> The decision was made to refer to the British, whose vernacular was already familiar to the population in Singapore as a result of its colonisation. The English language served as a racially neutral communicative tool upon the departure of the British as it was not inherently associated to a racial majority in Singapore.

5 *ibid.*

6 Siew-Min Sai, 'Educating multicultural citizens: Colonial nationalism, imperial citizenship and education in late colonial Singapore' (2013) 44 *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 49.

7 *ibid.* 55.

8 Hoon (n 3) 10.

9 Anthony Reid, 'Chapter 2—Singapore between Cosmopolis and Nation' in Hack and Margolin (n 1) 50.

10 Melissa Wan-Sin Wong, 'Negotiating Class, Taste, and Culture via the Arts Scene in Singapore: Postcolonial or Cosmopolitan Global?' (2012) 29 *Asian Theatre Journal* 233, 247.

A proficient level of English is continually stressed in Singapore, especially since it holds the status today as the world's lingua franca. In a speech given at the launch of a book series titled *Grammar Matters* (2000) produced to aid English-learning, then Minister for Education Teo Chee Hean highlighted the accessibility that English is able to provide to its citizens:

1. Singapore has four official languages: Malay, Tamil, Chinese and English, reflecting our ethnic diversity and our history. Our mother tongues give us access to our diverse cultures, values and roots, while English is our working language. Using English as the common language for administration and education has helped Singaporeans from all walks of life understand one another and live together harmoniously.
2. Equally importantly, proficiency in the English language has also provided Singaporeans with a medium to communicate with others around the world—for business and trade, in academia, in international fora, for travel and leisure, over the Internet. It has given Singaporeans a key advantage—global literacy—so that we can directly communicate and convey our views to others in many settings around the world.<sup>11</sup>

Teo noted that English was not only able to facilitate communication within Singapore's borders but also beyond on an international level. Alluding to Singapore's economy-centred disposition, Teo also argued that mastery of English would enable Singaporeans to achieve the 'global literacy' essential to the nation's economic development.

With the understanding that one's language is a strong signifier of one's racial identity, the explication of language-learning in Singapore above highlights the government's aspirations for racial equality. English remains today as the state's *de facto* official language and language of business and administration. By proclaiming Malay, Tamil, and Chinese as the other official languages (despite the disparity in numbers of the racial communities who speak them), the Singapore government grants 'equal status to the cultures and ethnic identities of the various "races"', and prompts a racially unbiased society in Singapore.<sup>12</sup> This belief is instilled in citizens through the daily recitation of the National Pledge—that includes the lines, 'pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language, or religion'—during their years in school.<sup>13</sup> Singapore's penchant for racial equality stems from the issues encountered as a state of Malaysia (as highlighted above), and its societal structure as a British colony which senior diplomat Tommy Koh highlights to be 'both racist and hierarchical'.<sup>14</sup> To inhibit the development of a racial hierarchy within a society, Koh explains that one needs to 'treat [their] minorities as equals', as demonstrated in Singapore.<sup>15</sup>

11 Ministry of Information and the Arts, 'Speech by RAdm Teo Chee Hean, Minister for Education and Second Minister for Defence at the launch of *Grammar Matters*, at Nanyang Girls' High School Auditorium on 31 Mar 2000 @ 2.30 PM', press release, 31 March 2000 <<https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/2000033101/tch20000331b.pdf>>.

12 Quoted in Selvaraj Velayutham, 'Everyday Racism in Singapore' in Selvaraj Velayutham and Amanda Wise (eds), *Proceedings of the Everyday Multiculturalism Conference of the CRSI* (Centre for Research on Social Inclusion 2007) 3.

13 'National Pledge', National Heritage Board <<https://www.nhb.gov.sg/what-we-do/our-work/community-engagement/education/resources/national-symbols/national-pledge>> accessed 11 April 2020.

14 Neil MacGregor, 'Singapore' (*As Others See Us*, 2 September 2019) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m00082cp>> at 41:35.

15 *ibid.*

Singapore's racial demographics are managed by the state through the Chinese–Malay–Indian–Other (CMIO) model. This four-race model obligates Singaporeans to identify themselves as part of one category in relation to the others. Through administering this model, the government homogenises each category and erects racial boundaries 'in an attempt to erase hybridity'.<sup>16</sup> To be categorised into one of the four racial groups is a significant part of forming one's own Singaporean identity, as Eve Hoon explains:

The coexistence of race and national identity was represented in the hyphenated identity model of 'nation–race', where Singaporeans were asked to identify as Singaporean–Chinese, or Singaporean–Indian, Singaporean–Malay or Singaporean–Other. Race was therefore foundational to the national identity of a Singaporean, almost serving as a prerequisite.<sup>17</sup>

The ascriptive nature of the CMIO model is exploited in many areas of management in Singapore, ranging from housing where there was 'a quota for each racial group in every block of flats';<sup>18</sup> to education where students were taught Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil as their 'mother tongue' if they were Chinese, Malay, or Indian respectively while a choice is given to those categorised as 'Other'; and to Singapore's racialised public holidays, shown in Fig. 1.<sup>19</sup> (Note that two days are associated with each race to ensure an equal distribution.)

Public Holiday	Racial Marking
New Year's Day	Unmarked
Chinese New Year (Two days)	Chinese
Good Friday	Other
Labour Day	Unmarked
Vesak Day	Indian
Hari Raya Puasa	Malay
Hari Raya Haji	Malay
National Day	Unmarked
Deepavali	Indian
Christmas Day	Other

Fig. 1 Public holidays in Singapore and their associated race<sup>20</sup>

As a result of these patent racial demarcations in the lives of Singaporeans, a notion of ethnic absolutism is passively developed within Singaporeans who become acutely perceptive of the nuances of the different racial factions.<sup>21</sup> In opposition to encouraging cultural integration often anticipated within the population of cosmopolises like Singapore, the government has instead made more distinct the racial boundaries between its people.<sup>22</sup>

16 Chua Beng-Huat, 'Culture, Multiracialism, and National Identity in Singapore' in Kuan-Hsing Chen (ed), *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* (Routledge 1998) 186.

17 Hoon (n 3) 11.

18 *ibid.*

19 Chua (n 16) 190.

20 Public holidays listed are ones observed in 2020. See 'Public holidays', Ministry of Manpower <<https://www.mom.gov.sg/employment-practices/public-holidays>> accessed 11 April 2020.

21 Ien Ang and Jon Stratton, 'The Singapore Way of Multiculturalism: Western Concepts/Asian Cultures' (2018) 33 *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, S61, S78; Vicente Chua Reyes, 'Issues of Citizenship, National Identity and Political Socialization in Singapore: Implications to the Singapore Education System' (2013) 1 *Studies of Changing Societies* 37, 39.

22 Hoon (n 3) 12.

To further strengthen Singapore's fundamental pillar of multiracialism, a curriculum known as 'National Education' is embedded within its education system. Students are taught of the racial conflicts in Singapore's history—which include the race-related Maria Hertogh riots of 1950 and the racial riots of 1964—in order to comprehend the fragility of inter-racial relationships and to deter racial tensions and its lamentable consequences. Additionally, public discourse concerning racial differences is sanctioned as taboo by the government, thus further mitigating the recurrence of the disabling events in Singapore's history.<sup>23</sup>

## Clash of Identities: Singaporeans vs Singapore Government

In comparison with its achievements in other areas of Singaporean society, the government's work as 'architect of nationalism and national identity' has been more contentious.<sup>24</sup> The national identity defined by the government centres around the state's obsession with economic success, rather than the more problematic promotion of an ethnic identity.<sup>25</sup> Policies are constantly changing to encourage economic growth, which results in a continual construction and reconstruction of the Singaporean identity.<sup>26</sup> When Singapore experienced a labour shortage in the 1990s, the government acted upon this deficiency by attempting through several means to make Singapore a favourable place for foreigners to settle and work. First, Singapore's foreign policy was amended, simplifying the immigration process.<sup>27</sup> Second, the government flagged the CMIO model in order to dismiss potential race-related concerns arising from integration into Singaporean society. Singaporeans are reminded of the all-encompassing 'O' of the CMIO model 'to encourage Singaporeans to welcome immigrants of all ethnic backgrounds into Singapore'. Likewise, foreigners are led to view Singapore as an accommodating and cosmopolitan country with the ability to 'incorporate all immigrants into [its] existing [CMIO] model'.<sup>28</sup> Some have termed the 'O' a 'catch-all residual category' due to the convenience it has provided to immigration.<sup>29</sup> The cosmopolitanism offered by the CMIO model and its connection to economic progress therefore constitutes the government's notion of 'Singaporean'. These efforts proved to be successful as the 'O' category saw an increase of approximately 100,000 individuals between 1990 and 2013.<sup>30</sup>

The influx of immigrants led Singaporeans to question the relationship between their national identity and the race-managing CMIO model. Does the cosmopolitanism propagated by the government characterise what the people view as 'Singaporean'? To the government, the 'Singaporean' is a cosmopolite who is inducted to the CMIO model and seeks economic progress. Singaporeans, on the other hand, regard the Singaporean identity as one that accounts for more than a racial identity represented by the CMIO model. The rejection of the convenient incorporation of new citizens into the CMIO model has shown that, to Singaporeans, the Singaporean identity is not simply defined by one's race (or even language or

23 Velayutham (n 12) 2–4; Chua (n 16) 192.

24 Kirsten Han, 'One Singapore?: Nationalism and identity in Singapore's mainstream and alternative media' (MA Journalism, Media, and Communication diss., Cardiff University 2013) 1.

25 Quoted in Hoon (n 3) 9.

26 Han (n 24) 1.

27 Hoon (n 3) 17–18.

28 *ibid.*

29 Quoted in *ibid.*

30 *ibid.*

religion) but by one's experience of growing up and living in a society shaped by the CMIO model which has attuned individuals to the practices and tendencies of those in a racial category that is different to their own. To Singaporeans, falling into one category of the CMIO model—as immigrants do—may allow one to attain Singapore citizenship but is insufficient to allow one to claim oneself as 'Singaporean'. Thus, a dispute between the government and the people's notion of 'Singaporean' is established. While the government regards all citizens as Singaporeans, Singaporeans perceive themselves more exclusively as members of an imagined community—to use Benedict Anderson's term—bound together by the experience of the Singaporean way of life.<sup>31</sup>

The discord between the government and the people's notion of 'Singaporean' is highlighted in the arts, which were employed to attract capable foreigners—Westerners, in particular—to join Singapore's workforce. State-funded arts companies (or those with aspirations of state-funding) tend not to be overtly culture-specific in order to cater to what is anticipated to be a cosmopolitan audience. Melissa Wong cites the Singapore Repertory Theatre (SRT) as an example; the SRT's tagline in 2010 was 'World Theatre with an Asian Spirit', which demonstrated that a distinct idea of 'Singaporean-ness' in the arts needs to be substituted for one that is less specific in order to create a cosmopolitan image of Singapore. This falls in line with the government's view of 'Singaporean' and of Singapore as a cosmopolis. While the tagline is no longer in use by the company today, its inclination for global connections is hinted at still by the company's mission, which states that the SRT seeks to collaborate 'with the best talent in the world'.<sup>32</sup>

## A Linguistic Analogy

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has noted that 'Singapore is not a melting pot but a society where each race is encouraged to preserve its unique culture and traditions, and appreciate and respect those of others'.<sup>33</sup> The Singapore government's attempts to keep the categories of the CMIO model distinct and prevent a coalescence of said categories is illustrated by their management of languages in the nation. A bilingualism policy put in place in 1959 mandates that all Singaporeans have knowledge of two languages—English and a 'mother tongue'.<sup>34</sup> Aside from being a key marker of one's racial identity, the ability to read, write, and converse in one's mother tongue arguably strengthens one's allegiance with their CMIO category.

In 1979, the *Speak Mandarin Campaign* was initiated by the government to organise the linguistically heterogeneous Chinese population in Singapore. The goal of the campaign was to encourage 'all Singaporean Chinese to embrace the use of Mandarin and enjoy an appreciation of the Chinese language and culture' and to discourage the use of Chinese dialects.<sup>35</sup> The government

recognised that an absolute Mandarin-speaking Chinese population would eradicate the need for the teaching of dialects in addition to the bilingual education system. In a speech marking a re-launch of the campaign in 1986, then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong dissuaded the use of dialects by branding them as a 'learning burden'.<sup>36</sup> By encouraging the use of Standard Mandarin as the sole Chinese language amongst Singapore's ethnic Chinese population, the government has further defined the Singaporean Chinese identity. While there have not been extensive campaigns for the Malay or Tamil languages, the Malay Language Council and Tamil Language Council (established in 1981 and 2000 respectively) organise events to encourage the continual use of Standard Malay and Standard Tamil amongst the respective racial communities.<sup>37</sup>

In spite of the government's attempts to keep the racial identities distinct and separate, a coalescence of these identity markers has proven to be inevitable—especially considering the close quarters in which people of different races inhabit. This coalescence manifests itself through an English-based creole language known as 'Singlish' which is widely spoken and understood by Singaporeans today. Singlish, while English-based, is characterised by words originating in Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, Malay, Tamil, and other common languages used in Singapore. Also part of its features are words created from a blend of languages; for example, 'agartation'—which means an estimation—is an anglicised form of the Malay 'agak-agak' which refers to the act of estimating. Teo attributes the emergence of Singlish to the first-generation English speakers who are more in touch with their mother tongues: 'The syntax, grammar, expressions, pronunciation and rhythms of their own mother tongues come more naturally to them. These creep into the English they use'.<sup>38</sup>

As Singlish is unintelligible to non-Singaporeans (and is thus nation-specific) and is believed to reduce Singaporeans' competence in Standard English, it was viewed by the government as detrimental to Singapore's cosmopolitan image and economic wellbeing.<sup>39</sup> In light of these potentially threatening outcomes, the government initiated the *Speak Good English Movement* in 2000 to discourage the use of Singlish and stress the importance of English to inhabitants of a 'global city'. As part of the campaign, the Ministry of Education revised the English Language syllabus used in schools with a stronger focus on grammar and presentation skills; more debates and essay competitions were organised; and new English-learning aids were published.<sup>40</sup>

Similar to the treatment of Chinese dialects, Singlish was viewed askance by former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew who termed it a 'handicap' that '[the government] must not wish on Singaporeans'.<sup>41</sup> Whilst some Singaporeans believe that Singlish is integral to the Singaporean identity—arguing that 'it is a true reflection of Singapore's multiculturalism'<sup>42</sup>—it is seen by the government as a

31 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso 2016).

32 'About Us', Singapore Repertory Theatre, <<https://www.srt.com.sg/about>> accessed 14 April 2020.

33 Nur Asyikin Mohamad Salleh, 'Singaporean identity is unique: PM', *Straits Times* (Singapore, 20 May 2017) <<https://www.tnp.sg/news/singapore/singaporean-identity-unique-pm>>.

34 Leonard Lim and Mathew Mathews, 'Emerging sense of S'porean identity independent of ethnic heritage', *Straits Times* (Singapore, 15 November 2017) <<https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/emerging-sense-of-sporean-identity-independent-of-ethnic-heritage>>.

35 'National Language Campaigns', National Heritage Board, <<https://www.nhb.gov.sg/what-we-do/our-work/community-engagement/>

[public-programmes/national-language-campaigns](https://www.nhb.gov.sg/what-we-do/our-work/community-engagement/public-programmes/national-language-campaigns)> accessed 16 April 2020.

36 Lionel Wee, "'Burdens" and "handicaps" in Singapore's language policy: on the limits of language management' (2010) 9 *Language Policy* 97, 99.

37 'National Language Campaigns', National Heritage Board.

38 Ministry of Information and the Arts (n 11).

39 Wee (n 36) 102.

40 Ministry of Information and the Arts (n 11).

41 Wee (n 36) 99.

42 'Searching for the Singaporean Identity' (2019) *The AlumNUS* 116

<<http://www.nus.edu.sg/alumnus/thealumnus/issue-116-jan-mar-2019/perspectives/focus/searching-for-the-singapore-identity>> accessed 16 April 2020.

peril to its cosmopolitan vision of Singapore. The government's pushback on Singlish evidenced their resistance towards Singaporeans' ideal of a culturally homogenous national identity.

## Music in Singapore

Similar to many aspects of Singaporean life, art in Singapore is subjected to the authoritative though pragmatic governance of the People's Action Party. The government frequently argued in the early years of independence that the economically focused people of Singapore lacked 'social graces and refinement', qualities that could be inculcated with art.<sup>43</sup> The civilising ability of the arts was also recently highlighted by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, who cautioned against building a Singapore with 'a first-world economy but a third-rate society, with a people who are well off but uncouth'.<sup>44</sup>

The state's intention to induct the arts into its nation-building process is evidenced in the early years of the state's independence as then Minister of State for Culture Lee Khoo Choy proclaimed at the opening of an art exhibition at the National Theatre in 1966 that 'The days of Art for Art's sake are over. Artists should play an integral part in our effort to build a multi-racial, multi-lingual, and multi-religious society where every citizen has a place under the sun'.<sup>45</sup> More than a decade later, the relationship between the arts and the state is highlighted again in former Finance Minister Hon Sui Sen's speech at the opening of the Third Singapore Arts Festival on December 10, 1980:

While it may sound romantic for artists to starve and work in their garrets, the output of such artists without patronage must be abysmally low. A Michelangelo could not have given of his best without the beneficence of a Pope Sixtus with a Sistine Chapel to be decorated: Neither could other artists of the Renaissance have done their work without the patronage of princes whose vanity must be flattered or wealth displayed.<sup>46</sup>

Hon emphasised the working relationship between artists and patrons in Renaissance Europe and likened the state and its government to the latter. It was expected that artists would consider the patron's (i.e., the state's) interests when creating art. The arts were to serve a civilising role in the building of a society that is desirable to the government. This role involved instilling a unique sense of identity and belonging in Singapore citizens, which was crucial to retaining the state's human resources following the economic crisis in the 1980s (which led to the emigration of many). In music, ethnic community songs and National Day Parade theme songs (NDP songs) were created to aid the imposition of the government's sociological ideologies.

## Ethnic Community Songs

Along with their enterprising spirit, the settlers of pre-independence Singapore brought to the island the songs of their diverse cultures,

which are categorised into the definitive 'C', 'M', and 'T' of the CMIO model. In an attempt to create a shared entity amongst its people post-independence, the government appropriated these songs by changing its lyrics to suit a Singaporean context. In the early 1980s, these songs were recorded by celebrities and promoted widely to the nation as 'national folk songs' through television and radio and were made even more accessible with musical scores and records sold at a low price.<sup>47</sup> A disregard for the act of appropriation is blatantly expressed by former Senior Minister of State Lee Khoo Choy:

Every tune is international. Melody is international. There is nothing wrong in putting new words to suit it to local conditions. You can choose any tune in the world, from any nation, but if you put new words to it, then you can sing it as your own.<sup>48</sup>

Aside from the abovementioned efforts to popularise these 'national folk songs', a 'quiet campaign' known as *Operation Singalong* was introduced to foster a habit of communal singing amongst the population, which the government saw 'as an important way for Singaporeans to develop a sense of belonging to the nation and solidarity'.<sup>49</sup> These songs are incorporated into a mass singing segment in the National Day Parade which is broadcasted nationwide every year. Lee's statement proved to be unconvincing as the campaign was received poorly, with the population lamenting the disingenuity of the songs in reflecting Singaporean culture. *Operation Singalong* was eventually 'quietly shelved and forgotten'.<sup>50</sup> While the songs were not well-received, the campaign was successful in popularising communal singing, a practice to be exploited later with the NDP songs.

In response to the inauthenticity of the pre-existing ethnic community songs, numerous songs of a similar style were composed and added to the repertoire by local composers since the 1980s. Together with NDP songs, ethnic community songs are taught in schools every year in the build-up to the celebration of National Day on August 9.

## National Day Parade and Theme Songs

The poor reception of the early ethnic community songs prompted the government to develop an alternative medium with which the population could better identify. The government employed advertising agency McCann-Erickson to produce National Day Parade theme songs in the hope of inculcating a sense of belonging to a unified community striving towards achieving prosperity and progress for the nation. The first of such songs was 'Stand Up for Singapore' composed in 1984 by Hugh Harrison. In contrast with ethnic community songs, the style of 'Stand Up for Singapore' was more akin to that of modern pop songs and appealed particularly to the younger generation. The production of the song (and its accompanying music video that was broadcasted on state media) was of a higher quality, thus augmenting its attractiveness.<sup>51</sup> The song's success was perpetuated with further commissions from

43 Terence Chong, 'The State and the New Society: The Role of the Arts in Singapore Nation-building' (2010) 34 *Asian Studies Review* 131, 134.

44 Quoted in 'Singapore's approach to diversity has created a distinctive identity across ethnic groups: PM Lee Hsien Loong', *Straits Times* (Singapore, 20 May 2017) <<https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/singapolitics/pm-whether-chinese-malay-or-indian-a-singaporean-can-spot-a-fellow-citizen>>.

45 Quoted in Chong (n 43) 132.

46 Quoted in *ibid* 139.

47 Aloysius Ho, 'The Invention of Tradition: Nationalist Songs and Nation-Building in Singapore' (BA History thesis, National University of Singapore 2016) 14.

48 Quoted in *ibid* 13.

49 Stephanie Ho, 'National Day songs' <[https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_2015-03-11\\_165927.html](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2015-03-11_165927.html)> accessed 26 April 2020.

50 Ho (n 47) 16.

51 *ibid* 30.

Harrison in 1986 ('Count on Me, Singapore') and 1987 ('We Are Singapore'). Aloysius Ho notes that cassette tape sales of NDP songs saw a significant increase in those two years, reaching 73,000 in 1986 and 105,000 in 1987.<sup>52</sup> The popularity of these early NDP songs developed the medium into 'fertile ideological sites for the PAP government's many fantasies'.<sup>53</sup>

The purpose of the early NDP songs was to strengthen the people's community consciousness by evoking a sense of pride and joy in past achievements. This is illustrated in the opening lines of 'We are Singapore', which goes: 'There was a time when people said that Singapore won't make it / But we did / There was a time when troubles seemed too much for us to take / But we did';<sup>54</sup> and in 'One People': 'We've built a nation with our hands / The toil of people from a dozen lands / Strangers when we first began now we're Singaporean'.<sup>55</sup> In addition to encouraging a unified community in Singapore, the songs often implore Singaporeans to ensure the state's continued success, as evinced in the lyrics for 'Stand Up for Singapore': 'Believe in yourself, you've got something to share / So show us all you really care / Be prepared to give a little more'.<sup>56</sup>

In the late 1990s, the NDP songs were reinvented; an alternative narrative that connoted place identity emerged. Contrary to the chest thumping quality of the earlier style, the reinvented songs adopted 'a softer and more sentimental musical style'.<sup>57</sup> This change in musical style catered to the refined taste of the population in the new millennium as the newspapers described: 'the recent repertoire... is ostensibly more melodic, sophisticated and attuned to popular culture than the previous decades' "Count on Me, Singapore" and "We Are Singapore".<sup>58</sup> The modified goal of establishing communal identity to a personal place identity warranted the recording of these songs by solo local artists in place of choruses (as before). Similarly, these songs were widely broadcasted through state media in the build-up to National Day.<sup>59</sup>

Apart from the explicit titles, the lyrics of the songs reveal the objective of fostering place identity as demonstrated in 'Home': 'Whenever I am feeling low / I look around me and I know / There's a place that will stay within me / Wherever I may choose to go';<sup>60</sup> and 'My Island Home': 'My island home / Wherever I may be / I never will forget her / Nor will she forget me'.<sup>61</sup> The sentimental style of the music (with its moderate tempo and lush orchestration), through which these texts are delivered, effectively instigates nostalgia and tugs at the heartstrings of singers and listeners.

52 *ibid* 32.

53 Chong (n 43) 136–137.

54 'We Are Singapore', National Library Board, Singapore <<https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/music/Media/PDFs/Lyric/c322c97d-53a7-40e4-97ac-ee46af810592.pdf>> accessed 27 April 2020.

55 'One People, One Nation, One Singapore', National Library Board, Singapore <<https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/music/Media/PDFs/Lyric/3df28aa8-01ee-413c-9b5b-9ff2b732770f.pdf>> accessed 27 April 2020.

56 'Stand Up for Singapore', National Library Board, Singapore <<https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/music/Media/PDFs/Lyric/e8f5904d-b46f-4766-a3c8-483433fd4d30.pdf>> accessed 27 April 2020.

57 Ho (n 47) 43.

58 Quoted in *ibid*.

59 Examples of such songs include 'Home' (1998), 'Where I Belong' (2001), and 'There's No Place I'd Rather Be' (2007).

60 'Home', National Library Board, Singapore <<https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/music/Media/PDFs/Lyric/650a3b13-9c4b-4e2a-b38c-a1676c49cacc.pdf>> accessed 27 April 2020.

61 'Kaira Gong: My Island Home Lyrics' <[https://lyrics.fandom.com/wiki/Kaira\\_Gong:My\\_Island\\_Home](https://lyrics.fandom.com/wiki/Kaira_Gong:My_Island_Home)> accessed 27 April 2020.

The invented tradition of singing a repertoire of NDP songs en masse at National Day Parades—a result of *Operation Singalong*—is still observed today. The song composed for a specific year is featured 'as the centrepiece of the parade's grand finale, effectuating the climax of a "secular and ritual landscape spectacle"'.<sup>62</sup> In addition to their function within the nation, NDP songs were created to improve the cultural image of Singapore as perceived by other countries and contribute to a hitherto scant musical heritage. The embarrassing state of Singapore's culture was alluded to by former Senior Minister of State Lee Khoo Choy who expressed that 'very often, Singapore delegates abroad are hard put to present a song', and that at such events

when it comes Singapore's turn—there's no song. It is a disgrace to Singapore's cultural prestige and image. They say Singaporeans cannot sing—Singaporeans only know how to make money. They don't care for culture, they're only materialistic. And that's bad!<sup>63</sup>

Despite a reinforced legitimacy of NDP songs as a symbol of national identity (with local composers and artists assuming the responsibility of composition and production), the production of numerous parodies in recent years reveal the apprehension and criticism with which Singaporeans today consume NDP songs.<sup>64</sup>

### Case Study One: Singapore Armed Forces Band Military Tattoo

The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) Band is the musical arm of the Singapore military that provides musical support for state and military events. Besides its engagements with internal events, the SAF Band participates in international events organised overseas. Past participants include the Sweden International Tattoo 2013, the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo 2014, and the 2017 Virginia International Tattoo. These tattoo performances are aural and visual spectacles incorporating music, dance, and rifle drills by the SAF Band, SAF Music and Drama Company, and the Silent Precision Drill Squad (SPDS) respectively.

As a representative of Singapore on the international stage, the SAF Band is responsible for presenting the Singaporean identity through its performances. To do so, the SAF Band consistently adopts a performance format which has been applied to their performances at the events listed above. Due to this consistency, this study will take the performance at the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo 2014 as an exemplar of the SAF's approach to performing 'Singapore'.

Intro	Indian	Malay	Chinese	Other (Scottish)	Finale
00:35–01:49 (15%)	01:49–02:50 (13%)	02:50–04:14 (17%)	04:14–06:20 (26%)	06:20–07:28 (14%)	07:28–08:40 (15%)

Fig. 2 Sections of performance with timestamps<sup>65</sup>

62 Ho (n 47) 24.

63 Quoted in Edna Lim, 'One People, One Nation, One Singapore' in Edna Lim, *Celluloid Singapore: Cinema, Performance and the National* (Edinburgh University Press 2018) 132.

64 For an example, see SGAG, *NDP 2018 Theme Song Parody [Unofficial Music Video]* / SGAG (8 August 2018) <<https://youtu.be/FSukmF8cy3U>>.

65 As pauses are filled with applause, timestamps are not definitive but close estimates. Percentages are rounded to the closest whole number.

The performance can be divided into six parts with a short pause marking the end of each part. While there is no pause between the first and second parts, a transition is made with a distinct change in artistic material.<sup>66</sup> The parts are distinguished with musical and visual markers which are clearly inspired by Singapore's racial CMIO model. The 'O' of CMIO is assumed by the music and culture of the event's host country—in this case, Scotland. Fig. 2 is a table plotted with timestamps of the performance and parts defined by its associated race and percentage in length in relation to the entire performance.

The performance begins with an introduction constructed with themes and motifs from several NDP songs (including 'We Are Singapore', 'Count on Me, Singapore', and 'Where I Belong') and marches of the SAF ('Tentera Singapura' and 'Bandstand'). A brief transition—in the form of a key change—is made before the part marked 'Indian'. This part is characterised by its compound metre and offbeat accents—rhythmic devices typical of Indian music. The Malay part begins with 'Di Tanjong Katong', an ethnic-Malay community song, performed by a saxophone quintet. A jovial section follows with 'Bengawan Solo', another ethnic-Malay community song of Indonesian origins, before the section returns to and closes with 'Di Tanjong Katong'. A solo on the Chinese flute begins the Chinese part. It is joined first by Chinese drums then by the full band. This part is also characterised by a pentatonic melody, an accompanying ribbon dance, and the band members' drill display executed with handheld fans. In a similar fashion, a tin whistle playing the melody of 'Wild Mountain Thyme' marks the start of the Scottish part. This follows with band members singing the song in two-part harmony and with minimal chordal accompaniment. The finale begins with the ascending motif of 'Wild Mountain Thyme' in the melodic instruments which then morphs into the melodic lines preceding the chorus of 'Count on Me, Singapore'. The song continues with interjections of the iconic fanfares from the Singapore national anthem 'Majulah Singapura' before the performance concludes with a mace throw by the drum major and a pyrotechnic display by the SPDS.

The well-defined parts of this performance correlate to Singapore's profoundly distinct racial communities that resulted from the government's efforts (as previously explored). By displaying all the different parts in one performance, the SAF Band aims to illustrate

Singapore as a country where different racial communities coexist and form a part of the Singaporean identity. The rather insignificant differences between the durations of each part of the performance is intentionally contrasted with Singapore's racial demographics, manifesting the nation's constant concern with equal representation of its majority races.

More interesting yet is the substitution of 'Other' with 'Scottish' in the performance. The ill-defined 'O' of CMIO has provided the convenience of adapting it to the culture of the host country. Apart from garnering cheers from the audience—potentially due to their familiarity with the musical content of the 'Other' part—the SAF Band's incorporation of artistic symbols of an external culture into their performance demonstrates the adaptability and accommodating quality of the Singaporean identity and society. With the Scottish

<sup>66</sup> This analysis is based on the performance dated August 24, 2017, uploaded online (performance starts at 00:35). See Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo, *Singapore Armed Forces Central Band @ Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo 2014* (12 September 2014) <[https://youtu.be/\\_9ScZF9Vhug](https://youtu.be/_9ScZF9Vhug)>.

part incorporated, the performance communicates a message of inclusivity to its audience (who are presumably of the majority race in the host country) and paints a cosmopolitan image of Singapore. Additionally, it may be observed from an abstraction of the grand scheme that neither the ensemble of a military band nor the tradition of tattoo performance is an artistic attribute of the main cultures in Singapore; thus, the SAF Band's engagement with the medium itself highlights a considerable level of cosmopolitanism.

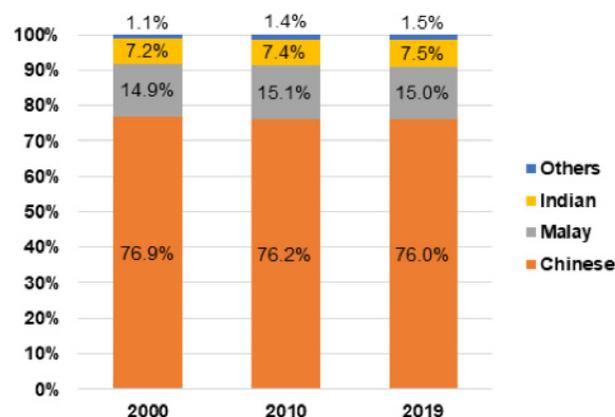


Fig. 3 Proportions of each race in the citizen population<sup>67</sup>

Aside from the music, Singapore's generic Asian flavour is evoked through the dancers' oriental costumes and dance while the SPDS characterised Singapore's orderliness through its performance of discipline and skill.<sup>68</sup> As this was an overseas performance presumably intended for a foreign audience, the SAF Band was granted liberty to illustrate a more idealised image of Singapore than an authentic one.

### Case Study Two: *Truly, SSO* (2019) by Singapore Symphony Orchestra

Formed in 1978, the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) is Singapore's civic orchestra. In addition to providing public audiences with the experience of classical music performances, the SSO has recorded several albums and premiered the works of local composers over the years.<sup>69</sup> In 2018 and 2019, the SSO performed concerts of Singaporean music as part of the nation's celebration of National Day. In the latter year, an album of Singaporean music titled *Truly*, SSO was produced as part of the National Day celebrations.

Several tracks on *Truly, SSO* can be characterised by the melange of musical styles and influences—in contrast with the performance of the SAF Band, these pieces do not overtly illustrate the compartmentalised racial factions of Singapore. This is prevalent

<sup>67</sup> 'What are the racial proportions among Singapore citizens?', Gov.sg <<https://www.gov.sg/article/what-are-the-racial-proportions-among-singapore-citizens>> accessed 29 April 2020.

<sup>68</sup> The SPDS is regarded as an embodiment of Singaporean efficiency and conscientiousness, having been described once in an NDP souvenir program that it emphasised 'skill, precision and alertness', and the 'qualities for a nation of excellence'. See Lim (n 64) 131.

<sup>69</sup> Jan Yap, 'Singapore Symphony Orchestra' <[https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_853\\_2005-01-11.html?s=singapore%20symphony%20orchestra](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_853_2005-01-11.html?s=singapore%20symphony%20orchestra)> accessed 28 April 2020.

in 'Symphonic Suite on a Set of Local Tunes' (2004) and 'Kampong Overture' (2019) by Singaporean composers Kelly Tang and Lee Jinjun respectively. Unlike its stance on the mixing of languages (that resulted in Singlish), the Singapore government assumed a less belligerent position towards the fusion of musical styles. While the reason for this remains unclear, a strong case could be made with the justification that music, compared to language and its immediacy in interpersonal communication, has a weaker influence on the state's economic development; thus, there is no obligation for a universally recognisable style. Moreover, *Truly, SSO* was targeted at Singaporeans experiencing a period of reflection through national celebrations.

Cultural Medallion recipient Kelly Tang is a composer known for incorporating Singaporean folk songs into his work.<sup>70</sup> In addition to folk songs, Tang's compositions are influenced by jazz and classical music amongst other styles. Several works that testify to Tang's penchant for such fusions include 'Tian Mi Mi' (which combines the melody of Indonesian folk song 'Dayung Sampan' and the theme music of *The Simpsons*) and an arrangement of Michael Jackson's 'She's Out of My Life' in the style of a mediaeval motet.<sup>71</sup> 'Symphonic Suite on a Set of Local Tunes' is a symphonic medley of two NDP songs and two Malay community songs. The work's brief introduction is clearly inspired by that of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, with instruments playing only the interval of a perfect fifth. After a sentimental statement of the melodies of 'Bunga Sayang' and 'Home', the work assumes the style of a concert march with the melodic content of 'Chan Mali Chan'. The sentimental tone returns with a luscious rendition of 'Bunga Sayang' which is then followed by an orchestral fanfare. The piece concludes with a grand and martial delivery of 'Together'. Apart from the work's symphonic character, reviewer Chang Tou Liang also notes 'clever cameos' of Elmer Bernstein's music for *The Magnificent Seven* (1960).<sup>72</sup> While the songs incorporated were executed in isolation, the mixing of musical styles was pervasive throughout the work. This piece's integration of styles is comparable to Singaporeans' national identity with its integration of cultures.

An allusion to the symphonic idiom is apparent from the title of 'Kampong Overture' which utilises the melody of three Malay community songs. It is safe to conclude that Lee's use of folk songs is intended to typically produce a work that is nation specific as he cites the compositional ethics of nationalist composer Antonin Dvořák in his notes for 'Kampong Overture':

Czech composer Dvořák was famous for melding folk elements into the symphonic form, creating music that sounds nostalgic and genuine, qualities that made him one of the most popular folk-inspired composers of the 19th century. *Kampong Overture* takes a page from Dvořák by using three Malay folk tunes, *Geylang Sipaku Geylang*, *Lengkang Kangkung* [sic] and *Suriram*, and weaving them into a Romantic-styled symphonic overture.<sup>73</sup>

70 The Cultural Medallion is regarded as the most prestigious award in the arts in Singapore and is conferred to those distinguished by their achievement of artistic excellence.

71 Venessa Lee, 'Karung guni composer', *Straits Times* (Singapore, 17 August 2015) <<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/karung-guni-composer>>.

72 Chang Tou Liang, 'Something for everyone in concert of Singaporean music', *Straits Times* (Singapore, 14 August 2018) <<https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/something-for-everyone-in-concert-of-singaporean-music>>.

73 Lee Jinjun, 'SSO National Day Concert', programme notes for *Kampong*

In addition to the work's character (that is reminiscent of Dvořák's *Slavonic Dances*), its melody quotes the 'Largo' of Dvořák's *New World Symphony*.<sup>74</sup> Another piece recorded on *Truly, SSO* worth highlighting is Tang's 'Montage: Concerto for Jazz Piano & Orchestra' which was commissioned and originally performed by the Singapore Chinese Orchestra in 2010. Besides a melodic resemblance to the theme music of Japanese animation, Tang claims 'Chinese tonal elements', 'Baroque and Jazz harmonies', 'Jamaican Calypso music', and George Gershwin as inspirations for 'Montage'.<sup>75</sup> This outcome of composing with such a myriad of influences can be likened to the linguistic amalgamation that is Singlish.

The two works from *Truly, SSO* examined highlight the diversity of cultures and musical styles that exists in Singapore from which local composers take inspiration. Singapore's cosmopolitan setting has resulted in the conflation of musical styles that can truly be described as unique to the nation. The existence of this musical identity is underscored by Chang who writes in his review of the National Day Concert in 2018 (where Tang's work was performed along with others of a similar style) that the concert 'merely scratched the surface of *Singaporean music*'.<sup>76</sup>

## Conclusion

In today's globalised world, some embrace the emergence of global citizenship and identity while others fear the loss of their heritage-claiming national identity.<sup>77</sup> Much like its architectural landscape, Singapore's cultural identity is one that has been inorganically constructed. At the crux of this identity is an observance of racial equality by levelling the dominance of the racial groups despite the differences in population numbers. To do this, the government meticulously defined the characteristics of the nation's ethnic Chinese, Malay, and Indian communities, which include the most common language, religion, and holidays observed by each racial community. A nebulous 'Other' category was added to account for the remaining population which proved more difficult to define. The resulting CMIO racial model is implemented to all areas of livelihood regulated by the government. In times of labour shortage, the CMIO model was flagged to portray Singapore as an accommodating nation ready to welcome all of any race to join its workforce and provide for its economic development. This is facilitated conveniently by the inclusive yet ambiguous 'O' category into which most immigrants fall. The influx of immigrants led Singaporeans to question their communal identity and conclude it to be different from that conceived by the government. This polarity is observed from the people's embrace of the nation-specific vernacular of 'Singlish' and the government's argument that it corrupts Singapore's cosmopolitan image.

*Overture*, Singapore Symphony Orchestra, Joshua Tan (Esplanade Concert Hall, Singapore, 10 August 2019) 40.

74 Chang Tou Liang, 'SSO National Day Concert examines what is Singaporean music' *Straits Times* (Singapore, 11 August 2019) <<https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/sso-national-day-concert-examines-what-is-singaporean-music>>.

75 Kelly Tang, 'SSO National Day Concert', programme notes for *MONTAGE: Concerto for Jazz Piano & Orchestra*, Singapore Symphony Orchestra, Joshua Tan (Esplanade Concert Hall, Singapore, 10 August 2019) 36.

76 Emphasis added; Chang (n 75).

77 Jayson Beaster-Jones, 'Globalization' (*Grove Music Online*) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.A2256705>> accessed 29 February 2020.

Upon realising that Singapore had no music to call its own, the Singapore government took several actions to address this deficiency. Folk songs of external origins were appropriated and promoted through *Operation Singalong*. Due to its limited success, these folk songs were replaced with commissioned National Day Parade theme songs that varied in style from the anthemic to the sentimental. The NDP songs aimed to foster a sense of community and motivate citizens to contribute to the State's economic growth in the early years of its inception but changed to that of establishing place identity in recent decades. On the international stage, the Singapore Armed Forces Band assumes the responsibility of projecting Singapore's CMIO model by incorporating ethnic community songs into the racially marked parts (and NDP songs into the frame) of its performances. The 'Other' part incorporates material from the music of the performance's host country, demonstrating Singapore's cosmopolitanism and illustrating Ulrich Beck's statement that 'cosmopolitans are people who can "internalise the otherness of others"'.<sup>78</sup> Locally, the Singapore Symphony Orchestra performs the work of local composers that take inspiration from a myriad of sources (ranging from ethnic community songs and NDP songs to the canonical works of jazz and classical music) as part of national celebrations. Referring to the polarity between the government and the people's notion of the Singaporean identity, I have shown through the case studies that the SAF Band abides by the government's idealised cosmopolitan image of Singapore while the works in *Truly*, SSO reflect an integration of styles and cultures which is an attribute of the people's definition of 'Singaporean'.

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<sup>78</sup> Quoted in Luke Lu, 'Singapore and the cosmopolitan ideal', *TODAY* (18 March 2014) <<https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/singapore-and-cosmopolitan-ideal>>.